

Article

Celebrity suicide: Did the death of Kurt Cobain influence young suicides in Australia?

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Abstract. This study examined the total rate of suicide in Australia for young people (aged 15–19 and 20–24 years) for the 30 day period after the announcement of Kurt Cobain's suicide in 1994, comparing with the identical period for the previous five years and accounting for unequal variability in weekends, Mondays and public holidays. The 1994 rates for male suicides for both age groups were lower than for 1992 and 1993, and were more similar to the 1990 rates. Female rates showed a steady small decline over the five years, sustained in 1994. Rates overall showed a reduction in all of the first five, ten and fifteen day rates, compared with previous years. There was no evidence of any increase in deaths from gunshot, the method used by Cobain. The conclusion appears to be that this celebrity suicide had little impact on suicide in young persons in Australia. Possible reasons for this are discussed.

Key words: celebrity suicide, influence, Kurt Cobain, media

Introduction

The research evidence that newspaper stories about suicide may lead to imitation is convincing (Blumenthal & Bergner, 1973; Motto, 1970; Phillips, 1974; Phillips & Carstensen, 1988; Stack, 1987; Wasserman, 1984), despite equivocal finding (Barraclough et al., 1977; Littman, 1985). Imitation is said to be more likely when the suicide report is front page, in large headlines (particularly with 'suicide' prominent), heavily publicized, lengthy, repeated, or concerning political or entertainment celebrities. Phillips, Lesyna, and Paight (1992) suggested that 'a dose-response relationship' may exist for this 'Werther Effect'. The influence may be stronger in younger people (Gould et al., 1989; Motto, 1970; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988). Hassan (1995) has reinforced both the concerns about imitation or 'copycat' suicide and contagion and the conventional wisdom that a very cautious approach should be taken to media reporting of such events.

Similarly, Bollen and Phillips (1982) found increased suicides up to 10 days after television news reports about suicide, and the effects remained

significant after correcting for holidays and unequal variability (Phillips & Bollen, 1985). Multiprogram and highly publicized stories have been said to have the greatest impact, more affecting youth or those predisposed (Phillips & Carstensen, 1986; Phillips & Carstensen, 1988). In contrast, Kessler, Downey, Milavsky, & Stipp (1988) reported *decreased* teenage suicides after newscasts for the years 1981–84, although Clark (1989) has criticized the study for inadvertently diluting the sample with non-celebrity cases and feature stories, and Phillips et al. (1992) have criticized the study, and a later reworking (Kessler et al., 1989), on methodological grounds and for not restricting attention to multi-program stories. Even fictional stories may influence suicidal behaviour (Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Gould et al., 1988; Ostroff et al., 1985; Phillips, 1982; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988), although some studies have failed to demonstrate a convincing effect (Berman, 1988a; Fowler, 1986; Holding, 1974; Holding, 1975; Phillips & Paight, 1978; Platt, 1987).

On the basis of these reports, the death of Kurt Cobain, the lead singer-guitarist-lyricist of the popular ‘grunge’ group Nirvana, should have had an impact on the rate of suicide in young people. Nirvana was one of the main bands from the indie “rock mecca” capital of Seattle that reflected the cultural change in America from the 80’s to the 90’s. Cobain’s music speaks of his feelings of apathy, hopelessness and anger toward a society from which he was an outcast. He was hailed as an unwilling spokesman for a “generation that was equally tired of being lied to by their parents, by government, and by the music on the radio” (Gaines, 1994, p. 128). He was “the outcast kid’s proof that in the end truth would be revealed and justice would prevail . . . he was not supposed to commit suicide” (Gaines, 1994, p. 128).

His dramatic death from a shotgun blast to the head is estimated to have occurred on April 5 1994, but was first reported in Australia on the 8th of April subsequently reaching every television channel in both news and music programs, and every newspaper, with extensive detail given (Toltz & O’Donnell, 1994). The Seattle Times (9 April) ran a front page feature on his death, complete with a photograph of the suicide scene. Music magazines and a range of others have since carried out detailed analyses of his life, his marriage, his problems and the suicide note and his untimely death at the age of 27. Much of the reporting broke the rules of journalistic caution and self imposed restraint – it was front page, in big letters included suicide in the title with photographs and eulogy in some reports amounting to hysteria. There appears to have been a strong reaction to the initial reports. Indeed, the day after the announcement of Cobain’s death, the Seattle Crisis Clinic received more than three hundred calls, nearly 100 more than usual (Toltz & O’Donnell, 1994). Thousands of callers are said to have flooded phone lines

across America. In Australia, radio station Triple J organized a nationwide phone-in for Cobain's grieving fans, and at least two well-publicized sets of suicide in young Australians are reputed to have been linked, with Cobain's name mentioned in suicide notes.

This study set out to discover whether any change occurred in the suicide rate in Australia for young people aged 15 to 24 years, as a direct result of Cobain's suicide.

Method

The design was based on previously unpublished work examining the impact of a 1993 episode of suicide and possible contagion from a well known television drama series produced by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (Martin, unpublished). Although no measurable effect was demonstrated, this appeared to be not the problem of the design, but rather that the audience penetration for the program was limited to 17% of the Australian viewing public, the program was not heavily advertised in advance, and arguably the series may not have appealed to, nor been seen by, young people. The original design called for personal contact with every coroner (medical examiner) in Australia to ascertain the number of deaths from suicide in each of the six states and two territories within the specified time frame. This approach proved so unreliable that when the figures were compared with final numbers obtained from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), this part of the design was discarded.

Figures for completed suicide were obtained for ages 15 years to 19 years, and 20 years to 24 years inclusive for the 30 24-hour periods from 9 pm on 8 April to 9 pm on 7 May 1994. The period of 30 days was chosen so that the first ten days could be examined closely, but also any delayed effect could be noted, and to ensure the inclusion of any impact from media stimuli given previous studies have examined 7, 14 and 28 days (Berman, 1988a). Because of the sometimes lengthy investigations prior to a coroner's inquest, final ABS figures were not released until October 1995, but are likely to represent as close to a final count as is possible. The 8th of April 1994, and the specific time of 9 pm were chosen as being well prior to when the general public in Australia first knew of Cobain's death (Toltz & O'Donnell, 1994).

We ascertained gender of any suicide, mode of death, place of abode and aboriginality. Precisely the same facts were obtained for the previous five years (1989–1993 incl.) to enable comparisons to be made of individual week-days and trends over time for the 30 days (Berman, 1988a; Phillips, 1985). A comparison of this sort also obviates the problem with public holidays, although a problem may still exist with days of the week (Hassan, 1995).

Table 1. Number of deaths 8th April to 7th May (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1995)

Year	Males			Females			Total	Ratio M:F
	15-19	20-24	Total	15-19	20-24	Total		
1989	7	17	24	2	4	6	30	4:1
1990	7	18	25	3	3	6	31	4:1
1991	9	22	31	2	4	6	37	5:1
1992	11	23	34	2	3	5	39	7:1
1993	11	24	35	1	3	4	39	8:1
1994	9	17	26	0	4	4	30	6:1

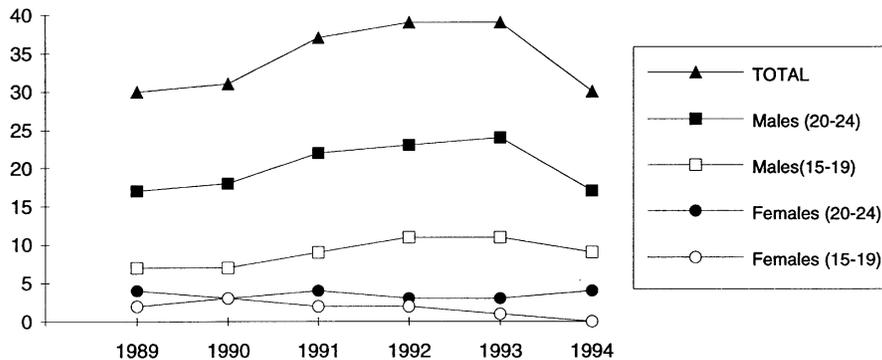


Figure 1. Suicides 8th of April to 7th of May (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1995).

Results

The total number of deaths for each 30 day period is given in Table 1 and Figure 1.

The average 30-day period rate for the five years 1989-93 is 35.2 deaths overall. However, there is a gradual increase in suicides for males (both age groups) each year from 1989 until 1994 when the overall rate drops from a high of 35 to 26 deaths. Female deaths decrease very slightly from 1989 to 1993, sustained in 1994.

Previous authors have noted that increased rates of suicide for the 15-24 age group, as a result of influence, occur predominantly in the first 10 days. Figure 2 demonstrates a steady increase in the total suicide deaths for the first 10 days from 1989 to 1993, the average daily rate (1989-1993) being 1.18. There are fewer suicides for the first ten days in 1994, the average daily rate being 1.10.

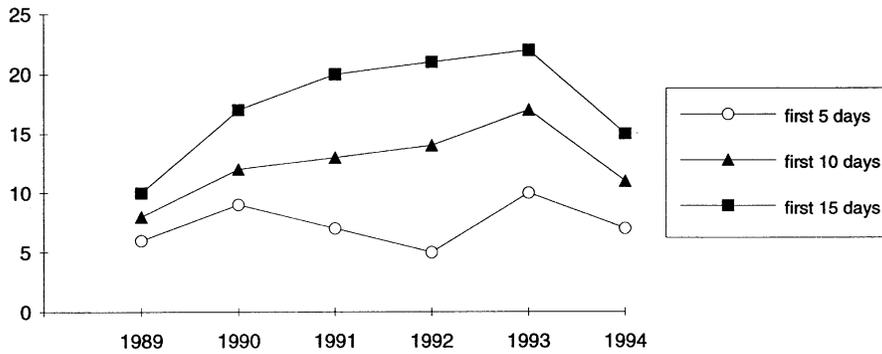


Figure 2. Cumulative total suicides (ages 15–24) from 8th to 22nd of April (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1995).

Table 2. Australian public holidays (1989–1994) from 8th April to 7th May)

	Easter included	Average daily suicide rate	ANZAC Day included	May/Labour Day (QLD/NT)
1989	NO		YES	YES
1990	YES	1.5	YES	YES
1991	NO		YES	YES
1992	YES	1.00	YES	YES
1993	YES	0.75	YES	YES
1994	NO		YES	YES

Public holidays

Many authors have drawn attention to the increase in suicides during (or immediately after) public holidays. Cobain's suicide is estimated to have occurred the day after the Easter holiday (April 5th).

ANZAC Day is a national holiday throughout Australia and the first Monday in May is a holiday in Queensland (Labour Day) and Northern Territory (May Day). Easter is celebrated nationally, but varies from as early as 24th–27th March (1989) to as late 17th–20th April of (1992) (Table 2).

The average daily suicide rate for Easter where it occurs in this sample appears somewhat low at 1.08, although there is marked random variation. It is unlikely that the absence of Easter in the sample for 1994 had a substantial impact in reducing the overall 30-day suicide rate.

Table 3. Monday suicides 8th April to 7th May (1989–1994)

	Mondays	Monday suicides	Daily average	Other days suicides	Other days average
1989	4	3	0.75	27	1.04
1990	5	10	2.00	21	0.84
1991	5	6	1.20	31	1.24
1992	4	9	2.25	30	1.15
1993	4	3	0.75	36	1.39
1994	4	2	0.50	28	1.08
Total	26	33	1.27	173	1.12

Mondays

Hassan (1995) has drawn attention in Australia to the possibility of increased suicides occurring on Mondays. As can be seen from Table 3, there is considerable variability in this sample from year to year for Monday suicides. This, the short time series and small numbers are problematic, but for this sample the difference between the daily average rate for Mondays and other days is not significant (paired t -value 0.41, NS).

It must be noted that the two years with five Mondays (1990, 1991) are not the years with the highest overall 30-day suicide rates (1992, 1993). Some other factor must be important here, and it seems unlikely that the number of Mondays plays a role in the reduced suicides for the 1994 30-day period.

Weekends

Similarly, it has been postulated that weekends have a higher rate of suicides and may influence the rates of suicide. Table 4 shows that there is considerable variability between years and, if anything, weekends appear to have slightly fewer suicides according to the daily rate, although differences are not significant (paired t -value -0.30 , NS). It appears unlikely that the number of weekend days plays a role in the reduced suicides for the 1994 30-day period.

Suicide method

Cobain's death was from a shotgun blast to the head. A total of 42 (23.9%) suicides from 1989–93 were from firearm wounds (daily rate 0.28). Seven (23.3%) of the 1994 suicides were from gunshot (daily rate 0.23). Of these only one (aged 23) occurred during the first 10 days with a further two (aged

Table 4. Weekend suicides 8th April to 7th May (1989–1994)

	Weekends	Suicides	Daily average	Other days suicides	Other days average
1989	5	13	1.30	17	0.85
1990	4.5	5	0.50	26	1.23
1991	4	10	1.25	27	1.23
1992	4	6	0.75	33	1.50
1993	4	13	1.63	26	1.18
1994	4.5	10	1.11	20	0.95
Total	26	57	1.10	149	1.16

15, 19) in the next 5 days (all male). There was little difference between the 15-day daily suicide rate for 1989–93 (0.24) and the 15-day daily suicide rate for 1994 (0.20). Six of the 1994 suicides appear to be from either shotguns or hunting rifles, compared with an average from 1989 to 1993 of 4.6 (range 2–8). Overall the small numbers make it difficult to conclude that any influence, in terms of method of suicide, occurred as the result of Cobain's death.

Rural versus metropolitan

For the years 1989 to 1993, the average rural percentage of suicides was 33%, with wide variation from 23% to 46%. For 1994 the percentage was 50%; this may be part of a natural variability, given that the result did not reach significance ($\chi^2 = 3.3, p = 0.07$).

Aboriginal

Of the 206 total suicides, 5 (2.4%) were aboriginal, all male. Two occurred in 1989, one in each of 1990 and 1991, the last in 1994 – a 19-year-old male on the 12th day who did not die from gunshot.

Discussion

The issue of influence in suicide is a complex one, and research results have been discussed with some vehemence. The work of Phillips (e.g., Bollen & Phillips, 1982; Phillips, 1974; Phillips, 1977; Phillips, 1982; Phillips & Carstensen, 1986) stands out as showing that both newspaper reports and television stories may influence particularly young people to suicide. This evidence supports the general public view that if suicide is talked about,

particularly if it is glorified, then vulnerable young people will consider it as an alternative when they are struggling with personal, interpersonal and family problems which at the time appear to be insurmountable. Shaffer et al. (1988) have supported this view in their work which suggests that school prevention programs which address the issue of suicide directly may cause more harm than good.

Apart from researchers who have had technical difficulties in discerning a clear effect of influence, the one dissenting voice comes from Kessler et al. (1988) who showed that during 1981–1984, teenage suicides decreased after newscasts about suicide. As previously noted, this work has been attacked for failing to take into account the effect of holidays, etc., and a later reworking has been attacked for diluting the possible impact by including a whole range of suicides rather than restricting to celebrity suicides.

The death of Kurt Cobain fulfils all the criteria suggested by Phillips et al. (1992) for influence to occur. To young people in particular he was a celebrity, being the lead singer of a recognised grunge group. He was revered for the quality of his music, and for the strong and angry messages of his lyrics. His death was front page news in many newspapers around the world (the concept of suicide in bold letters) and was reported on most television stations and in all music magazines. The discussion has continued in a range of music magazines well past the first anniversary. If one celebrity death should have influenced a range of young people to consider suicide, then Cobain's death should have done so. Indeed it is reported that in Seattle, the day following his death, the number of calls to the local suicide line increased markedly (Toltz & O'Donnell, 1994).

The results of this study suggest that in Australia Cobain's suicide did not increase the rate of suicide in young people over the 30 days after his death, and this mirrors recent findings in the United States (Jobes et al., 1996). Overall for the thirty day period after Cobain's death the rate of deaths for Australian 15 to 24 year olds fell from a 1993 high back to the level of 1990. There was no increase in suicides for the first five, ten or fifteen days of the thirty-day sampling time frame. The effect of weekends, Mondays and public holidays does not appear to have substantially influenced the numbers. There are only seven deaths from gunshot wounds (the method used by Cobain), and only three occurred in the first fifteen days, the rate being lower than the mean of the comparison five years from 1989 to 1993. Further, although six of these were from shotguns, it is difficult to perceive any significance when the numbers are so small and the range wide (2–8 for 1989–1993). This is at variance with reports which suggest that even if the rates of suicide are not influenced then the method of suicide may be (Berman, 1988a; Berman, 1988b; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988).

It is conceivable, but unlikely, that the 1994 suicide numbers are incomplete. Coroner's enquiries may take many months to complete before a final verdict is given. However, the results for April/May 1994 were not released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics until October 1995, which suggests that very few, if any, verdicts are missing. The issue of reporting of suicide has been problematic in the past (Sainsbury & Jenkins, 1982). There remains some reluctance on the part of coroners to give a verdict of suicide unless the evidence is clear (for instance a note has been left). However in general, reporting has improved over the last ten years and there is no reason to suspect that 1994 was part of a retrograde step.

The question must therefore be asked as to why this very public death from suicide did not increase the suicide rate in the young population concerned. Those who like heavy metal music are already known to be more reckless and sensation seeking (Arnett, 1991), more depressed and drug using, have more suicidal behaviors and come from more disadvantaged families (Martin et al., 1993), and more likely to get into antisocial and destructive behavior (Wass et al., 1991). How is it that these vulnerable young people are not influenced to suicide?

First, it has to be considered that they may not have seen the broadcast. This point has been made recently by Simkin et al. (1995) in their study of parasuicides. Despite the almost 100% television news penetrance, young people do not routinely watch news programs. However, in Cobain's case the news was carried on every music program, and articles have subsequently appeared in all music magazines as well as general interest magazines. It is highly unlikely that young people, particularly followers of heavy metal or punk of grunge, could have missed the reporting and discussion. Phillips (1974) has noted that an imitative effect is likely to be restricted to the geographical area in which the suicide occurred. As already noted, Cobain's music had an international following as strong in Australia as it is in the United States; it could be argued that his death had as much implication for young people in Australia as elsewhere.

Second, there has been a suggestion on the Internet that Cobain's death may not have been suicide, and a lawyer continues to seek information. However, the context surrounding Cobain's death, the clear suicide note, Cobain's previous attempts in the weeks prior to his death, and the general consensus mitigate against this speculation, which in any case was raised too late to have influenced events in the first month. Further, Cobain's widow, Courtney Love, made an impassioned speech to a crowd (estimated to be 10,000) on the day after the suicide was made public, reading the contents of the suicide note. This event was well publicised, and must have confirmed the initial public perception that Cobain suicided.

Courtney Love's comments were very negative about Cobain's suicide. Despite this it is reported that one individual Seattle male committed suicide within hours (Toltz & O'Donnell, 1994), and this must be considered as a copycat suicide. However, overall the 30 day rate for suicide, at least in Australia, seems to have dropped. One possible explanation is that this is simply part of natural variability from year to year, with a regaining of the 1990 levels. However, it is tempting to consider the one quarter reduction in deaths from 1993 to 1994 as of significance. Kessler et al. (1989) suggest that increased public sensitivity to teenage suicide may have created a context in which teenagers have become more resistant to the effects of TV. Simkin et al. (1995) have also considered positive or deterrent effects of media reporting in reducing the number of suicides. They comment how difficult this is to measure, but argue that "clinicians and professional bodies should encourage responsible media portrayal and reporting of suicidal behaviour". Courtney Love's comments may not have contributed to responsible media portrayal, but the question has to be raised whether Nirvana fans may have been deterred from suicide by her denigration of Cobain's act. This could be in the context of a cultural shift away from the assertion that talking about suicide may lead to normalisation – away from an acceptance that "everyone seems to do it" (Goldney, 1989; Littman, 1985).

This study did not take a time period before the death of Cobain which might have added strength to the findings. Further, the study did not consider possible rises in motor vehicle accidents. Given previous work it is possible that any increase in suicide was disguised by a marked increase in the MVA or other deaths (Phillips, 1997, 1978). Despite this, the rather small numbers of deaths recorded, and the complexity of the debate around the issue of influence, the study does appear to show a reduction in Australian deaths from suicide in the 30 day period after Cobain's suicide. At the very least, the absence of a rise must be considered as evidence that following this example of a celebrity suicide, the expected copycat effect did not occur. What demands further exploration and discussion is what was special about the reporting in this case that may conceivably have reduced the likelihood of influence.

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