

‘Hotspots’ and ‘copycats’: A plea for more thoughtful language about suicide

The latest meta-analysis by Pirkis and colleagues¹ presents a useful contribution to knowledge about the effectiveness of interventions to prevent suicides in public places. I take issue not with the content of their work, but with its language. They use the term ‘hotspot(s)’ no fewer than 30 times in their paper. For some years, this term has served to denote specific public sites that are frequently associated with acts of suicide, usually by jumping.² Beloved of the media, its continued, uncritical use in scientific literature is concerning.

In 2006, colleagues and I produced the English *Guidance on action to be taken at suicide hotspots*, the first such guidance in the world.² I used the term ‘hotspots’ reluctantly, being constrained by the commissioning brief to do so in the title. In the text, I not only provided a clear operational definition, which has become standard, but also introduced the concept of ‘high-risk places’ (to match ‘high-risk people’), which replaced ‘hotspots’ in our 2012 national strategy.³

The Scots copied our 2006 guidance but sagely dropped the term ‘hotspots’, replacing it with ‘locations of concern’. The Australians (led by Professor Pirkis) modelled their guidance on ours, using ‘hotspots’ throughout. In 2014, Public Health England commissioned me to develop fresh English guidance, and has accepted the need to dispense with this term altogether.⁴

So what is wrong with ‘hotspots’?

First, like its companion term ‘copycat’, also beloved of both the media and Professor Pirkis, it trivialises suicidal acts. It contains an implicit suggestion that certain suicides or attempted suicides, by dint of the fact that they take place at locations that have been used by others, are less genuinely desperate or tragic than others. We need to consider the impact of this on the bereaved.

Secondly, it demonises the place. For this reason, I now take issue with my own earlier use of ‘high-risk places.’ High-risk is not a fixed property of either people or places. Risk is a state created in the moment through the interaction of person, place and time (or mental state, means and opportunity). Like the spinning dials on a fruit machine, it is a chance combination of variables that results in a fatal suicide attempt.

Labelling a location a ‘suicide hotspot’ establishes its reputation as an effective means of suicide, and thus may encourage further suicides at that site. For this reason, in their media guidelines Samaritans urge reporters and editors to avoid the term ‘hotspot’ and never to refer to a place as such.⁵ Curiously, Samaritans continue to make liberal use of the equally repugnant term ‘copycat’ (albeit placing it in inverted commas), and fail to include this in their list of words/phrases to avoid.

In the new English guidance,⁴ we refer to sites that are frequently used for suicide as ‘frequently-used locations.’ This term says what it means, is neutral in valence and possibly less likely either to cause distress or trigger suicidal behaviour. As Samaritans point out, language matters.

Christabel Owens

Senior Research Fellow

University of Exeter Medical School, Exeter EX1 2LU, UK

c.v.owens@exeter.ac.uk

References

1. Pirkis J, Too L, Spittal M, Krysinaka K, Robinson J, Cheung Y. Interventions to reduce suicides at suicide hotspots: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2015; **Sep 22**. pii: **S2215-0366(15)00266-7**. doi: **10.1016/S2215-0366(15)00266-7**. [Epub ahead of print].
2. National Institute for Mental Health in England (NIMHE). *Guidance on action to be taken at suicide hotspots*. Leeds: NIMHE; 2006.
3. Department of Health. *Preventing suicide in England: A cross-government outcomes strategy to save lives*. London: Department of Health; 2012
4. Owens C, Hardwick R, Charles N, Watkinson G. *Preventing suicides in public places*. London: Public Health England; 2015 (in press).
5. Samaritans. *Media guidelines for reporting suicide*. <http://www.samaritans.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/files/press/Samaritans%20Media%20Guidelines%202013%20UK.pdf>. 2013.