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Suicide on the Railways in Great Britain: A Multi-Disciplinary Analysis

Final Report

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1. Executive Summary

Background to the study

As part of wider efforts to reduce suicide on the railways, Network Rail commissioned a programme of research and consultation focusing on railway suicide messaging and communications. The aim of this work was to generate new multi-disciplinary insights and actionable intelligence for the rail industry, via the following interrelated projects:

Phase 1: In-depth analyses of existing ethnographic[1], online[2], survey[2,3] and interview[3] data with individuals who have contemplated or attempted suicide by train, to explore from an anthropological and social psychological perspective the ways in which railway suicide is constructed in these accounts. A key focus of these analyses was the nature and possible functions of common myths and (mis)understandings around this method of suicide, including in relation to its causes, lethality and impact, and to other methods of suicide. We also aimed to explore implications and potential challenges for suicide-related communications, and suicide prevention more widely.

Phase 2: A series of workshops/consultation events with i) individuals with lived experience of suicidality and people bereaved by railway suicide, ii) clinical and academic experts, and iii) rail staff. Building on the analyses carried out as part of Phase 1, this workstream aimed to explore in greater depth, and from a variety of perspectives, some of the myths, ideas, discourses and cultural scripts surrounding railway suicide, and the ways in which these may be perpetuated and/or challenged via formal and informal messaging on rail suicide/suicide attempts (both at railway locations and in online spaces). As part of this, we also considered the possible implications, and risks, of different communications strategies about railway suicide, and related messaging (e.g. in relation to trespassing and accidents, as well as suicide/attempts announcements at stations and on social media).

The currently ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has meant that we have been unable to date to complete all the workshops and consultation events that were planned. We are, however, planning a *third phase of work* once social distancing measures allow. This will involve further consultation with the Lived Experiences Advisory Group, and a wider meeting involving rail industry suicide prevention leads and some of the clinical and academic experts we have consulted with so far, in order to bring together a wide variety of perspectives and to discuss our findings and recommendations. This will also be an opportunity to consider messaging and suicide prevention issues raised by the Covid-19 situation.

[1] From: Pharoah, R. (2017). *Suicide Prevention on the Railway: An Anthropological and Ethnographic Approach.* London: Encounter Consulting.
[2] From: Marzano, L. MacKenzie, J-M., et al. (2020) *Suicide and Life-Saving Interventions on the Railways in Great Britain: A Research Study.* Middlesex University.
[3] From: Marzano, L., Borrill, J., Mackenzie, J.M., Kruger, I., Fields, B. (2016). *Why Do People Take Their Lives on the Railways in Great Britain? A Research Study.* London: Middlesex University.

Brief overview

The secondary analysis of existing interview and survey data[4], taken alongside the analysis of online environments[5], previous ethnographic and anthropological work[6], and consultations with academic, rail industry and lived experience experts, has enabled us to generate a **fairly full and clear picture** of how people who are contemplating (or who have contemplated and attempted) suicide on the railways **engage with and express the idea of railway suicide**, and the types of associations made about that method / location. In short, by bringing together the findings from different studies, and looking for overlaps, common themes, as well as differences, we have been able to develop a good sense of the **cultural scripts and discourses that together form 'railway suicide' as a knowable and available means of ending one's life**.

More specifically, from these sources we have been able to draw out the factors that seemingly **attract** people to the method/location (quick, lethal, accessible, commonly used method), and also what **dissuades** them (impact on others - especially the driver, possibility of surviving with injuries, possibility of intervention, fear-inducing method). The logic, in terms of a messaging / communications strategy, would therefore be to challenge the 'attractors' (because many are misunderstandings or myths) and try to reinforce or amplify the 'dissuaders'. There are complexities and difficulties to be considered, though, particularly around risks, possible unintended consequences, and the nuances needed to communicate to different audiences.

Below, we summarise our key findings and also unpack some of the complexities involved in messaging around railway suicide that emerged during the course of the study. Implications of the findings and recommendations are then set-out.

Key findings

Suicide and suicide prevention are complex, and for that reason we drew on a wide variety of informed perspectives for this project. In the end, each element of the project generated useful insights and, importantly, consistent themes and lessons emerged across the different components of work:

Common stories and myths around railway suicide: Discourses and 'cultural scripts'

In the interview, survey, ethnographic and online data, there was a degree of consistency about the **reasons given for choosing the railways for suicide**:

- Railway suicide is seen as a highly **lethal** method, one that is likely to be fatal.
- It is seen as a method that is likely to be **quick**.
- As well as being perceived as a 'reliable' and quick way to end your life, the railways are also taken to be an **accessible** and an **affordable** method of suicide.

[4] From: Marzano, L., Borrill, J., Mackenzie, J.M., Kruger, I., Fields, B. (2016). *Why Do People Take Their Lives on the Railways in Great Britain? A Research Study.* London: Middlesex University.
[5] From: Marzano, L. MacKenzie, J-M., et al. (2020) *Suicide and Life-Saving Interventions on the Railways in Great Britain: A Research Study.* Middlesex University.
[6] From: Pharoah, R. (2017). *Suicide Prevention on the Railway: An Anthropological and Ethnographic Approach.* London: Encounter Consulting.

- Railway suicide is perceived to be a frequently used or **common** method of ending one's life.

These can be seen as factors that **attract** people to the method / location. They are interesting perceptions, as they stand in contrast somewhat to the known reality of the method (and can even be thought of as myths).

The following **counter or alternative discourses** circulate around railway suicide:

- The recognition of the **impact on others**, particularly the **driver**, is the most prominent.
- Due to this it is often described as a **selfish** way to die (this is a particularly strongly stated opinion in online forums).
- The possibility of **surviving with injuries** is often acknowledged,
- as are the chances of **intervention**,
- and also the fact that it can be a **fear-inducing method**, one where it can be difficult to overcome the survival instinct.

These counter-discourses are interesting in that they can be seen as strongly **dissuasive** in relation to railway suicide, and thus may be useful from a messaging perspective. The idea being that drawing on, even amplifying, these known dissuasive factors in messaging may have the effect, over time, of **deterring** people from considering the railways for suicide (or to put it another way, of making the railways seem less attractive as a site / method for suicide).

Discourse theory, messaging and preventing suicide on the railways

Attempting to change the associations people make between the railways and suicide is not a straightforward task, however. For these associations to be shaped or influenced, messaging would have to work on different levels – from the local / individual level, targeting people who are contemplating ending their life on the railways, up to broader background social discourses and cultural scripts.

A key point to emphasise, though, is that working on one level influences other levels, in that there is a relationship between background cultural scripts / discourses about railway suicide, railway messaging and individual experiences and actions. That is:

- Existing cultural images, ideas and scripts shape individual intentions and actions
- In relation to railway suicide, people draw on these images, ideas and scripts when imagining, planning and undertaking various actions which make up, or lead to, a suicide attempt
- There is a relationship between these background cultural scripts and the more immediate railway messaging context, in that messaging (over time) can exert an influence and shape these images, ideas and scripts

Working with this theory as a guide, we can consider how best to influence existing or emerging scripts and discourses in order to reduce the likelihood of people choosing suicide as an option.

A number of questions need to be carefully considered though:

- Which, if any, of these cultural scripts can – and should – we try and challenge via formal and informal messaging, in different spaces and contexts? And how?

- Which might we want to 'encourage'/reinforce/amplify? How?

- What are the risks?

- What might the unintended consequences be? And for whom?

- What are the implications of the (mis)understandings of railways, suicide and railway suicides – for different groups and individuals?

Different audiences

Before addressing the above, and how different forms of communication may help shape these cultural scripts or discourses, it is important to consider what **different audiences** exist in relation to railway suicide messaging/communications[7]:

a. Those who could be thought of as having particular **sensitivity / vulnerability** to messaging around suicide:

   i. Those who are or have been in distress/suicidal - at different stages of the 'suicidal process'. In this context, it is perhaps also useful to consider whether and how those falling in this group may seek and respond to help/intervention. The secondary analysis of interviews with attempt survivors indicated that this group could be made up of two cohorts – those who are suicidal and would welcome, or at least be open to, some form of intervention, and those who are suicidal and are not help seeking (and are often in fact, intent on avoiding any intervention).

   ii. People bereaved by suicide

b. Those **not necessarily seen as 'vulnerable'** as such, and who may seek and react to messaging around railway suicide primarily in relation to travel delays/disruption but nonetheless may be 'primed' (e.g. to think that suicides on the railways are more common or lethal that they actually are, thus potentially increasing the 'cognitive availability' of the railways as a suicide method at times of distress).

   i. General commuters

   ii. Rail staff

   iii. The wider community (including/especially those who live or work near a rail station, bridge or crossing).

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[7] These are not intended as exhaustive or mutually exclusive categories, and are not homogeneous groups, and it is important that we continue to ask ourselves which other voices and perspectives we might be missing.

For this second group (commuters, rail staff, wider community) it is also important to consider the effects, and potential trauma, of being exposed to a suicide or attempt on the railways, even for individuals and groups who are not considered 'vulnerable'[8].

People can, of course fall into different categories, and there will be a degree of overlap for many people, but through the consultation events it became clear that the same message can be received in quite contrasting ways by different audiences, and a message that is perceived as 'neutral' / factual by one can be a potentially 'triggering' one for another (as an example, the announcement of a fast train approaching seems to elicit many different and contrasting responses). This was one of the many occasions in relation to messaging where **unanticipated** or **unintended consequences** seemed to come into play.

An important implication is that **messaging has to be quite sophisticated** in order to **meet the needs of / influence each audience**. Our consultations with the lived experiences group in particular bore this out.

Challenges

It is clear that the needs of these different audiences may not always be compatible. For example, commuters wanting precise information about the location and timing of an incident, to minimize travel disruption; rail employees wanting to reduce commuter dissatisfaction or even hostility, by being open about the ('external') nature and extent of suicide-related service disruptions, and wanting to 'advertise' the good work being done to prevent suicide on the railways; versus the risks of 'triggering' people at risk of suicide and/or providing an unhelpful level of detail about where and when an attempt on the railways is likely to be fatal.

This raises a number of further questions;

- **Whose needs should be prioritized** in such cases? We can't overlook the complex and, at times, competing interests and priorities of the rail industry and its different stakeholders. However, from a suicide prevention perspective, the answer is arguably clear - but not that simple, not least as those at risk of suicide on the railways are not a homogenous group.

- **What 'internal' communications are needed** to persuade key stakeholders of the importance of prioritizing the needs of those at risk of suicide? Given some of the commercial imperatives and implications at stake, should cost-effectiveness analyses

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[8] For example, a recent survey of 219 rail industry employees found that almost 70% (N=147, 67.1%) had lived experience of suicidal thoughts (in 30 cases (18.3%) involving rail locations) and one in five (N=44, 20.1%) had previously attempted suicide, in three instances by train. Whilst the survey may not have been representative of rail staff more widely, the high proportion of 'vulnerable' staff respondents is an important issue to consider, and address. As remarked by some participants, this may at least in part be due to the impact of, and exposure to, other suicides in this context. Ease and frequency of access to tracks and other relatively inaccessible (to the general public) locations may further compound the problem (Marzano, L. MacKenzie, J-M., et al., 2020).

be an integral part of cross-industry suicide prevention activities, discussions and decisions? If so, what are the risks and potential disadvantages?

- If the main aim of suicide-related communications is **suicide prevention** (rather than to communicate delays/appease delayed customers), this may include both interventions to interrupt suicidal thoughts and attempts (e.g. signage at key locations), and strategies to challenge broader cultural scripts / discourses around railway suicide. The latter may well require separate, but complementary, measures.

The example of suicide-prevention signage illustrates some of the complexities at play. The quotes below are from survey respondents who had contemplated or attempted suicide on the railways, when asked what could help prevent suicide on the railways:

- *Samaritans adverts at the end of train platforms. Projected adverts that change provide distraction as travelling at the same place day after day you know the adverts and there is no stimulation and that allows the mind to do its own thing more easily*

- *Messages that mean something to me, whether from a friend or seeing signs up (e.g. Samaritans) in the station.*

- *Samaritans signs at stations have helped*

- *Maybe signage sensitively but clearly displaying that, horrifically, some of those who jump in front of trains survive and a no. for Samaritans. Tackle idea that it would 'just be over in a second'*

- *Publicising that suicide attempts on the railways don't always work (if there are many cases).*

Versus:

- *When all you can think about is death and dying, you don't particularly notice signs or posters so I don't believe they would particularly help.*

- *Too much obvious 'suicide prevention' things makes me think more about the possibility of suicide and that stations are a 'good' place for suicide*

- *I don't think adverts for the Samaritans help - if anything, it gives people the idea. Posters showing the devastation caused, the trauma to the driver involved, the human impact on the survivors - might be more effective - I'm glad I didn't ruin a driver's life*

Whilst not the only 'audience' for such signage, people with lived experience of suicidality are arguably the most important group to consider, and target, when deciding whether, where and what suicide prevention messages and images should (and shouldn't) be displayed at or near rail locations. However, as shown above, lived experience perspectives on this are both varied and, at times, divergent.

To complicated matters further, these signs of course don't exist in a vacuum. For example, they can be in conflict with some of the messages and signage to prevent trespassing[9], which tend to emphasize the risk of prosecution if caught and the high chance of death if accidentally struck by a train:

- *The signs telling you that you are trespassing if you step onto the tracks, makes me feel worse and as though I have to jump now or else I will be left with a huge fine.*

Whether signage (or indeed other forms of communication) are encouraging help-seeking and/or help-giving, or challenging some of the more unhelpful scripts associated with railway suicide (e.g. that it is quick and effective), there are – perhaps inevitably – risks and unintended consequences. For example, knowing that support/help/intervention may be available at a rail station, or that an attempt by train may not necessarily result in death, could attract more or different people to this location/method of suicide – whilst deterring others. The amount and exact position of such signage may further influence this process of 'attracting' or 'dissuading' suicidal individuals to/from railway locations.

Implications and Recommendations

Despite the challenges, the following are arguably promising comms strategies to help 'dissuade' and prevent suicide by train:

1. Discuss known **dissuasive factors** more:
   - The most prominent dissuasive factor (seemingly both online and offline) is the recognition of the **impact on others**, particularly the **driver**. However, this is rarely 'officially' discussed or reflected in suicide prevention. Such an approach would build upon a commonly, and strongly, held understanding of railway suicide. This form of messaging about the impact on staff might be particularly resonant now given the positive public perceptions of 'front-line' public sector workers during the Covid-19 epidemic.
   - Due to the impact on others, railway suicide is often described as a **selfish** way to die. This is a difficult message to 'formally' draw on, and for some audiences (e.g. those bereaved by railway suicide) might be distressing to hear. However, on online forums especially, this is a particularly strongly stated opinion.
   - Discussing the possibility of **surviving with injuries** and/or the possibility of experiencing **pain** would work to counter the 'quick, lethal and painless' myths.
   - Advertising the chances of **intervention** might dissuade people who do not want to be intervened with, and are not looking for support and help. Even existing campaigns such as 'Small Talk Saves Lives' can have the effect of increasing the perception that one might be approached and stopped at a station, and thus dissuade some from considering that location as a site for suicide.
   - Acknowledging the fact that it can be a **fear-inducing method**, one where it can be difficult to overcome the survival instinct.

   Such an approach raises many issues (discussed above), but in terms of challenging myths, one strategy that prior intervention research indicates would be helpful is that

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[9] See http://restrail.eu/toolbox/spip.php?article135 – some of these recommendations are arguably also relevant to suicide signage

communities should be provided with factual and clear information about suicide that is not romanticized or distorted[10].

2. In relation to **beliefs** or **myths** around railway suicide, factual information can be used to **challenge** the idea that:

- Railway suicide attempts are always **lethal.**

- It is a method that is efficient or **quick.**

- That the railways are freely **accessible,** and you won't be interrupted.

- Railway suicide is a frequently used or **common** method of ending one's life.

3. **Reduce the cognitive availability** of railways as a method of suicide, by tackling the perception that suicide on the railways are common and/or on the rise.

   The perception of railway suicide being a common means of suicide, mentioned above as a myth that could be challenged, also relates to the idea of 'cognitive availability', and is important with regards to industry messaging more broadly.

   Whilst the rail industry may have limited control over the stories that circulate online (for example in pro-choice forums) about railway suicide, the announcements made at stations, on trains, on social media and media/news reporting more generally can all contribute to railway suicide being perceived as more common than they actually are. From a lived experience perspective:

   - *Knowing that people often die on the railways makes you think it is an effective method.*

   - *[When choosing the railways as a method of suicide I was influenced by] online statistics and delays read aloud.*

   The question is not just *how* to communicate about RS, but *whether, how much, when and to whom.*

   It is important to consider the language, tone and frequency of messages used to communicate delays/disruptions due to a suicide or suicide attempts – and whether/when it is actually necessary to communicate these to the general public. Where possible, this is to be balanced again the needs of commuters, staff and other audiences and stakeholders, and of course it is not a 'secret' that some people take their lives on the rails. However, some practical measures could help reduce the risks and unintended consequences of well-meaning, informative messages:

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[10] Abrutyn, S., Mueller, A.S., & Osborne, M.A. (2019). Rekeying Cultural Scripts for Youth Suicide: How Social Networks Facilitate Suicide Diffusion and Suicide Clusters Following Exposure to Suicide. *Society and Mental Health*, 215686931983406.

i. **Avoid language or announcements which suggest that suicide on the rails are a common occurrence**. Every life lost on the railways is a tragedy, with far-reaching impacts for family and friends, and potentially for a wide range of people, not least train drivers, rail employees, bystanders, commuters and the wider community. This, and the disproportionate reporting of fatal attempts on the rails[11], might well contribute to the perception that this is a common method of suicide. For accuracy, and to minimise the risk of clustering and 'contagion', it is arguably important to (also) communicate that rail suicides are relatively rare, and on average less than 5% of all suicides in the UK.

ii. **Avoid a sensational and alarmist tone** in suicide-related messaging and reports, especially when communicating a possible increase in railway suicides or suicide cluster. Indeed, consider very carefully whether it is necessary to communicate this information to the general public (or fears around a possible rise or cluster). This may be especially important in a Covid-related context, given the 'tsunami' discourse currently dominating discussions, and predictions, of the likely impact on suicide and mental illness[12].

iii. **Sensationalised messaging can include warm and emotive messages**, as these may serve to render a specific issue or incident more memorable and/or relatable to. The balance between destigmatising and 'normalising' suicide can be a difficult one to achieve, as is deproblematising suicidal thoughts (e.g. to increase awareness and encourage help-seeking) whilst discouraging suicidal behaviours.

Despite the potential to dissuade from railway suicide by highlighting its impact on others, emotive messages of sympathy and support towards those affected (including family, friends, train drivers and other bystanders) can also have unintended consequences by creating further shame and guilt for those struggling with suicidal thoughts, and associated feelings of 'burdensomeness'[13].

iv. As well as the content and tone of suicide-related communications, it is important to consider – and arguably minimise – the **frequency** with which any suicide or attempt is communicated to the general public. Reducing exposure to railway suicide may include, **where possible, avoiding repeated suicide-related announcements on affected trains and at stations.**

v. **Social media announcements** about a specific incident can potentially reach millions of people, particularly when the associated delays/service disruption affects a number of lines, routes and train operating companies, and are therefore communicated via multiple channels, on multiple occasions. Such level of exposure may in turn contribute to the perception that railway suicides are a common and pervasive problem. To minimize this, solutions such as 'pinned' (rather than frequently repeated) announcements/tweets could be adopted. Measures to restrict or prevent other social media users from sharing or commenting on such announcements could also be considered.

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[11] Marzano, L., Borrill, J., Mackenzie, J.M., Kruger, I., Fields, B. (2016). *Why Do People Take Their Lives on the Railways in Great Britain? A Research Study.* London: Middlesex University.
[12] (see for example https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52676981).
[13] Joiner T (2005) *Why people die by suicide.* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

4. References to suicide and self-harm can be **triggering** for those with lived experience of suicidality, and those bereaved by suicide. A common suggestion, at all of the consultation events held, was to avoid such language where possible, and refer instead to **'a medical emergency'**, both at rail locations and in online communications.

   It is also important to consider, from a lived experience perspective, what other aspects of railway environments and travel can be difficult or even triggering (see for example Mackett, 2019)[14]. This might include **anti-trespass signage and fast-train announcement**s, which reinforce and 'publicise' that "trains are fast, cannot stop quickly, and the outcome of a collision is usually fatal"[15]. The example of other countries, including Germany and the Netherlands, suggests that announcements such as these could be modified, minimised or indeed eliminated to reduce suicide on the railways (see for example Lukaschek et al, 2014)[16].

5. **Avoid communicating unnecessary detail and images of methods and locations,** and **follow established media guidelines** for the responsible reporting of suicide[17], and railway suicide in particular[18]. Although generally targeted at journalists and editors, such guidelines are also relevant in the context of industry-led communications. They are based on a substantial body of evidence about the potential dangers of media (especially newspaper) coverage of suicide, including some powerful examples of the impact of reporting, and reporting guidelines, on suicides by train[19].

6. Remember that **post-incident communications after a traumatic event can be unhelpful and have negative emotional implications**, **even for those who are not 'vulnerable' as such.** For example, there is evidence that providing emotional support and psychological 'debriefing' after exposure to a potentially traumatic event can actually be harmful and increase the risk of developing post-traumatic stress[20].

[14] Mackett, R., (2019). *Mental health and travel - Report on a survey*. University College London, June. Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/civil-environmental-geomatic-engineering/sites/civil-environmental-geomatic-engineering/files/mental_health_and_travel_-_final_report.pdf
[15] Savage I. Analysis of fatal train-pedestrian collisions in metropolitan Chicago 2004-2012. *Accid Anal Prev*. 2016;86:217-228. doi:10.1016/j.aap.2015.11.005.
[16] Lukaschek K, Baumert J, Erazo N, Ladwig KH. Stable time patterns of railway suicides in Germany: Comparative analysis of 7,187 cases across two observation periods (1995-1998; 2005-2008). *BMC Public Health*. 2014;14(1).
[17] World Health Organization (2017). *Preventing suicide: a resource for media professionals - update 2017*. Available at: https://www.who.int/mental_health/suicide-prevention/resource_booklet_2017/en/: Samaritans (2013). *Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide*. Available at: https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/
[18] Samaritans (No Date). *Reporting Rail Suicides and Attempts*. Available at: https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Media_guidelines_-Rail_suicides_factsheet_UK_Final.pdf
[19] Koburger N, Mergl R, Rummel-Kluge C, et al. Celebrity suicide on the railway network: Can one case trigger international effects? *J Affect Disord*. 2015;185:38-46. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2015.06.037: Etzersdorfer E, Sonneck G. Preventing suicide by influencing mass-media reporting. The Viennese experience 1980–1996. *Arch Suicide Res*. 1998;4(1):67-74. doi:10.1080/13811119808258290.
[20] World Health Organization (2012). Psychological debriefing in people exposed to a recent traumatic event. Available at: https://www.who.int/mental_health/mhgap/evidence/resource/other_complaints_q5.pdf

7. **Consider what associations exist with the railways, as well as with railway suicide and suicide more generally**. For example, can and should the railways be - and be known to be - places where intervention is likely? What are the potential unintended consequences of heightening expectations of intervention (which some may effectively experience and look to as 'support') where these may not be fully met, and in such close proximity to lethal means of suicide (as opposed to 'safer' community, health and social care, or online spaces)? Alongside the potentially deterrent effect for those seeking to avoid intervention, these potential risks need careful consideration when designing any initiative to reduce suicide, and when deciding whether or how to 'advertise' any such measure to the general public (be it a staff training programme or coordinated efforts to make rail locations friendlier, more difficult to access, and so on).

   In other words, how might **the naming and 'framing' of interventions to prevent railway suicide** affect those who are most vulnerable/sensitive to such messages? These are as important an aspect of suicide-related communications as the messaging/announcements about specific incidents or clusters. A frequent suggestion raised at the events we facilitated was to **minimise or even avoid "obvious *suicide prevention*", and instead couch interventions in terms of general well-being, mental health and loneliness -** but in such a way as to not exclude those with the most complex needs.

8. Current suicide prevention discourses and evidence-based approaches tend to emphasise the importance of doing a lot to reduce suicides. Calls for multi-faceted, multi-agency strategies, incorporating several measures and levels of intervention, proliferate in policy, practice and research literature. This is undoubtedly often important work, which sometimes however leaves little space for considering whether we could or should do less, compared to what we are currently doing. In other words, could it be better – at least in some contexts - to say and do less? **Should we talk about railway suicide, and railway suicide prevention, less?**

   The answer is arguably not to *do* less, but perhaps to *talk* about it less. This doesn't just mean limiting whether or how information about rail suicide and prevention initiatives is made public, but also drawing on potential design and technology solutions to communicate about – and indeed prevent – suicide (as opposed to more traditional, verbal methods). The concept of **'dissuasion by design**', including the use of art, sound and visual installations 'designed against suicide' offers a fruitful area for further exploration. Whilst potentially costly, projects such as the redesign of the Foyle river banks and bridges[21] could offer much promise in a railway context, particularly at busy and especially impersonal railway environments, as well as remote, unstaffed locations.

Suggestions for Further Studies and Consultation

- Further secondary analysis from other commissioned studies on railway suicide (e.g. BTP data 'psychological autopsy' study; data from 'social media listening' digital media projects) would complement the work outlined in this report. As stated earlier, by bringing together the findings from different studies, and looking for overlaps, common themes,

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[21] https://www.urbandesignmentalhealth.com/journal-5---river-foyle.html

as well as differences, it is possible to develop a good sense of the cultural scripts and discourses that together form 'railway suicide' as a knowable and available means of ending one's life. **Synthesising findings from different studies** on railway suicide can be a way to inform messaging and communications strategies within the industry, and to ensure their relevance and usefulness.

- When considering the different audiences in relation to communications, campaigns and messaging, it may be beneficial for the industry to have access to **'experts by experience'**. These are people who can bring both knowledge and experience of how messaging may be received by key groups – those who are contemplating using the railways as a site/method of suicide, and those who have been bereaved by suicide. The Lived Experiences Advisory Group convened for this project is perhaps a useful model of how these can be formed and run.

- Multi-disciplinary research and consultation with academic, rail and lived experience experts could help to cast light on how messaging around suicide may need to be adapted in the context of **Covid-19**. As stated earlier, a third phase of work is planned as part of this project that will involve further consultation with the Lived Experiences Advisory Group, and a wider meeting involving rail industry suicide prevention leads and some of the clinical and academic experts we have consulted with so far. This will also be an opportunity to consider messaging and suicide prevention issues raised by the Covid-19 situation. However, further work may also be needed, particularly in the light of the numerous challenges Covid-19 has raised for the industry.

2. Secondary Analysis of Middlesex University Railway Suicide Study Data

A secondary thematic analysis was undertaken of the 34 recorded semi-structured interviews and 353 online survey responses originally collected as part of the Middlesex University led ''*Why do people take their lives on the Railways in Great Britain? A research study*' project[22].

The main aim was to identify the range of issues and themes expressed in the interviews and through the survey that would potentially have relevance to messaging and communications in relation to suicide and the railway network.

The main findings from the secondary analysis are set out first, then the main themes from the study are summarised. There then follows a consideration of how these themes can be drawn on to inform a messaging and communications strategy, both in order to influence individual actions as well as to potentially shape cultural scripts / discourses around railway suicide more broadly.

1. Summary of main findings from the analysis

The perspectives and experiences of people considering suicide on the railway

The study included interview participants who had made a suicide attempt by walking, jumping, or lying in front a train (Group 1); participants who had survived a suicide attempt by another method, having considered and/or rejected a rail method (Group 2); and those who reported thoughts of suicide on the railways but had never made a suicide attempt (Group 3).

These participants describe viewing and evaluating the railway environment through the 'lens' of planning a suicide attempt. Their perspective, and experience, of these environments is thus probably very different from the average rail user / customer who most likely view the railway as a service, a means of transport, the station as a place of transition / transport, and so on. For the participants, the railway was somewhere they had considered as an environment where they might undertake a series of actions that would lead, ultimately, to their death. Although very much a minority of rail users, the radical difference in perspective between the 'average' rail user and those who are considering it as a site of suicide is probably worth keeping in mind. Understanding that people are seeing and experiencing the railway environment through very different 'lenses' can inform prevention initiatives. For those who describe thinking of, or planning, suicide whilst experiencing distress at a railway site, the environment is often viewed through a 'mental health' or 'help-seeking' 'lens' – that is, opportunities and/or resources to ameliorate distress are looked for (for example, Samaritans phone number, staff availability and likely attitude to being approached, the availability of 'safe' spaces). For those viewing the railway environment (physical and social) through a

[22] '*Why do people take their lives on the Railways in Great Britain? A research study*' Lisa Marzano, Jay-Marie Mackenzie, Ian Kruger, Jo Borrill and Bob Fields (2016). See also, Marzano, L., Mackenzie, J., Kruger, I., Borrill, J., & Fields, B. (2019). Factors deterring and prompting the decision to attempt suicide on the railway networks: Findings from 353 online surveys and 34 semi-structured interviews. *British Journal of Psychiatry, 215*(4), 582-587. doi:10.1192/bjp.2018.303

'suicide' 'lens', then avoiding detection and possible intervention become key elements in the perception and appraisal of the spaces.

Different audiences for messaging

Following on from this, when it comes to messaging around suicide, it may be necessary to think through who the different audiences are. These obviously include a wide range of people (including general commuters and rail staff), and for this majority they may seek and react to messaging around railway suicide primarily in relation to travel delays/disruption.[23] The interview data would suggest, though, that those who are or have been in distress/suicidal would have a particular sensitivity / vulnerability to messaging around suicide. However, in many ways even this group is not singular or homogenous. For example, with regards to help-seeking behaviour (and responsiveness to messaging that encourages this), the secondary analysis of interviews with attempt survivors indicated that there could be two cohorts – those who are suicidal and would welcome, or at least be open to, some form of support or intervention, and those who are suicidal and are not help seeking (and are often in fact, intent on avoiding any intervention and have negative perceptions of the support available).

Messaging, therefore, may have to be quite sophisticated in order to meet the needs of / influence each audience, with an understanding that people may be in very different places in relation to seeking help (i.e. help-seeking, ambivalent, or, potentially, 'post' help-seeking).

Cultural scripts / discourses of railway suicide and messaging

Another point which emerges from the interview data is that you can map a relationship between background cultural scripts and discourses about railway suicide, and individual experiences and actions. Study participants talk about hearing of other suicides on the railways from a variety of sources, including local media (TV and newspapers - online and print), through searching on the internet, websites that list different methods, and local stories that circulate through word of mouth[24].

These existing cultural images, ideas and scripts shape individual intentions and actions. In relation to railway suicide, people draw on these when imagining, planning and undertaking various actions which make up, or lead to, a suicide attempt.

There is also an iterative relationship between background cultural scripts and the more immediate railway messaging context. That is, broad cultural scripts influence messaging, and messaging (over time) can influence these cultural scripts.

The main themes from the data are now presented, with a selection of illustrative quotes. As well as showing the processes involved in planning and enacting a suicide attempt, they also

[23] Nonetheless, these people may also be affected in non-obvious ways by messaging around suicide (e.g. be 'primed' to think that suicides on the railways are more common or lethal that they actually are, thus potentially increasing the 'cognitive availability' of the railways as a suicide method at times of distress).
[24] Rarely is it through direct personal experience of witnessing such a death

give a rich insight into what those key cultural scripts / discourses around suicide - and railway suicide in particular - are. Picking up on this theme, there follows a consideration of the possibilities which exist for influencing or shaping these scripts and discourses as part of a broader prevention approach.

2. Summary of main themes from the data

Choosing a site / method of suicide

Study participants describe an **active, dynamic process** in terms of choosing a particular method, time and place for a suicide attempt, and in terms of the actions they took towards that goal. They describe their plans as being **contingent** on a number of elements, rather than being something entirely fixed in advance.

Often these were framed in terms of **necessary or desirable** elements for a particular method or place; how long it would take to die (**quick/slow**), perception of how likely a method was to end their life (**lethality**); the amount of **pain** likely to be suffered, for how long; and the likelihood of being **seen, interrupted, or stopped**. Other factors included whether the site was considered **private or public**; and the likely state and site of their **body** afterwards.

One interviewee (B1) was quite explicit about the different criteria:

- *'I've come up with, for me, 5 criteria. Of why I did it. And the first criteria was ease of equipment or ease getting to a location…' '…so the location and getting hold of the stuff…' '…one of the other criteria was the probability of success once I started the attempt…' '…duration and intensity of pain during the attempt…' '…top criteria really was that I didn't want my body found by my wife.'*

Interestingly, participants described a process by which they **imagined (or rehearsed in their mind) and evaluated** a particular method or scenario ('**suicidal imagination**'). This process seems to have involved (for some) images of travelling to a particular place; imaging the attempt itself (for example, being hit by a train), and the sorts of pain which might be involved, how long they would be alive for and so on; and imagining the scene immediately afterwards (what happens to their body afterwards, the immediate effect on others (e.g. train driver), and the impact on others later (when family would be informed for example).

Participants described having not just thoughts about a particular method but of **imagining in detail what would happen to them and others before, during and after an attempt**. The extent to which this involved others (drivers, partners, friends) was quite striking. Participants offered descriptions of imagining the reactions of others (e.g. to finding body), and often alongside a moral accounting for the act (assessing the impact on others):

- A8 *'I was like, "My partner is going to be so disappointed if I do this". Because like he said, I'd been trying hard over the past year… To like stay well… and he was at home during the time. At that time. And I was imagining the kind of call he would get. And like there have been a lot of times this year when just on an impulse, I've had a bad day at work, and I'm like walking down to the platform, I can hear a train coming so I*

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walk a little faster towards the platform and I'm a little… and every time a train… I'm on the platform, I actually have to step back.'

The suicidal act had seemingly often been already imagined – it didn't just exist as an abstract thought or 'ideation'. Detailed narratives were sometimes constructed around the event that had structure, characters (self and other), environments, and were associated with meanings and images that were affectively charged:

- A8 *'But with like, I guess, creating a suicide, you're creating a narrative that's special and meaningful to you, and… and it was the thought of, I guess, doing something right for once. And like making it a spectacle and making it, I guess, theatrical. I even had like… I'd created a playlist. To kind of accompany it. So it had like lots of… lots of… mostly classical music. Like kind of Beethoven and Puccini. Theatrical stuff. And then when I was considering the railway, when I wasn't actually able to go through with it in the end, again it was a kind of last resort, I guess.'*

Choosing railways as a site / method of suicide

When considering the railways as a means and/or place to end their life, participants identified a number of common considerations:

Lethality

Railway suicide is seen as a highly lethal method, one that is likely to be fatal.

- B7 *'I thought it would be definite for sure, because trains when they're coming really quickly, they're not going to stop. That's why I think it's one of the most easy, quick methods, because it's just going to hit you.'*

Efficiency

It is seen as a method that is likely to be quick.

- A1 *'A quick, violent death is quite attractive. I think that's one thing that you hope that a train can provide.'*

Accessibility and privacy

As well as being perceived as a 'reliable' and quick way to end your life, the railways are also taken to be an accessible and an affordable method of suicide.

- A1 '*the great thing about the train stations is partly the sense of anonymity, whether it's train stations or open stretches of track. In xxx there's a lot of places where you can literally just walk onto a track if you wanted to or there are bridges that are unmonitored and no cameras around… It was essentially no one could see you and that was quite practical.'*

The effect on others

One of the most consistent features of the interviews was the extent to which participants highlighted how a consideration for others informed their decision making in relation to their

choice of method, and the time and place of their attempt. The most prominent concern expressed about suicide on the railways was the impact it would have on others, particularly **the train driver**. There was also concern expressed about family members having to identify the body.

- B4 *'I couldn't do that, because that would be running the risk of doing that to the driver of the train, and likewise a car, I couldn't do that, because that's making somebody else complicit, so that's almost making them feel as if they'd killed me.'*
- B10 *'I think railways are quite traumatic on other people. I do work with people who work in the emergency services and stuff, and I just think that's an awful position to put a train driver or the people inside into'*

Possibility of surviving with injuries

The possibility of surviving with injuries is often acknowledged, with participants describing giving consideration to whether they might survive the attempt, and what that survival would be like, again imagining or visualising in some detail what that might be like:

- A1 *'what I don't want to be is in some sort of half vegetative state. That just seems the worst of all worlds. Your current life may be a bit ropey from time to time, but it's definitely got to be better than being a bit of a physical wreck or a mental wreck.'*
- A4 *'Well if you've just told me that sometimes you don't die, that probably would have an effect… You wouldn't want to be left mangled and still alive because that would be even worse. I don't think that's made clear at all. In fact I don't think I've ever heard that.'*

Interventions on the railway

'Interventions' were described in many different ways; in terms of being interrupted, rescued, intercepted, interfered with, saved, arrested, helped, or 'detained involuntarily'. The meaning, and emotional reaction to each, varied markedly.

Ambivalence to any intervention

There was often an ambivalence about intervention in the interviews. Sometimes intervention was talked about in terms of being stopped or prevented, and sometimes as possibilities for being helped / supported / rescued. There was an awareness that intervention could be in relation to participants transgressing or breaking the law (e.g. trespass) and that the intervention might then be punitive (or just unsympathetic). Participants often describe themselves as ill, vulnerable, in crisis and in need of the right (sympathetic) support and help. So, some evidence of a desire for intervention, but also wariness of social censure and negative consequences (e.g. police involvement, arrest, sectioning, shame). People also described having had many interventions before whilst in crisis that weren't very helpful (particularly from mental health services) so some ambivalence was also grounded in personal experience.

- Case c - '*I had been aware that other stations there were signs saying to approach a member of staff if you were struggling. … I couldn't see anyone to approach. I was*

terrified of what they would do if i did say something. I presumed that police would be called, that I may be hospitalised in a strange city far from friends and family.'

Avoiding being seen

Participants describe being aware of whether they could be observed or not. If they felt they could be observed behaviours were, to various degrees, consciously managed or controlled in order not to communicate intentions or likely actions:

Participants described how the possibility of being seen acts, or could act, as a deterrent.

- A7 *'I didn't want to be spotted or bothered so like if somebody had seen that there was – that I'd just climbed over and was just sat like next to the lines and somebody might – they might have phoned through and the next minute the police would be there or they'd stop all the trains coming or something like that. So I didn't want any of that. I didn't want to deal with people. I didn't want to be stopped or talked to so yeah, that's why I sort of chose where it was like – it wasn't just dark; there was – there was quite a bit of sort of low vegetation so stuff like brambles and stuff like that. So it was somewhere I could sort of sit and sort of be a bit sort of camouflaged. It wasn't just like if it was all open stones and I was just me sticking up. Because there's always some kind of light whether it's the moon or whatever – it's never completely dark. So yeah, I did make my way to where it was dark but again even if the whole railway was lit up then all you have to do is move a few yards further back from the railway line and then there's always some kind of bushes or tree line so I would just have gone further away from, further away from where all the houses are. The railway lines sort of go through like industrial areas as well, so – yeah, more lights wouldn't have stopped me. Even if the whole thing was totally with floodlights and I would have just gone away from where the lights were and then when the time come and just gone out into the path – again on the basis that you're not going to be able to stop even if they do see you'*

The presence of others as support / deterrent / human contact

Participants discussed how the presence of others could have acted as a source of help, but also as a deterrent. It is worth considering how the awareness of 'Small Talk Saves Lives' campaign could have an effect on people's perception of the likelihood of intervention (possibly reducing the desirability of stations as a location).

- B13 '*I think if there's staff around or staff nearby you often think differently that there's someone there.' …' Definitely knowing that there's someone. Even if it's someone who smiles at you, kind of thing, it might just be enough to break your thoughts away or someone that might just even come and sit next to you and just be approachable. It might be enough to break that thought pattern.'*

- A7 *'just by the location and moving away so that – yeah, so that people didn't find me; I didn't want any intervention – it was sort of that's what I'm going to do and I want my own space before I do it.'*

Attitude to seeking help

Ambivalence to help seeking

Some people described a certain weariness when faced with posters encouraging help seeking. For some, there was a sense that they could be described as 'post' help seeking:

- A6 *'So people buy into it, that there's help there, you just need to ask, and the reason people die by suicide is because they don't talk about it. And actually I think some people do talk about and the help just isn't there, and I've certainly known people who've died by suicide and have asked for help and have not been able to get any. And it's hard because I think some people believe that and so it just makes me more hopeless just trying to explain why I've been refused help, it makes you feel like it's your fault, it's very personal, you start blaming yourself so it's almost easy not to have to explain it to people because they mean well and they think that the reason you haven't got help is just because you haven't been able to go to your GP and they don't realise you've been trying for years and years and there's nothing'*

Perception (or expectation) of railway staff as possible therapeutic resource

In contrast, some participants described looking at the railway environment as a possible place of support or help:

- A8 *'I think one thing I can think of, they've got those, kind of like, "Those who need help", where you can like you know, call up the office and say… I think staff could also be trained, in case anyone says, you know, "I think I'm going to jump. I'd like to talk to someone"… Even if they're not going to offer like immediate moral support. They should be trained enough to go down… And make sure that that person is safe until they can get somewhere safe. Or someone like a volunteer can come down. And help them.'*

Personal meaning of railway places

The interviews connect railway spaces to certain ideas, feelings or associations related to the rail network as a site for attempted suicide. In some cases, the railways (or underground) were sites of prior experience, or involve knowledge of train speeds, frequency, access (open stretches), the height of fences or bridges, or unobservability. These sites might be visited to establish these facts or to test the idea of a suicidal act (e.g., by standing on a bridge). The salience of the railways is here reported in practical terms:

- A6 '*I used to spend a lot of time on the Underground. And it was then I really started thinking about the railways as a place for suicide, and so that was one of the links for me.'*

The physical railway environment

Participants often commented on the physical environment at stations, and on occasions connected that to a 'suicidal mood':

- A1 '*I think when one is in a suicidal mood then it's quite intriguing that sometimes the situation, the environment that you're in can either exacerbate it or calm it. And some stations you can be feeling jumpy and suicidal and some stations make that worse, some changes between a platform and another platform. A lot of it is in your head, it's not about the environment, but the environment can sometimes just make you even*

more cruel to yourself. Nobody can make commuting that much fun, but I think there are subtle things that one should do to make some stations a bit more calming maybe.'

Accidents, fate and agency

Perhaps unsurprisingly in interviews with survivors of suicide attempts, an ambivalence surrounds their intentions and agency. Some spoke of there being no alternative, no choice, others that suicide was a response to feeling out of control, or of taking the control that had been removed from them by mental health services). Several accounts imply a wish for agency to come from elsewhere. The person has put themselves in a situation where their fate will be left to chance, to impulse, to the weight of the body, to people around who might or might not intervene).[25] There is a kind of suspension of agency as someone undertakes risky behaviour: lies on the edge of a bridge, hitchhikes where "anything could happen", commits criminal damage, has unsafe sex. The narrative may displace agency to the alcohol, or the depression. There are accounts of looking to the surroundings or to the body for clues, signs, personal messages, or interventions beyond their own decision-making. External events can even be engineered (the timing of rejection letters, the fixing of dates) so to *act on* the person or by means of another part of the self. In other words, some frame or structure for action is created so that it is not self-generated – not exactly planning – and the railway environment has a part in some of these imaginings.

Gamble / fate:

Some describe putting themselves in danger but leaving to fate what happened next. The person has put themselves in a situation where the outcome will be left to chance, to impulse, or to people around who might or might not intervene:

- A3 '*But then I decided eventually to leave it to fate. So I – I sort of lay down and went to sleep. And I was thinking, you know, there was probably that much room, the safety fence, sheer drop, and this bit that I was lying on.'*

Wanting death to look like an accident:

Sometimes, the attraction of an attempt on the railways was that it could, possibly, be taken to be an accidental death:

- A3 '*I remember telling someone I kind of wanted it to look like an accident.'*

The main themes discussed above give a good insight into how railway suicide is thought about by people who have seemingly given this a lot of thought, and who represent a key group in terms of prevention (i.e. they have thought about, and/or attempted suicide on the railways, and must therefore be considered a 'high risk' group).

[25] Conceivably the railway station is a place to stage a rescue fantasy

3. Railway Suicide and the Online Environment

In addition to a secondary analysis of the Middlesex data, we also looked in depth at how railway suicide was written about in online forums. In terms of understanding how railway suicide is thought about by people considering ending their lives, online forums offer important insights. The research outlined below was undertaken as part of a parallel project ('*Suicide and Life Saving Interventions on the Railways'*[26]) and is included here in summary form as many of the findings have a relevance to this current project. In particular, the findings from the online research can help us to understand more about:

- attitudes to railway suicide amongst a well-informed, 'motivated', high-risk group
- who and why people choose the railways as a suicide method/location
- the ways in which people try to dissuade others from using railways
- the effects of online social pressure to not use the railways for suicide
- the effects of increased knowledge on people's choice of method
- how various online platforms are used to discuss suicide in different ways
- the ways in which the internet is changing the prevalence of particular suicide methods
- the informal peer-to-peer support that people both seek and provide online.

An online 'pro-choice' suicide discussion forum[27], and a Reddit forum which hosted discussions on suicide, were analysed as part of the project in order to gain insight into how, and on what grounds, people 'intervene' online when someone discloses an intent to die by suicide using the railways as a method/location. A 'pro-choice' forum was chosen as it tends to be used by those who describe high levels of intent[28], who sometimes have direct personal experience of attempts using the railways, and have given both the practicalities as well as the ethical issues around suicide much consideration. Reddit is a more moderated space, where posts are removed if they do not comply with content rules, yet people can still openly discuss suicide.

The analysis undertaken casts light on how railway suicide is discussed and understood as a method amongst a particularly 'high risk' group.

Research questions

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[26] Marzano, L. MacKenzie, J-M., et al. (2020) *Suicide and Life-Saving Interventions on the Railways in Great Britain: A Research Study.* Middlesex University.

[27] The data used in this analysis is taken from a site which describes itself as a 'pro-choice' suicide discussion forum. 'Pro-choice' forums are usually contrasted with 'pro-life' (suicide prevention) ones. It's stated aims are to facilitate discussions of suicide and the ethics of the act. The site denies being 'pro-suicide' in that they do not encourage or aid suicide.

[28] Aladağ, A. E., Muderrisoglu, S., Akbas, N. B., Zahmacioglu, O., & Bingol, H. O. (2018). Detecting Suicidal Ideation on Forums: Proof-of-Concept Study. *Journal of medical Internet research*, 20(6), e215. doi:10.2196/jmir.9840

Biddle L, Derges J, Goldsmith C, Donovan JL, Gunnell D (2018) Using the internet for suicide-related purposes: Contrasting findings from young people in the community and self-harm patients admitted to hospital. *PLOS ONE* 13(5): e0197712. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0197712

Marchant A, Hawton K, Stewart A, Montgomery P, Singaravelu V, et al. (2017) A systematic review of the relationship between internet use, self-harm and suicidal behaviour in young people: The good, the bad and the unknown. *PLOS ONE* 12(8): e0181722. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0181722

The primary focus of the work was on online disclosures of intent, looking at the ways in which people disclose and the responses such posts elicit from peers. However, we also engaged with the question, 'Where and why do people take their life on the railways?' from an online perspective. This allowed us to explore those discourses and background cultural scripts which circulate and influence people's decisions about whether or not to end their life, and the method and location they consider choosing.

Method

Data were collected from one 'pro-choice' suicide discussion forum of posts, and posts from a subreddit surrounding the topic of suicide between 14th December 2018 and 14th December 2019. Online ethnography was used across each of the different sites, with data being recorded through fieldnotes. This method takes online spaces to be places where communities gather and interact with each other. Through observation and listening to these interactions, an in-depth understanding can be gained about how individuals in a community communicate around given topics.

The 'pro-choice' site was chosen as a source of data as it is widely used[29] (particularly by UK-based users), is available on the 'clearnet' (as opposed to 'darknet'), and is moderated but allows discussion of different suicide methods (almost always prohibited on other forums). The site thus provides an abundance of discursive material on specific topics (e.g. different methods of train suicide) not usually available publicly in such detail; it can provide an insight into how suicide on the railways is understood by those who are thinking about, or have tried, to end their life using this method - people who might not normally get involved in suicide prevention research but whose insights can be very valuable in understanding why people choose the railways for suicide.

A subreddit surrounding the topic of suicide was chosen as a different space where people gather to talk openly about the subject, albeit in what appears a more moderated space. Whilst the conversations cover a wide array of topics, from survival stories to discussing methods, the search strategy focused on highlighting those which spoke about railways. Comparing these two meant a comparison could be made around how different communities discuss the same topic, demonstrating the heterogeneity of online spaces.

Ethical considerations

In order to maintain the privacy and anonymity of site users, the sites and users are not named here. People turn to social media sites to disclose experiences in spaces where they feel a level of anonymity and safety. Therefore, it is important to maintain an expected level of privacy. We have not used direct quotes in this report as these would be searchable, and therefore users potentially identifiable, online, and have instead paraphrased user's comments to illustrate the main themes of discussions. Every effort has been made to ensure the privacy of the users has not been compromised more than is necessary to illustrate the discussions which take place on the site.

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[29] The site hosted, as of 14th December 2019, 25,741 threads, 468,446 messages and 9,868 members. Many more 'lurk' as guests, able to read posts but not to post messages themselves.

Search strategy and analytic approach

Key search terms were used across the social media sites, centring on terms relating to suicide and railways, whilst also searching for conversations discussing different interventions. These acted as connections between the different sites to trace similarities and differences in discussions across the different communities formed in each online space.

Using this method, a list of 102 threads was returned on the 'pro-choice' forum. Those discussions which mentioned trains or railways as a secondary issue were excluded, leaving 55 separate discussion threads that had a primary focus on trains or railways as a method/location for suicide.

A typical thread runs to one page (approximately 14-30 posts, 800-2000 words), whilst some run to 3 pages or more. In a discussion thread, anywhere between 2 and more than 20 users post comments in addition to the original poster (OP).

In terms of demographic information, site users almost always use gender-neutral pseudonyms, so it is not possible to state with any certainty the gender mix of users, although a poll of users indicated the majority were men (Male 51.9%; Female 37%; Other 11.1%[30]). Similarly, the ages of users are not given, but, again, polls on the site indicate that the majority (over 80%) are under 40 years of age[31][32].

The search strategy brought up 512 original posts on Reddit. 313 were excluded due to railways being a secondary discussion, or used as a generic example of a suicide method, such as *'I want to jump in front of a train or something'*. This left 199 posts where the primary conversation was about railways. A total of 1,228 associated comments were analysed, with an average of around 6 comments per post. Demographics on Reddit are also difficult to gauge as they are not explicitly mentioned on profiles. There was indication of a spread of ages, from people discussing being in school to having a job and children. Therefore, we presume this community consists of a mixed demographic.

Throughout the data collection fieldnotes were kept, following the traditional method of data collection in ethnographies. In terms of analysis of the data, a thematic approach was used to identify and analyse patterns of meaning within the texts and fieldnotes. An iterative process of open, axial, and selective coding was used. In the first stage of open coding, each post was coded in a way that captured the thoughts and ideas of each post (with more than one code being assigned to many posts). The posts were then reviewed in the second stage of analysis (axial coding), and here broader themes were assigned to posts that consolidated the open codes. In the third and final stage of analysis, selective codes were identified that represented the central or main themes.

[30] N=54
[31] N=323
[32] N=154

In addition, emerging patterns of interaction in the discussions were noted; that is, the ways in which particular ideas and arguments, points of view, and expressions of emotion recurred within and across threads.

Findings

Online disclosures of intent

Of the 55 discussion threads on the site which had a primary focus on train suicide, in 38[33] cases the original poster (OP) or thread starter disclosed that they were considering or planning an attempt using this method.

On the 'pro-choice' forum typical discussion on a thread where someone discloses that they are considering suicide on the railway usually shows a number of features;

- The OP will usually state that they are considering this method
- Sometimes, this will be presented as part of a story outlining how they ended up suicidal
- Reasons for considering the method are given, usually including that it is:
  - accessible
  - affordable
  - likely to be fatal
  - likely to be quick
- There is often an acknowledgment from the OP that the method is frowned upon by others on the site as it is considered 'selfish' due to the effects on others (e.g. driver)

People turn to Reddit to disclose intent and write about their reasons and experiences which have led to them wanting to take their own life by railway. Here, original posters write about difficult situations in their lives, this includes problems at school and work, relationship break downs, and struggling with life in general. Some posts provide a historical narrative about what has led to this moment of despair. Others are snippets of that day saying, for instance, an argument with their parents that day means that they want to take their own life. Responses are sympathetic, with other social media users asking them to talk to them about what they are going through, and help to provide 'hope' for the future.

People also write of a sense of loneliness or not having others to speak to offline about these difficulties they may be facing and therefore turn to online spaces to share their experiences. They often gain sympathetic responses from a community of people who have had similar feelings to them.

Original posters on both sites often have specific questions about the method. Examples include;

- How fast must the train be travelling for the method to be lethal? How do you ensure trains are travelling at this speed? Where are trains travelling fastest/slowest?

[33] Involving 36 different users

- How should one position oneself on the track (i.e. Standing or lying down, in front of train or neck on the line, should one wait by the side of the tracks or on the tracks)?
- Does the design of the train make a difference?
- Best time of day? How can someone find out train times through certain points on the track?
- 'Success rates' / what are the chances of survival?
- Is it painful?

Whilst on the 'pro-choice' site people may answer the questions with facts about how to find timetables, for instance, on Reddit there is a higher degree of people responding to such questions with asking why the OP is thinking of killing themselves.

Responses to disclosure

The disclosure of the desire and/or a plan to end one's life is usually met on the forum with sympathy for and understanding of the person's current situation and previous life experiences, a desire for them to find peace with whatever choice they make, and the wishing of good luck.

However, the disclosure of a plan involving the railways is almost always met with a negative response, and the suggestion (often implored) to find / choose another method. On the forum, people generally advise against railway methods for the following reasons:

- Traumatic effect on others (especially the driver)
- Possibility of surviving with injuries
- Possibility of intervention
- Fear-inducing method so difficult to overcome survival instinct

Occasionally, the fact that the person's family will have to identify their body is also mentioned.

Interactions on Reddit to disclosure of a plan mirror these responses about the impact it may have on others, and potential of surviving injuries. In response to people writing about wanting to 'jump in front of a train', others post reasons not to. 'Think about the trauma for others involved' is often used to indicate the impact it may have on passengers, train drivers and the emergency services. People share stories of their friends or family members who have attempted suicide by train before and survived but with long term injuries. Others offer a listening ear and say that they are available to chat to the original poster. 'I'm here for you if you need someone to talk to' or 'talk to me' are both frequently written within the comments.

These arguments and forms of response are often relayed time and time again in threads (albeit in different ways).

Involving others in one's suicide is often looked upon very negatively in posts, with the potentially traumatic effect on the driver particularly prominent as an argument against the method.

At times, the method is called out as being particularly selfish, and people writing that they should find a method which does not involve others.

Interaction on discussion threads

Sometimes, the OP gives reasons why they have to use this method. Often this is because they have tried and 'failed' with other ways to end their life or that alternative methods aren't available (due to cost, accessibility, etc). The railway is sometimes presented as a method of 'last resort'.

In many threads, there is considerable (and often heated) discussion over whether the method is a 'good' or 'acceptable' one. These discussions can be broken down into practical and ethical considerations.

In terms of practicalities, the arguments for the method being ineffective are countered by alternative views. So:

- Method is not always lethal – you plan carefully to ensure lethality
- Possibility of surviving with injuries - as above
- Possibility of intervention – careful planning including scouting of location and taking advice from others on forum about time of day, what to wear, how to act
- Need to be brave / overcome survival instinct - practice overcoming through exposure, use of alcohol and/or drugs

In terms of the ethics of the method, arguments around the trauma to the driver and others are countered by minimising these effects:

- Trauma to others – cognitively minimise possible impact on others (by rationalising that they will get support, get over it, not be too affected)

Resolution of these issues in discussion is very rare.

Offline Interventions from members of public (MOP)

Occasionally, stories are recounted on the 'pro-choice' forum of where people have been prevented from attempting to take their life on the railways by members of the public or Police (there are no stories in the threads looked at for this study of railway staff intervening). These interventions are looked at negatively (e.g. "*people should mind their own business*, *what right do people have to stop someone?*", "*it should be illegal to intervene*", talk of MOP seeing themselves as '*heroes*').

One OP tells of crying at a station and wanting to end their life but nobody noticing or intervening.

On Reddit people share their stories about members of the public 'pulling' them away from the platform edge as they were about to jump. Others say that they were lying on the tracks when a MOP came and spoke to them or carried them off the tracks. Unlike the 'pro-choice' forum, there

is mention of train drivers stopping the train and then stepping down on to the line to try and talk to the individual. Finally, there is mention of Police and also Samaritans finding people in distress on or beside the tracks and preventing them from dying on the railways. Interestingly there is a mix between the original poster being thankful to the individual for intervening and others being angry that they had *"taken away the opportunity"*.

Commuting and proximity to the tracks

Daily commuting life to school and work is mentioned in online posts, with people describing their 'urges to jump everyday' when they are at the station.

On Reddit people write that they think about jumping in front of the train at their commuter station every day, describing how difficult it can be not to act on these feelings and also how hard it is to think this morning and night. People respond saying that they are strong for not jumping, despite this daily pressure. They try to help the individual talk through their feelings, send love, and try to support them through these moments.

Others write that they hear the train from their places of work or where they live, and this makes them think about suicide by railway.

Proximity is central to several posts when discussing this topic, people know how far away the nearest tracks are both in time and distance, describing it to the nearest mile and minute. This indicates the degree of knowledge and planning that people have about the locations of quieter points on the tracks. It also demonstrates the association that some may have on their daily commutes of train stations being potential places to take their own life.

Additional elements in online forum posts
- Acknowledgment that person must be desperate to consider method
- Anger towards others as reason for choosing railway method
- Desire to avoid publicity of event after their death / media reporting of train deaths
- Wanting to make public statement by using railways as method/location
- Design of train and effect on lethality / possibility of injury
- Parking car on tracks
- Managing / overcoming survival instinct

Implications for prevention and messaging

The findings raise a number of questions for prevention practice and messaging:
- To what extent is there a relationship between the level of knowledge of the method people have, and the likelihood of an attempt on the railways?
  - i.e. do people who do go to railway to end life have less detailed knowledge of reality of method? Does it indicate less planning or more?

Figure 1. Theoretical Relationship Between Level of Knowledge of Method, and Likelihood of Attempt

- • would wider availability of knowledge of reality of method act as a deterrent?

- The main way people attempted to deter others from using the railways as a location/method was the impact it would have on others, particularly the driver. The method is often described online as 'selfish', and this raises questions as to whether campaigns which attempt to reduce stigma around suicide, or which explicitly declare suicide not to be a selfish act, may have unintended consequences.

- The other main deterrent people state is in relation to experiencing pain and surviving with injuries, which raises questions as to what the effects would be of having these elements more frequently talked about.

4. Anthropology Project: Overview and Comparison of Findings

Background

In 2016 Network Rail commissioned an anthropological study of railway suicide 'hotspots' in order to better understand how and why such incidents and clusters occurred. The resulting research study reported back in August 2017[34].

The main question investigated was, 'How does the railway ever come to be in a list of options for taking one's own life in the first place?' As such, the study was not focussed on why people take their own life, or why people take their life on the railway, but more on the cultural context of suicide as it relates to the railways - specifically the cultural and discursive resources people draw on when thinking about and making plans for suicide using this method.

The idea behind this approach was that it might be useful in terms of prevention if we can understand how the railway might get on to a person's 'suicide ideation menu' (the list of methods a person would consider for ending their life), then it might be possible to identify ways it can be taken *off* that menu.

The fieldwork for the study was undertaken at particular locations identified as being suicide 'hotspots' by British Transport Police (3 suspected suicides or injurious attempt incidents within a 12 month period), and focussed on the study of local environments and communities, in particular the ways of thinking and talking about railway suicide that existed at these locations. What they wanted to investigate were the ways in which people at these locations (non-suicidal people as well as suicidal), thought about and discussed suicide on the railway.

The initial research took place at four different stations, with about ten days fieldwork at each site. This included tours of the area and interviews with local residents, visits to local stakeholders, station staff interviews, observing relevant local spaces, the scanning of local news, social media and websites. The study was complex.

Findings

In terms of understanding the railways and suicide ideation menu, the researchers found that for some people, even those who have actively considered taking their own lives, taking their life on the railway was unthinkable, whereas for others it was clearly an option. Often, it seemed people were influenced by wider discourse (e.g. specific websites, discussion forums, and social media) as well as local stories and media.

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[34] Pharoah, R. (2017). *Suicide Prevention on the Railway: An Anthropological and Ethnographic Approach*. London: Encounter Consulting.

The researchers focussed their attention on the nature and meaning of 'hotspots' - that is, on how a location comes to be strongly associated with suicides in the minds of a community (and so not just in terms of numbers of deaths at a location), and as a direct result of that collective understanding, chosen as a suicide location. They wanted to explore whether a person chose a specific location due to influence or prevalence of a particular popular narrative about that location, and the possibilities of that as an explanation as to why certain locations may see a cluster of suicides, whilst other similar locations do not. Through an understanding of that dynamic, prevention measures could also involve tackling 'hotspot' narratives that might be playing a role in 'attracting' those thinking of taking their own life to particular locations.

In such a way there is a possible relationship between hotspots and the ideation menu; where there is a narrative around a suicide hotspot, those who are party to that narrative, and are also suicidal, are bound to have that location (and the associated method) in their ideation menu (that does not mean that the hotspot will inevitably become the chosen location, but rather that hotspot is likely to at least feature in the list of options).

Following on from this idea, certain discourses (ways of talking and writing) about 'hotspots' were identified:

- Myth-making – anecdotal reports with some basis in truth but embellished or containing misinformation

- Very specific places within an area were often associated with suicide

- Locals had explanations as to why suicides occurring there (geography of railway line, presence of mental health hospital, and/or housing estate with high levels of social deprivation)

More broadly, discourses of railway suicide were found to include:

- Theatrical or dramatic elements, particularly in relation to the reporting of incidents (e.g. there were many examples of reports of people '***throwing*** themselves under a train' and other variants of 'jumping', rarely 'stepping out' or 'walking in front of')

- There was an idea that the method '**sends out a message**'

- Often, railway suicide was talked about in **gory and visceral** ways

- The impact it had on others was frequently noted, and railway suicide often noted as being a particularly '**selfish**' form of suicide

- The method was seen as requiring a level of **bravery**, with respondents sometimes commenting that '***I am too much of a coward to do that***'

- The method was perceived to be **quick and efficient**. Also, stories of 'successful' suicides on the railways are more widely shared and talked about. 'Failed' (and injurious attempts) were very rarely mentioned by any of the respondents, meaning that there was very little in the way of a 'failed attempt' narrative around railway suicide

- **Easy access** was frequently commented upon

- Finally, the study authors consider the possibilities of prevention from the perspective of 'society' (based on the idea of 'social harm') rather than from the perspective of the individuals who chose to take their life, recognising, of course, some of the ethical and practical difficulties this raises

Relationship to Middlesex and online data

Similarities: The findings from the anthropology study mirror, for the most part, those of the Middlesex research and the online ethnographic study. Specifically with regards:

- The **impact on others**, and the perception of the act as '**selfish**'

- The method being perceived as **quick and efficient**

- **Easy access**

- **T**he idea the method '**sends out a message**' is present in some interviews in quite an overt way

Differences: In other ways, the anthropological study found aspects less frequently commented upon by interviewees in the **Middlesex study** (although these were still present in some interviews):

- Theatrical or dramatic elements

- Talking about railway suicide in **gory and visceral** ways

- **Bravery**

Overlaps with the findings of the **online ethnography**:

- Online, the idea of **bravery** is frequently expressed, but often in terms of having to overcome the **survival instinct**, and how hard this can be

- There is certainly a use of **theatrical or dramatic descriptions** and, often, railway suicide was talked about in **gory and visceral** ways (and **videos** are posted of incidents from around the world (sometimes fake it should be said) which are very graphic)

Conclusions and implications

Understanding the methods those with suicidal thoughts consider using to end their life are an important but under-researched area of suicide prevention. How the railway comes to appear in a person's ideation menu in the first place is a potentially useful, and novel, way to approach prevention. One of the main ideas explored in the anthropology report is how certain locations can become 'attractive' to those with suicidal thoughts or intentions, and a key element of this process is the way popular discourses define the context in which railway suicides take place, in that:

- Popular discourses around railway suicide influences whether or not the railway comes to appear in any given individual's ideation menu

- Discourses about particular locations play a role in determining how certain locations become 'suicide hotspots'

- Popular discourses around 'hotspots' (at least at the local level) also play a role in pushing the railway (or specific railway locations) on to the ideation menu of suicidal people

- Some discourses might encourage people to consider railways, whilst others might discourage

- Industry 'messaging' can be used to shape these discourses, and thus influence people's choice of method (that is, discourage people from considering the railways as a location / method)

It is that idea, of influencing wider narratives that may encourage or discourage railway as a site or method of suicide that is key, and is taken up further in the next section, which looks at the theory (and some of the practical issues) of how that can be done.

5. Conclusions of Secondary Analysis

The secondary analysis of the interview and survey data, taken alongside the analysis of online environments, previous ethnographic and anthropological work[35], other qualitative work in this area (for example the QUEST Life Saving Interventions project), means that we now have a fairly full and clear picture of how people who are contemplating (or who have contemplated and attempted) suicide on the railways engage with and express the idea of railway suicide, what sort of associations are made about that method / location – in short, we have a pretty good idea of the cultural scripts and discourses that together form 'railway suicide' as a knowable and available means of ending one's life.

We know, for example, that:

- Railway suicide is seen as a highly **lethal** method, one that is likely to be fatal.

- It is seen as a method that is likely to be efficient or **quick**.

- As well as being perceived as a 'reliable' and quick way to end your life, the railways are also taken to be an **accessible** and an **affordable** method of suicide.

- Railway suicide is perceived to be a frequently used or **common** method of ending one's life.

These are interesting perceptions, as they stand in contrast somewhat to the known reality of the method (and can even be thought of as myths).

We also know that there are many dissuasive factors associated with the method, and these can be thought of as counter or alternative discourses that circulate around railway suicide:

- The most prominent is the recognition of the **impact on others**, particularly the driver.

- Due to this it is often described as a **selfish** way to die (this is a particularly strongly stated opinion in online forums).

- The possibility of **surviving with injuries** is often acknowledged,

- as are the chances of **intervention**,

- and also the fact that it can be a **fear-inducing method**, one where it can be difficult to overcome the survival instinct.

These counter-discourses are interesting in that they can be seen as strongly **dissuasive** in relation to railway suicide, and thus may be useful when thinking about what alternative discourses a preventative messaging strategy could draw on.

The reasons often given for choosing the railways for suicide (lethal, quick, accessible, affordable and a common method of ending one's life) can be seen as factors that **attract** people to the method / location.

[35] Pharoah, R. (2017). *Suicide Prevention on the Railway: An Anthropological and Ethnographic Approach*. London: Encounter Consulting.

The counter-discourses (the impact on others (particularly the driver), seen as a 'selfish' method, the possibility of surviving with injuries, the chances of intervention, and it being a fear-inducing method) are interesting in that they can be seen as strongly **dissuasive** in relation to railway suicide, and thus may be useful from a messaging perspective.

The idea being that drawing on, even amplifying, these known dissuasive factors in messaging may have the effect, over time, of **deterring** people from considering the railways for suicide (or to put it another way, of making the railways seem less attractive as a site / method for suicide).

Attempting to change the associations people make between the railways and suicide is not a straightforward task, however. For these associations to be shaped or influenced, messaging would have to work on different levels – from the local / individual level, targeting people who are contemplating ending their life on the railways, up to broader background social discourses and cultural scripts.

Discourse theory can perhaps help to understand how such an approach could work.

Shaping background cultural scripts and local stories to influence individual experiences and actions in relation to railway suicide

The ways in which people conceive of, and express, ideas around suicide on the railways are informed by and shaped, not just by their own personal experiences (although that is obviously a part of it) but also by wider social discourses and cultural scripts. Abrutyn, Mueller & Osborne (2019)[36] argue that there are cultural scripts related to suicide embedded within cultures that shape individual actions in relation to suicide;

> '… there are meanings about suicide embedded within cultures that are often broadly known and taken for granted. These meanings clarify why people die by suicide; are very often linked to behavioral repertoires of how one should die by suicide; and ultimately allow the act to be a meaningful performance for the suicidal individual, her intended audience, and even unintended audiences (Stack and Abrutyn 2015; Mueller 2017)' (p4).

As highlighted in this report, it is not just meanings and 'behavioural repertoires' concerning suicide in general that can be discerned, but discourses and scripts around a particular method of suicide.

The question, in relation to this report, is whether it is possible to change or shape these discourses and cultural scripts, and to consider how this might be done. As part of a

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[36] Abrutyn, S., Mueller, A.S., & Osborne, M.A. (2019). Rekeying Cultural Scripts for Youth Suicide: How Social Networks Facilitate Suicide Diffusion and Suicide Clusters Following Exposure to Suicide. *Society and Mental Health*, 215686931983406.

programme of prevention, interventions aimed at discourse / cultural scripts would be relatively low cost and could complement existing strategies.

In terms of theory, the idea would be that there is a relationship (albeit a complex one) between background cultural scripts / discourses about railway suicide, railway messaging and individual experiences and actions. That is:

- Existing cultural images, ideas and scripts shape individual intentions and actions
- In relation to railway suicide, people draw on these images, ideas and scripts when imagining, planning and undertaking various actions which make up, or lead to, a suicide attempt
- There is a relationship between these background cultural scripts and the more immediate railway messaging context, in that messaging (over time) can exert an influence and shape these images, ideas and scripts

The practical application of that theory is that over time you can use messaging and communication approaches to directly and indirectly shape relevant discourses and cultural scripts around railway suicide, and thus influence people's beliefs about whether railway suicide was a viable method/location for them (in the terms used in the anthropology report by Robin Pharaoh, you are trying to remove railways from people's ideation menu).

There are complications, though. It is important to acknowledge that individuals also draw on their own experiences (in addition to cultural scripts) in relation to imagining and enacting railway suicide, and project these onto the railway environment. That is, people also create personalised railway environments, and many of the interviews from the Middlesex study[37] illustrated this. In these interviews, people describe finding a correspondence between the railways and their inner states (depersonalised, distant from loved-ones, 'isolation zones', speed, violent destruction). In several cases it becomes apparent that people projected their feelings onto the railways, making them a 'congruent' site for an attempted suicide.

So, whilst broad cultural scripts influence messaging, and messaging (over time) can influence these cultural scripts, this relationship between messaging and cultural scripts is also mediated by the individual stories of people. The diversity of these stories is what makes planning for and predicting the effects of particular interventions (in messaging, or the physical environment say) so difficult.

When thinking about messaging interventions, it is also necessary to think-through possible negative effects or unintended consequences. Seeking to influence existing ideas and scripts around railway suicide by focusing on those factors seen as dissuasive (e.g. images of surviving with injuries or emphasising the possibility of experiencing pain; or more emphasis on the impact on staff, especially drivers) opens up possibilities for thought and action in

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[37] Marzano, L., Borrill, J., Mackenzie, J.M., Kruger, I., Fields, B. (2016). *Why Do People Take Their Lives on the Railways in Great Britain? A Research Study*. London: Middlesex University.

relation to prevention, but, obviously, by their nature, these are not 'neutral' images or messages to circulate, and they carry with them risks.

This becomes even more apparent when one considers the different potential audiences for messaging. As stated earlier, one only has to think of the ways in which messages may be received in contrasting ways by different groups of people (suicidal, those bereaved by suicide, rail staff or general commuters) to see that messages that focus on dissuasive elements may 'work' for some, but they may also at the same time have strong negative connotations or effects for others.

Moreover, as Abrutyn, Mueller & Osborne (2019) note, controlling scripts can be extremely challenging, as media outlets act somewhat autonomously and often at cross-purposes with carefully constructed prevention plans. Additionally, there are communication channels such as online forums that would be difficult to effectively influence, and many of these have developed narratives of opposition to mainstream suicide prevention approaches and 'prevention heroes'.

Despite the limitations, there remains real possibilities in using messaging and communication approaches to directly and indirectly shape discourses and cultural scripts around railway suicide, and thus influence people's beliefs about whether railway suicide is a viable method/location for them. By giving attention to the role of discourse and cultural scripts in patterning suicide, we can begin to understand with greater clarity why some methods and locations for suicide are chosen more than others. In addition, we can consider how best to influence or shape these scripts and discourses in order to reduce the likelihood of people choosing suicide as an option.

The idea of using messaging and communications to shape cultural scripts and people's beliefs about the viability of using the railways to end their life raises a number of questions, though:

- Which, if any, of these cultural scripts can – and should – we try and challenge via formal and informal messaging, in different spaces and contexts? And how?

- Which might we want to 'encourage'/reinforce/amplify? How?

- What are the risks?

- What might the unintended consequences be? And for whom?

- What are the implications of the (mis)understandings of railways, suicide and railway suicides – for different groups and individuals?

At this point in the project we began to consider who were the experts best placed to help us think-through these complex questions. We turned first to 'experts by experience', that is people with lived experience of suicidality or bereavement by railway suicide, then to academic and clinical experts in suicide prevention, and finally to those in the rail industry itself. These consultation events are described in the next sections.

6. Consultation Event with Lived Experiences Advisory Group (LEAG)

17th July, 2019, SOAS, London

The first consultation event was held on 17th July with academics from Middlesex University, SOAS and Canterbury Christ Church University, and the newly-formed Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG). The LEAG included individuals bereaved by suicide or with lived experience of suicidality. It was felt such a group would be able to provide valuable perspectives on current railway suicide prevention initiatives as well as helping to develop new avenues to explore.

Summary of discussions

At the first consultation event a number of issues were discussed, and these included:

- How a death by suicide on the railway is communicated, with a particular focus on the impact of using certain words and phrases. This was considered from the perspective of both the general public but also potentially vulnerable individuals at stations and on trains

- How distraction may help those experiencing suicidal thoughts at stations

- Ways to change the face of stations from impersonal to friendlier spaces (for example by displaying artwork), and how this might help to create suicide-safer environments

- How to provide and seek help at a station, with discussions on what form support could take and where individuals might go to seek help

The discussions benefited from the different perspectives of those present – those who have experience of what it is like to feel suicidal on the railways and those who have been bereaved by suicide. These 'experts by experience' can give the industry valuable insight into how suicide prevention measures and initiatives might impact different groups of people. At the workshop it was acknowledged by all how complicated many of these issues are, and how hard it can be to find a consensus position.

Notes of discussions

Messaging

- Consider different groups: those who have lived experience and the general public and how to present information to each of these

- Announcements of delays. General consensus that there is sympathy out there, but this occurs when the general public are informed of the attempted suicide

- Suggestion: PA announcement about delays can be used as a form of sensitively educating the general public

- Also - announcement which is to prevent/ discourage those who may feel suicidal

- Discussion of the suggestion of using "casualty" in announcements
  - But people felt this meant fatality
  - Need to also think about what words could be triggering with regards to suicide when saying what has happened on the line
  - Suggestion that 'medical emergency' could be used instead – general agreement that this did not sound like a fatality, but also feelings that this did not provide the 'honesty' of talking about an attempted suicide

Signage/posters

Discussions around using signs as a form of intervention on stations:

- Critique of this idea: need to think carefully about the images/ messages being presented in any sign and consider the feelings they may elicit in someone with lived experience of suicidal thoughts
- Later on someone spoke about maybe having the information elsewhere e.g. GPs and other places where people may get information about suicides by trains
- Relating to messaging at stations – need to think about what the Samaritans posters are next to so that they are beneficial (e.g. not next to CPR video)
- Questions over the presence of Samaritans and posters at the stations - Is it normalising? Does it trigger feelings of suicide?

Safe spaces

Idea of creating safe spaces, which are signposted for people experiencing suicidal thoughts at station:

- Question: would someone feel comfortable asking a member of staff to go to this room
- Will the space be used for the intended reasons?
- Linked to police triage teams and the displacement of people who need help and support - when someone needs "help" they get pointed to different spaces not receiving the full care they may require

Distraction

There were a lot of discussions about how distractions may help for those experiencing suicidal thoughts at stations

- People discussed how when they felt suicidal they would got into two "states"
  - One was almost sensory overload – hearing, seeing, sensing everything
  - Two - a bubble where they had no senses
- For both of these people suggested that distraction may help

- Could take the form of a poster - such the image of someone who had died by suicide, their family members etc. - concern over this being painful for people who had lost someone – idea that it "would make someone think"

- Idea later on for there to be stories on posters from families who had lost someone to suicide

- Potentially the same problem of causing distress to some

- Potential barriers already experienced of not being allowed to put up flowers because it might negatively impact on train drivers

- Where should any distraction be located?

- Questions over finding out where most suicides occurred along the platform and potentially focusing the signs/ distractions in those areas

Changing the face of stations: impersonal to caring

- Opinions that stations can feel impersonal and there were suggestions on how to change this

- Music - but suggestion that certain songs may trigger memories/ emotions

- Art also suggested

- Compared stations to bridges and how these have been made 'friendlier'

Intricacies of suicide

- There was discussion about needing to think about/ question the intricacies of suicide e.g. question the idea that it is impulsive

- Instead people discussed suicides being planned out/ people spending several hours at the station before taking their own life

Discussion of wider mental health system:

- Spoke about how wider mental health systems were lacking resources

- Discussion about the few no. of transport police who cover large areas and felt that they may not fully investigate all of the incidents

Overall

• Need to think and set out the priorities for messages

7. Suicide Research Symposium with Clinical and Academic Experts

22nd October 2019, SOAS, London

On 22nd October, a further workshop was held at SOAS for academics and experts. This brought together a group of people with diverse areas of expertise, with 16 people attending from different academic disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, psychiatry, psychology, design and technology, architecture and a transport planner / engineer, as well as representatives from Samaritans and Rethink Mental Illness charities.

Summary of discussions

This workshop built on the work already undertaken (secondary analysis of existing ethnographic, online, survey and interview data with individuals who have contemplated or attempted suicide by train; learning from LEAG workshop), and focused on;

- the nature and possible functions of common myths and (mis)understandings around railway suicide, including in relation to its causes, lethality and impact

- the ways in which these may be perpetuated and/or challenged via formal and informal messaging around rail suicide/suicide attempts (both at railway locations and in online spaces).

- the possible implications, and risks, of different communications strategies and other forms of intervention

- how learning from prevention projects that have utilised environmental design and technology (e.g. Foyle Bridge in Northern Ireland) can potentially inform prevention on the railways

- the potential challenges for suicide prevention on the railway

Participants brought many different perspectives to bear on the main issues. The full programme of the day is listed in appendix 1.

Notes of discussions

Messaging about railway suicides

- There was a consensus that consideration is required in relation to how different groups may react to an announcement (by any form of media) about a railway suicide (and maybe that it shouldn't be mentioned at all - there was discussion as to whether mentioning suicide in tweets may reinforce the idea that railway stations are associated with suicide, and potentially that railways suicides are more common than they actually are)

- There is a need to think about the audiences that are being targeted with a tweet for instance, is it for commuters for information, or for people who may be emotionally

affected by the incident? The need for 'differentiated messaging' (messages targeting different audiences) was a theme of the day

- Similarly, we discussed the need to consider if it is right to distribute information in the local area which is related to a suicide on the railway:
  o Does this reinforce the idea that suicides in that area are common, that it is a lethal method, and assumptions over the number of suicides which happen in that location? (An example was given that people in the local area of a 'hotspot' in fact thought that there were more suicides in that location than there were due to the information being provided).
  o Will it have negative emotional consequences for people in the local area who likely know the person who took their own life? In relation to this point, participants also referred to the research evidence about post-incident/trauma debrief (there is a body of research suggesting *not* debriefing until and unless there are signs of post-traumatic stress (see e.g. https://www.who.int/mental_health/mhgap/evidence/resource/other_complaints_q5.pdf), as there is a risk of making things worse).
  o Therefore, is it better to provide support surrounding mental health in general instead of thinking about providing support around suicide specifically?

Proactive approaches

- The location of the suicide (termini, route stations or on the tracks) needs to be considered when finding a way to both discuss the local suicide and to be proactive in preventative methods:
  o Think about how we can take the same basic format and principles of messaging and adapt these to the local area/culture to make it more effective, reduce contagion, and reduce myths around suicides in the area
  o Consider making it locally specific to the community and seeing what is already in place in that area – i.e. is there a local community and 'unofficial' network of individuals who provide support for those affected by the suicide (thinking about the local cafes etc)? Or is there a need for a more proactive approach of introducing an information and support system in places where this may not exist?
  o How can we provide training and support to people who form these unofficial supportive environments (such as cafes) so they can recognize someone in distress and take appropriate action?
  o Generic messages may be less useful – feeling that these are not providing the support and information needed for the local area and may come across negatively for companies

Design / atmosphere of stations
- Questions around how do we develop stations which are multi-sensory and change the atmosphere of the station (this links with the lived experience group about finding distraction techniques)?
- There was mention of finding ways of measuring the cost of adapting current stations to be more 'friendly' spaces and effectiveness of this in reducing suicides.
- There was again discussion about what would interventions look like on a small rural platform compared with a terminus.

Reducing links between railways and suicide

- It was suggested several times that it may be beneficial to change the messaging at stations, even to the point of reducing information about the Samaritans, so that messaging around the station was not specifically about suicide, instead moving towards talking about mental health more generally
- This might then reduce the connection between railways and suicide
- Instead posters, information provided at the stations should be about seeking support and where to find this for mental health overall (as an example, Sheffield station tried a 'how are you?' day on world mental health day where members of staff would ask people how they were and how their day was going. There was no mention of suicide in the announcements)

Improving knowledge of how to talk to someone in distress

- Need to consider making people mental health literate, so that the public, not just staff, have the tools they need to talk to others about their mental health. This was brought up in consideration of approaching someone who looks distressed
- We spoke about that whilst "Small Talk Saves Lives" is good in principle there might not be the mental health literacy within the general population to know what to do if someone describes feeling depressed/suicidal
- This could also link with point above, by moving away from the general public being encouraged to intervene, and instead towards "if you see someone in distress then inform a member of staff". Therefore, increase mental health training for members of the station crew

Assessing the success of interventions which have already been implemented

- Throughout the day there was discussion about how do we assess if an intervention has had an effect or not? To then justify its use in other areas and economic costs/benefit of these

Presentation on the Foyle Bridge, Derry project

- An excellent example of creative architecture but mention of the cost implications of rolling such ideas out
- People spoke about less permanent measures - such as projecting messages on the platforms for people to read, which may be a cheaper alternative (another example: Manchester Piccadilly platform 13/14 has both a yellow and red line. The yellow line if to stand behind when the train is at a standstill and the red on is further back for another other times. There are station staff asking people for them to stand behind the red line constantly, so people aren't close to the platform edge)

Specific discussion about letters drafted by Network Rail for distribution after a suicide

- Discussion about how Network Rail could influence the narrative after incidents but there was some concern about unintended consequences (e.g. uncertainty over the effects on different people / audiences of the letters).

- We continually went back to 'is this a good idea, or is it better sometimes to do nothing?'
- Could we use high profile survival stories instead, this was raised as a way to counter ideas about the lethality of suicide?
- Feelings again arose about whether this should be made on a case-by-case basis as the generic letter may be counter-productive, reinforce myths, and raise the possibility of people thinking there are more suicides in that area than there actually are
  - And then how might this lead to contagion – by shining a light on it, are we risking upsetting the local community (many of whom may know the individual who took their own life), and also increasing the likelihood of drawing attention to this area as a suicide hotspot?
- Summary: If used, make them locally specific, and sensitive to that community

Summary

The main theme from the day was support for the idea of moving away from discussing suicide on the railways directly in intervention campaigns and instead talk about mental health and wellbeing more generally (we spoke about things such as not having messages about the Samaritans and instead make them about general mental health support) - and making this the foundation of station design drawing on concepts of wellbeing spaces in architectural design. In turn, this would mean using comms and design solutions to not only create new associations with suicide (on the railways) but also new perceptions of the railways per se.

8. Consultation Event with Rail Industry Staff on Communications and Messaging around Suicide

Tuesday 10th March 2020, Mary Ward House, London

This consultation event was attended by 14 people from the rail industry, including staff from BTP, LNER, Prorail Netherlands, and Southeastern, with a variety of roles including station staff, Police, Revenue Enforcement & Prosecutions, messaging / social media, training, Suicide Prevention Coordinator, recruitment, emergency planner, and Mobile Incident Officer.

Summary of discussions

This workshop again built on the previous work for the project (secondary analysis of existing ethnographic, online, survey and interview data with individuals who have contemplated or attempted suicide by train; learning from LEAG workshop; consultation with clinical and academic experts), and focused on;

- The ways in which formal and informal messaging (including in public and online spaces) are used in the rail industry, and the possibilities and risks of different communication strategies
- What are considered effective approaches after a suicide has occurred
- The effects on staff of a suicide
- Station design and suicide prevention

The variety of roles, responsibilities, experience and working contexts of those present meant that discussions were very well-informed and participants brought many different perspectives to bear on the main issues. The full programme of the day is listed in appendix 2.

Notes of discussions

Why certain locations are chosen for suicide
- The underground was described as being less popular as people shared that they thought individuals were 'less likely to jump' if they were in front of a crowd. As the underground is more crowded than other stations, they therefore equated the two together. There were other barriers mentioned too - the act of having to go through a barrier, and the long journey down escalators too were thought to act as deterrents. They also spoke about the design of the tracks - such as the gaps below them to decrease possibility of suicide
- Fast trains were more popular areas for suicide and changes in recent timetables in certain areas (which means more fast trains) means they have seen a peak in number of attempted suicides
- Need to consider that a lot of suicides are not at the stations themselves but at level crossing due to point of access and are easy to get to

- People expanded on the idea of access - that having access to the railways means increased access of opportunity to take their own lives

Differences in different countries

- There was discussion about why suicide by railway in the US may be lower with peoples saying that perhaps it was due to it being a less popular form of transportation and easier access to other means such as firearms

Prorail, Netherlands presentation

- When an announcement was made about a collision with a person - people assumed this was about a suicide, less so when they said that emergency services were dealing with a situation
- But this latter one saw increased anger toward situation and decreased overall appreciation of the information provided
- Discussion about messaging in the UK - language was important and emergency services dealing with an incident received a backlash from the general public because it wasn't specific enough, so they have moved towards saying it was a fatality because it improved responses from the general public (increased understanding shown and decreased negative communications)
- Suggestion that we could use "medical incident" because want to counter the perception about being a suicide
- Another said that saying "person under a train" had led to hotspot locations too when they said where these were happening
- There was general agreement that there was a need for information to decrease anger, but railway staff said they felt that no one believes anything they say anyway
- There were questions about why we need to change the method of communications and what we were aiming to do with this: was it that it is upsetting to hear about a suicide or is it to decrease the association of trains and suicides?
- Use in Netherlands of a scheme where when you buy a coffee, you get one for you and another to share: received positive agreement that this was a good idea in principle. They framed it as an act against loneliness not an act to reduce suicides. Again, this messaging was thought to be a good reframing. They did it through local councils. However, someone did mention that it could receive potentially negative reactions from vendors at stations as it would decrease their revenue.

Changes in signage/ general messages

- One attendee said that when they started working for the rail industry in 2004 their first job was to go around stations and remove signage about the Samaritans to reduce association with railways and suicide. However, they had noticed that signage was now returning and was unsure why this had changed over the years. Asked "Is this advertising suicide at stations/on the tracks?"
- Someone said that when they are discussing rail safety they say to staff "don't worry about touching the electric rail and dying, worry about the living afterwards"

- People are discouraged from putting up memorials to those who have died, especially at the stations or putting up messages of hope either - as this again links railways with suicide
- People thought that there should be positive messaging at stations to make them friendlier places
- Idea that they shouldn't announce fast trains going through the station, it was explained that they don't use these in the Netherlands. Although in principle people agreed with this someone said it could be because of litigation
- This moved on to the number of announcements made at stations which people said was too much and it would be good to try and find a shorter announcement which covered everything
- Could say "Fast trains pass through here, not all stop here, please stand behind the yellow line" NOT "There is a fast train approaching"
- Should we stay someone was struck by a train not hit by one

What information to provide when there has been a suicide

- There was a debate about whether or not it was helpful to announce in different places about suicides/attempted suicides
- Giving no information meant that staff received anger from passengers who wanted to know why their trains were cancelled whereas explaining it was a suicide reduced anger and increased understanding
- People explained that when they announced a suicide, if a passenger became angry about this others would defend the staff saying that they were being rude
- Discussion that maybe the effect of announcing a suicide was less for regular commuters than those doing a one-off trip - e.g. people become used to hearing about suicides and may show less understanding towards to situation
- Need to consider how many times something is tweeted from a rail company - maybe only once - so that it decreases the idea of frequency of suicides on the railways and reducing promotion of the link between railways and suicide
- Consider what is broadcasting and what is the information that people need to know
- Discussion that to reduce potential anger at staff maybe it is best to do a follow up message - e.g. what alternative routes could be taken, which trains will now accept tickets, how long the delay may be - but also some said that passengers want to know who is responsible for the delay too
- Do we encourage speaking to 'distressed passengers' or instead have information about who to get in contact with if someone looks distressed?
- What do we announce on trains? At the moment there is no set script about what to announce and so sometimes it's not explained what has happened
- Some use the phrase "I'm here, I listen" instead of signage about suicide and talking to someone if they feel suicidal
- Some felt that there was too much association between Samaritans and suicide

Effect on staff

- Discussion that staff began to associate railways with suicide too

- Discussion about the impact on staff - particularly the driver and how this is discussed online a lot - it acts as a deterrent
- The Samaritans and NWR are currently working together to develop some advertising about the impact that suicides have on the drivers
- Someone else suggested that an effective way to engage with the public and deter them from the method of suicide was through documentaries. They mentioned it in the past but said there was the opportunity to do another which showed the impact of suicides on staff members. "About staff just trying to do their job"
- But is this a difficult message for people who have lost someone to suicide? (E.g. hard to hear that the suicide of their loved one had impacted so much on staff members)
- The question that family members often ask is "was it quick"

Wider society

- Someone mentioned societal changes - young people no longer experiencing death because grandparents are living longer. So instead by being kind to others rather than discussing death are we planting in people's minds the idea of suicide on the rails?
- This came down the idea of destigmatising suicide vs also potentially normalising it
- Impact of the media: discussion about the reporting of suicides on the railways, especially about celebrities, and how this may increase copy-cat behaviour in others e.g. there was mention of a footballer who took their life on the railways and that around this there was an increase in the number in the general public too
- Toxicology: police investigations found that majority of people who died by suicide had taken drugs or alcohol before going to the railways.
- Questions about if people become more respected after taking their own life
- Railways are a very public way to die by suicide, and so there was the idea of it increasing the celebrity's notoriety

Someone who is suicidal

- Suicide notes lay out why people have chosen that method - so there is potentially a lot of thought behind this decision rather than being an impulsive action
- Station staff and police said that in such instances it was much harder to reason with people as they had set out their plans / had put a lot of consideration into choosing this method
- In this way we need to think about what stage someone is in their suicide story and how they can be helped at each stage so they don't reach the final one where people said that someone may be more difficult to engage with. A member of the group said that people looked vacant when they were about to attempt suicide and they knew that this meant that it would be difficult to engage with them
- This was expanded upon to think about strategies for different subgroups and how you help them

Interventions

- Someone asked: Are the numbers of interventions increasing or are we better at recording them?
- Brought up that there are two definitions of an intervention: has it stopped someone from killing themselves or have you approached someone
- Staff have found that sometimes when they have gone to speak to someone who was distressed, that individual comes back to speak to staff again - so is there a blurring of roles? People said the staff had helped them feel better
- Need to then consider if stations are becoming a community centre and a source of support with the end result of attracting vulnerable people
- But staff don't want vulnerable people to go to a place where they can kill themselves
- Should we make Small Talk Saves Lives about wider communities/society, not just associate it with stations?

Ideas about changing the stations

- Make the lights stronger on the stations so the places don't see so 'dark'
- Change the ambience through redecorating and make this compulsory for stations to have to do this - that they have to keep the station attractive, well kept - someone else pointed out through that this has been done before but was vandalised
- Put flowers up to make them friendlier - but someone said that this could be viewed negatively that they can take care of plants but not make trains run on time
- Put up clear information - how to contact someone if you are concerned about another
- Add more help points in rural areas to alert staff that someone looks distressed
- Have pictures of people smiling/welcoming passengers at the entrances of stations
- Increase the visibility of staff on platforms
- Involve the local community particularly in rural areas so that there is someone to contact nearby to help
- Be reactive - if there are increased number of suicides at certain stations then be reactive and try to find ways to improve the environment there as a priority
- Find ways to communicate with station staff what you need help with, without having to say this loud and potentially make someone feel uncomfortable who is distressed
- Change the perceptions of stations through the media

Announcements

- some interesting discussion around automated announcements and these being inappropriate to announce a fatality
- Staff also stressed the importance of not lying to passengers
- Importance of having more than 1 message (so announcements can be rotated)
- Importance of including positive messages (e.g. to encourage help-giving as well as help-seeking)
- Do we generally over-announce?

- Should/can we standardized announcements given on train itself? Could the message sounds disingenuous if standardized and/or automated?

Other discussions

- Should we focus on discouraging trespass? On loneliness?
- How do we avoid sounding self-interested?
- Should we use comms to educate about calling staff/what do in an emergency/how to use help points etc?
- Could there be a 'ask for Angela' type system?

9. Conclusions and Recommendations

The secondary analysis of existing interview and survey data[38], taken alongside the analysis of online environments[39], previous ethnographic and anthropological work[40], and consultations with academic, rail industry and lived experience experts, has enabled us to generate a **fairly full and clear picture** of how people who are contemplating (or who have contemplated and attempted) suicide on the railways **engage with and express the idea of railway suicide**, and the types of associations made about that method / location. In short, by bringing together the findings from different studies, and looking for overlaps, common themes, as well as differences, we have been able to develop a good sense of the **cultural scripts and discourses that together form 'railway suicide' as a knowable and available means of ending one's life**.

More specifically, from these sources we have been able to draw out the factors that seemingly **attract** people to the method/location (quick, lethal, accessible, commonly used method), and also what **dissuades** them (impact on others - especially the driver, possibility of surviving with injuries, possibility of intervention, fear-inducing method). The logic, in terms of a messaging / communications strategy, would therefore be to challenge the 'attractors' (because many are misunderstandings or myths) and try to reinforce or amplify the 'dissuaders'. There are complexities and difficulties to be considered, though, particularly around risks, possible unintended consequences, and the nuances needed to communicate to different audiences.

Below, we summarise our key findings and also unpack some of the complexities involved in messaging around railway suicide that emerged during the course of the study. Implications of the findings and recommendations are then set-out.

Key findings

Suicide and suicide prevention are complex, and for that reason we drew on a wide variety of informed perspectives for this project. In the end, each element of the project generated useful insights and, importantly, consistent themes and lessons emerged across the different components of work:

Common stories and myths around railway suicide: Discourses and 'cultural scripts'

- **Reasons for choosing railway suicide**
    - Railway suicide is seen as a highly **lethal** method, one that is likely to be fatal.
    - It is seen as a method that is likely to be **quick**.
    - As well as being perceived as a 'reliable' and quick way to end your life, the railways are also taken to be an **accessible** and an **affordable** method of suicide.

[38] From: Marzano, L., Borrill, J., Mackenzie, J.M., Kruger, I., Fields, B. (2016). *Why Do People Take Their Lives on the Railways in Great Britain? A Research Study.* London: Middlesex University.
[39] From: Marzano, L. MacKenzie, J-M., et al. (2020) *Suicide and Life-Saving Interventions on the Railways in Great Britain: A Research Study.* Middlesex University.
[40] From: Pharoah, R. (2017). *Suicide Prevention on the Railway: An Anthropological and Ethnographic Approach.* London: Encounter Consulting.

- Railway suicide is perceived to be a frequently used or **common** method of ending one's life.

These are interesting perceptions, as they stand in contrast somewhat to the known reality of the method (and can even be thought of as myths). They are, however, the reasons often given for choosing the railways for suicide and can be seen as factors that **attract** people to the method / location.

- **Counter or alternative discourses**

In terms of counter or alternative discourses that circulate around railway suicide, the most prominent is the recognition of the **impact on others**, particularly the driver. Due to this it is often described as a **selfish** way to die (this is a particularly strongly stated opinion in online forums). The possibility of **surviving with injuries** is often acknowledged, as are the chances of **intervention**, and also the fact that it can be a **fear-inducing method**, one where it can be difficult to overcome the survival instinct.

These counter-discourses are interesting in that they can be seen as strongly **dissuasive** in relation to railway suicide, and thus may be useful from a messaging perspective. The idea being that drawing on, even amplifying, these known dissuasive factors in messaging may have the effect, over time, of **deterring** people from considering the railways for suicide (or to put it another way, of making the railways seem less attractive as a site / method for suicide).

Discourse theory, messaging and preventing suicide on the railways

Attempting to change the associations people make between the railways and suicide is not a straightforward task, however. For these associations to be shaped or influenced, messaging would have to work on different levels – from the local / individual level, targeting people who are contemplating ending their life on the railways, up to broader background social discourses and cultural scripts.

A key point to emphasise, though, is that working on one level influences other levels, in that there is a relationship (albeit a complex one) between background cultural scripts / discourses about railway suicide, railway messaging and individual experiences and actions. That is:

- Existing cultural images, ideas and scripts shape individual intentions and actions
- In relation to railway suicide, people draw on these images, ideas and scripts when imagining, planning and undertaking various actions which make up, or lead to, a suicide attempt
- There is a relationship between these background cultural scripts and the more immediate railway messaging context, in that messaging (over time) can exert an influence and shape these images, ideas and scripts

Working with this theory as a guide, we can consider how best to influence existing or emerging scripts and discourses in order to reduce the likelihood of people choosing suicide as an option.

A number of questions need to be carefully considered though:

- Which, if any, of these cultural scripts can – and should – we try and challenge via formal and informal messaging, in different spaces and contexts? And how?

- Which might we want to 'encourage'/reinforce/amplify? How?

- What are the risks?

- What might the unintended consequences be? And for whom?

- What are the implications of the (mis)understandings of railways, suicide and railway suicides – for different groups and individuals?

Different audiences

Before addressing the above, and how different forms of communication may help shape these cultural scripts or discourses, it is important to consider what **different audiences** exist in relation to railway suicide messaging/communications[41]:

a. Those who could be thought of as having particular **sensitivity / vulnerability** to messaging around suicide:

  i. Those who are or have been in distress/suicidal - at different stages of the 'suicidal process'. In this context, it is perhaps also useful to consider whether and how those falling in this group may seek and respond to help/intervention. The secondary analysis of interviews with attempt survivors indicated that this group could be made up of two cohorts – those who are suicidal and would welcome, or at least be open to, some form of intervention, and those who are suicidal and are not help seeking (and are often in fact, intent on avoiding any intervention).

  ii. People bereaved by suicide

b. Those **not necessarily seen as 'vulnerable'** as such, and who may seek and react to messaging around railway suicide primarily in relation to travel delays/disruption but nonetheless may be 'primed' (e.g. to think that suicides on the railways are more common or lethal that they actually are, thus potentially increasing the 'cognitive availability' of the railways as a suicide method at times of distress).

  i. General commuters

  ii. Rail staff

  iii. The wider community (including/especially those who live or work near a rail station, bridge or crossing).

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[41] these are not intended as exhaustive or mutually exclusive categories, and are not homogeneous groups, and it is important that we continue to ask ourselves which other voices and perspectives we might be missing

For this second group (commuters, rail staff, wider community) it is also important to consider the effects, and potential trauma, of being exposed to a suicide or attempt on the railways, even for individuals and groups who are not considered 'vulnerable'[42].

People can, of course fall into different categories, and there will be a degree of overlap for many people, but through the consultation events it became clear that the same message can be received in quite contrasting ways by different audiences, and a message that is perceived as 'neutral' / factual by one can be a potentially 'triggering' one for another (as an example, the announcement of a fast train approaching seems to elicit many different and contrasting responses). This was one of the many occasions in relation to messaging where **unanticipated** or **unintended consequences** seemed to come into play.

An important implication is that **messaging has to be quite sophisticated** in order to **meet the needs of / influence each audience**. Our consultations with the lived experiences group in particular bore this out.

Challenges

It is clear that the needs of these different audiences may not always be compatible. For example, commuters wanting precise information about the location and timing of an incident, to minimize travel disruption; rail employees wanting to reduce commuter dissatisfaction or even hostility, by being open about the ('external') nature and extent of suicide-related service disruptions, and wanting to 'advertise' the good work being done to prevent suicide on the railways; versus the risks of 'triggering' people at risk of suicide and/or providing an unhelpful level of detail about where and when an attempt on the railways is likely to be fatal.

This raises a number of further questions;

- **Whose needs should be prioritized** in such cases? We can't overlook the complex and, at times, competing interests and priorities of the rail industry and its different stakeholders. However, from a suicide prevention perspective, the answer is arguably clear - but not that simple, not least as those at risk of suicide on the railways are not a homogenous group.

- **What 'internal' communications are needed** to persuade key stakeholders of the importance of prioritizing the needs of those at risk of suicide? Given some of the commercial imperatives and implications at stake, should cost-effectiveness analyses

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[42] For example, a recent survey of 219 rail industry employees found that almost 70% (N=147, 67.1%) had lived experience of suicidal thoughts (in 30 cases (18.3%) involving rail locations) and one in five (N=44, 20.1%) had previously attempted suicide, in three instances by train. Whilst the survey may not have been representative of rail staff more widely, the high proportion of 'vulnerable' staff respondents is an important issue to consider, and address. As remarked by some participants, this may at least in part be due to the impact of, and exposure to, other suicides in this context. Ease and frequency of access to tracks and other relatively inaccessible (to the general public) locations may further compound the problem (Marzano, L. MacKenzie, J-M., et al., 2020).

be an integral part of cross-industry suicide prevention activities, discussions and decisions? If so, what are the risks and potential disadvantages?

- If the main aim of suicide-related communications is **suicide prevention** (rather than to communicate delays/appease delayed customers), this may include both interventions to interrupt suicidal thoughts and attempts (e.g. signage at key locations), and strategies to challenge broader cultural scripts / discourses around railway suicide. The latter may well require separate, but complementary, measures.

The example of suicide-prevention signage illustrates some of the complexities at play. The quotes below are from survey respondents who had contemplated or attempted suicide on the railways, when asked what could help prevent suicide on the railways:

- *Samaritans adverts at the end of train platforms. Projected adverts that change provide distraction as travelling at the same place day after day you know the adverts and there is no stimulation and that allows the mind to do its own thing more easily*

- *Messages that mean something to me, whether from a friend or seeing signs up (e.g. Samaritans) in the station.*

- *Samaritans signs at stations have helped*

- *Maybe signage sensitively but clearly displaying that, horrifically, some of those who jump in front of trains survive and a no. for Samaritans. Tackle idea that it would 'just be over in a second'*

- *Publicising that suicide attempts on the railways don't always work (if there are many cases).*

Versus:

- *When all you can think about is death and dying, you don't particularly notice signs or posters so I don't believe they would particularly help.*

- *Too much obvious 'suicide prevention' things makes me think more about the possibility of suicide and that stations are a 'good' place for suicide*

- *I don't think adverts for the Samaritans help - if anything, it gives people the idea. Posters showing the devastation caused, the trauma to the driver involved, the human impact on the survivors - might be more effective - I'm glad I didn't ruin a driver's life*

Whilst not the only 'audience' for such signage, people with lived experience of suicidality are arguably the most important group to consider, and target, when deciding whether, where and what suicide prevention messages and images should (and shouldn't) be displayed at or near rail locations. However, as shown above, lived experience perspectives on this are both varied and, at times, divergent.

To complicated matters further, these signs of course don't exist in a vacuum. For example, they can be in conflict with some of the messages and signage to prevent trespassing[43], which tend to emphasize the risk of prosecution if caught and the high chance of death if accidentally struck by a train:

- *The signs telling you that you are trespassing if you step onto the tracks, makes me feel worse and as though I have to jump now or else I will be left with a huge fine.*

Whether signage (or indeed other forms of communication) are encouraging help-seeking and/or help-giving, or challenging some of the more unhelpful scripts associated with railway suicide (e.g. that it is quick and effective), there are – perhaps inevitably – risks and unintended consequences. For example, knowing that support/help/intervention may be available at a rail station, or that an attempt by train may not necessarily result in death, could attract more or different people to this location/method of suicide – whilst deterring others. The amount and exact position of such signage may further influence this process of 'attracting' or 'dissuading' suicidal individuals to/from railway locations.

Implications and Recommendations

Despite the challenges, the following are arguably promising comms strategies to help 'dissuade' and prevent suicide by train:

1. Discuss known **dissuasive factors** more:
   - The most prominent dissuasive factor (seemingly both online and offline) is the recognition of the **impact on others**, particularly the **driver**. However, this is rarely 'officially' discussed or reflected in suicide prevention. Such an approach would build upon a commonly, and strongly, held understanding of railway suicide. This form of messaging about the impact on staff might be particularly resonant now given the positive public perceptions of 'front-line' public sector workers during the Covid-19 epidemic.
   - Due to the impact on others, railway suicide is often described as a **selfish** way to die. This is a difficult message to 'formally' draw on, and for some audiences (e.g. those bereaved by railway suicide) might be distressing to hear. However, on online forums especially, this is a particularly strongly stated opinion.
   - Discussing the possibility of **surviving with injuries** and/or the possibility of experiencing **pain** would work to counter the 'quick, lethal and painless' myths.
   - Advertising the chances of **intervention** might dissuade people who do not want to be intervened with, and are not looking for support and help. Even existing campaigns such as 'Small Talk Saves Lives' can have the effect of increasing the perception that one might be approached and stopped at a station, and thus dissuade some from considering that location as a site for suicide.
   - Acknowledging the fact that it can be a **fear-inducing method**, one where it can be difficult to overcome the survival instinct.

   Such an approach raises many issues (discussed above), but in terms of challenging myths, one strategy that prior intervention research indicates would be helpful is that

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43 See http://restrail.eu/toolbox/spip.php?article135 – some of these recommendations are arguably also relevant to suicide signage

communities should be provided with factual and clear information about suicide that is not romanticized or distorted[44].

2. In relation to **beliefs** or **myths** around railway suicide, factual information can be used to **challenge** the idea that:

- Railway suicide attempts are always **lethal.**

- It is a method that is efficient or **quick.**

- That the railways are freely **accessible,** and you won't be intervened with.

- Railway suicide is a frequently used or **common** method of ending one's life.

The logic, in terms of a messaging / communications strategy, would be to challenge the 'attractors' (because many are misunderstandings or myths) and try to reinforce or amplify the 'dissuaders'.

3. **Reduce the cognitive availability** of railways as a method of suicide, by tackling the perception that suicide on the railways are common and/or on the rise.

The perception of railway suicide being a common means of suicide, mentioned above as a myth that could be challenged, also relates to the idea of 'cognitive availability', and is important with regards to industry messaging more broadly.

Whilst the rail industry may have limited control over the stories that circulate online (for example in pro-choice forums) about railway suicide, the announcements made at stations, on trains, on social media and media/news reporting more generally can all contribute to railway suicide being perceived as more common than they actually are. From a lived experience perspective:

- *Knowing that people often die on the railways makes you think it is an effective method.*

- *[When choosing the railways as a method of suicide I was influenced by] online statistics and delays read aloud*

The question is not just *how* to communicate about RS, but *whether, how much, when and to whom.*

It is important to consider the language, tone and frequency of messages used to communicate delays/disruptions due to a suicide or suicide attempts – and whether/when it is actually necessary to communicate these to the general public. Where possible, this is to be balanced again the needs of commuters, staff and other audiences and

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[44] Abrutyn, S., Mueller, A.S., & Osborne, M.A. (2019). Rekeying Cultural Scripts for Youth Suicide: How Social Networks Facilitate Suicide Diffusion and Suicide Clusters Following Exposure to Suicide. *Society and Mental Health*, 215686931983406.

stakeholders, and of course it is not a 'secret' that some people take their lives on the rails. However, some practical measures could help reduce the risks and unintended consequences of well-meaning, informative messages:

i. **Avoid language or announcements which suggest that suicide on the rails are a common occurrence**. Every life lost on the railways is a tragedy, with far-reaching impacts for family and friends, and potentially for a wide range of people, not least train drivers, rail employees, bystanders, commuters and the wider community. This, and the disproportionate reporting of fatal attempts on the rails[45], might well contribute to the perception that this is a common method of suicide. For accuracy, and to minimise the risk of clustering and 'contagion', it is arguably important to (also) communicate that rail suicides are relatively rare, and on average less than 5% of all suicides in the UK.

ii. **Avoid a sensational and alarmist tone** in suicide-related messaging and reports, especially when communicating a possible increase in railway suicides or suicide cluster. Indeed, consider very carefully whether it is necessary to communicate this information to the general public (or fears around a possible rise or cluster). This may be especially important in a Covid-related context, given the 'tsunami' discourse currently dominating discussions, and predictions, of the likely impact on suicide and mental illness[46].

iii. **Sensationalised messaging can include warm and emotive messages**, as these may serve to render a specific issue or incident more memorable and/or relatable to. The balance between destigmatising and 'normalising' suicide can be a difficult one to achieve, as is deproblematising suicidal thoughts (e.g. to increase awareness and encourage help-seeking) whilst discouraging suicidal behaviours.

Despite the potential to dissuade from railway suicide by highlighting its impact on others, emotive messages of sympathy and support towards those affected (including family, friends, train drivers and other bystanders) can also have unintended consequences by creating further shame and guilt for those struggling with suicidal thoughts, and associated feelings of 'burdensomeness'[47].

iv. As well as the content and tone of suicide-related communications, it is important to consider – and arguably minimise – the **frequency** with which any suicide or attempt is communicated to the general public. Reducing exposure to railway suicide may include, **where possible, avoiding repeated suicide-related announcements on affected trains and at stations.**

v. **Social media announcements** about a specific incident can potentially reach millions of people, particularly when the associated delays/service disruption affects a number of lines, routes and train operating companies, and are therefore communicated via multiple channels, on multiple occasions. Such level of exposure may in turn contribute to the perception that railway suicides are a common and pervasive

45 Marzano, L., Borrill, J., Mackenzie, J.M., Kruger, I., Fields, B. (2016). *Why Do People Take Their Lives on the Railways in Great Britain? A Research Study.* London: Middlesex University.
46 (see for example https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-52676981).
47 Joiner T (2005) *Why people die by suicide*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

problem. To minimize this, solutions such as 'pinned' (rather than frequently repeated) announcements/tweets could be adopted. Measures to restrict or prevent other social media users from sharing or commenting on such announcements could also be considered.

4. References to suicide and self-harm can be **triggering** for those with lived experience of suicidality, and those bereaved by suicide. A common suggestion, at all of the consultation events held, was to avoid such language where possible, and refer instead to **'a medical emergency'**, both at rail locations and in online communications.

   It is also important to consider, from a lived experience perspective, what other aspects of railway environments and travel can be difficult or even triggering (see e.g. Mackett, 2019)[48]. This might include **anti-trespass signage and fast-train announcement**s, which reinforce and 'publicise' that "trains are fast, cannot stop quickly, and the outcome of a collision is usually fatal"[49]. The example of other countries, including Germany and the Netherlands, suggests that announcements such as these could be modified, minimised or indeed eliminated to reduce suicide on the railways (see e.g. Lukaschek et al, 2014)[50].

5. **Avoid communicating unnecessary detail and images of methods and locations,** and **follow established media guidelines** for the responsible reporting of suicide[51], and railway suicide in particular[52]. Although generally targeted at journalists and editors, such guidelines are also relevant in the context of industry-led communications. They are based on a substantial body of evidence about the potential dangers of media (especially newspaper) coverage of suicide, including some powerful examples of the impact of reporting, and reporting guidelines, on suicides by train[53].

6. Remember that **post-incident communications after a traumatic event can be unhelpful and have negative emotional implications**, **even for those who are not 'vulnerable' as such.** For example, there is evidence that providing emotional support

[48] Mackett, R., (2019). *Mental health and travel - Report on a survey*. University College London, June. Available at: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/civil-environmental-geomatic-engineering/sites/civil-environmental-geomatic-engineering/files/mental_health_and_travel_-_final_report.pdf
[49] Savage I. Analysis of fatal train-pedestrian collisions in metropolitan Chicago 2004-2012. *Accid Anal Prev*. 2016;86:217-228. doi:10.1016/j.aap.2015.11.005.
[50] Lukaschek K, Baumert J, Erazo N, Ladwig KH. Stable time patterns of railway suicides in Germany: Comparative analysis of 7,187 cases across two observation periods (1995-1998; 2005-2008). *BMC Public Health*. 2014;14(1).
[51] World Health Organization (2017). *Preventing suicide: a resource for media professionals - update 2017*. Available at: https://www.who.int/mental_health/suicide-prevention/resource_booklet_2017/en/: Samaritans (2013). *Media Guidelines for Reporting Suicide*. Available at: https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/
[52] Samaritans (No Date). *Reporting Rail Suicides and Attempts*. Available at: https://media.samaritans.org/documents/Media_guidelines_-Rail_suicides_factsheet_UK_Final.pdf
[53] Koburger N, Mergl R, Rummel-Kluge C, et al. Celebrity suicide on the railway network: Can one case trigger international effects? *J Affect Disord*. 2015;185:38-46. doi:10.1016/j.jad.2015.06.037: Etzersdorfer E, Sonneck G. Preventing suicide by influencing mass-media reporting. The Viennese experience 1980–1996. *Arch Suicide Res*. 1998;4(1):67-74. doi:10.1080/13811119808258290.

and psychological 'debriefing' after exposure to a potentially traumatic event can actually be harmful and increase the risk of developing post-traumatic stress[54].

7. **Consider what associations exist with the railways, as well as with railway suicide and suicide more generally**. For example, can and should the railways be - and be known to be - places where intervention is likely? What are the potential unintended consequences of heightening expectations of intervention (which some may effectively experience and look to as 'support') where these may not be fully met, and in such close proximity to lethal means of suicide (as opposed to 'safer' community, health and social care, or online spaces)? Alongside the potentially deterrent effect for those seeking to avoid intervention, these potential risks need careful consideration when designing any initiative to reduce suicide, and when deciding whether or how to 'advertise' any such measure to the general public (be it a staff training programme or coordinated efforts to make rail locations friendlier, more difficult to access, and so on).

   In other words, how might **the naming and 'framing' of interventions to prevent railway suicide** affect those who are most vulnerable/sensitive to such messages? These are as important an aspect of suicide-related communications as the messaging/announcements about specific incidents or clusters. A frequent suggestion raised at the events we facilitated was to **minimise or even avoid "obvious *suicide* prevention", and instead couch interventions in terms of general well-being, mental health and loneliness -** but in such a way as to not exclude those with the most complex needs.

8. Current suicide prevention discourses and evidence-based approaches tend to emphasise the importance of doing a lot to reduce suicides. Calls for multi-faceted, multi-agency strategies, incorporating several measures and levels of intervention, proliferate in policy, practice and research literature. This is undoubtedly often important work, which sometimes however leaves little space for considering whether we could or should do less, compared to what we are currently doing. In other words, could it be better – at least in some contexts - to say and do less? **Should we talk about railway suicide, and railway suicide prevention, less?**

   The answer is arguably not to *do* less, but perhaps to *talk* about it less. This doesn't just mean limiting whether or how information about rail suicide and prevention initiatives is made public, but also drawing on potential design and technology solutions to communicate about – and indeed prevent – suicide (as opposed to more traditional, verbal methods). The concept of **'dissuasion by design**', including the use of art, sound and visual installations 'designed against suicide' offers a fruitful area for further exploration. Whilst potentially costly, projects such as the redesign of the Foyle river banks and bridges[55] could offer much promise in a railway context, particularly at busy and especially impersonal railway environments, as well as remote, unstaffed locations.

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54 World Health Organization (2012). Psychological debriefing in people exposed to a recent traumatic event. Available at: https://www.who.int/mental_health/mhgap/evidence/resource/other_complaints_q5.pdf
55 https://www.urbandesignmentalhealth.com/journal-5---river-foyle.html

Suggestions for Further Studies and Consultation

- Further secondary analysis from other commissioned studies on railway suicide (e.g. BTP data 'psychological autopsy' study; data from 'social media listening' digital media projects) would complement the work outlined in this report. As stated earlier, by bringing together the findings from different studies, and looking for overlaps, common themes, as well as differences, it is possible to develop a good sense of the cultural scripts and discourses that together form 'railway suicide' as a knowable and available means of ending one's life. **Synthesising findings from different studies** on railway suicide can be a way to inform messaging and communications strategies within the industry, and to ensure their relevance and usefulness.

- When considering the different audiences in relation to communications, campaigns and messaging, it may be beneficial for the industry to have access to **'experts by experience'**. These are people who can bring both knowledge and experience of how messaging may be received by key groups – those who are contemplating using the railways as a site/method of suicide, and those who have been bereaved by suicide. The Lived Experiences Advisory Group convened for this project is perhaps a useful model of how these can be formed and run.

- Multi-disciplinary research and consultation with academic, rail and lived experience experts could help to cast light on how messaging around suicide may need to be adapted in the context of **Covid-19**. As stated earlier, a third phase of work is planned as part of this project that will involve further consultation with the Lived Experiences Advisory Group, and a wider meeting involving rail industry suicide prevention leads and some of the clinical and academic experts we have consulted with so far. This will also be an opportunity to consider messaging and suicide prevention issues raised by the Covid-19 situation. However, further work may also be needed, particularly in the light of the numerous challenges Covid-19 has raised for the industry.

Appendix 1. Programme for Academic and Clinical Experts Consultation Event

22nd October 2019, SOAS, London

10.00 am	Arrival and Coffee
10.15 am	**Lisa Marzano, Ian Marsh, David Mosse** Welcome and Introductions

Understanding Context

10.25 am	**Lisa Marzano**
	Suicide-related communications: Project rationale and overview
10.45 am	**Robin Pharoah and Alex Dark**
	Suicide on the railways: An ethnographic approach
11.15 am	**Roger Mackett**
	Travel and Mental Health
11.45 am	Discussion
12.15 pm	Lunch

Understanding Audiences and Localities

1.00 pm	**Amy Chandler**
	Suicide cultures
1.30 pm	**Ian Marsh and Rachel Winter**
	Online discussions of train suicides
2.00 pm	Discussion
2.30 pm	Coffee

Dissuasion by Design

2.45pm	**Ralf Alwani**
	Creating a barrier through civic ownership and the arts: A case study of the Foyle Reeds in Derry/Londonderry
3.15pm	Discussion
3.45pm	Concluding comments and close

Appendix 2. Programme for Rail Industry Workshop on Communications and Messaging around Suicide

Tuesday 10th March 2020, Mary Ward House, London

10.15 am	Arrival and Coffee
10.45 am	**Lisa Marzano, Ian Marsh, David Mosse** Welcome and Introductions
11.00 am	**Lisa Marzano** Suicide-Related Communications: Project Rationale and Overview
11.20 am	Discussion
11.45 am	Morning break
12.00pm	**Roald van der Valk, ProRail** Suicide Prevention on the Dutch Railways: Influencing Suicidal Behaviour through Announcements and Other Suicide-Related Communications
13.00 pm	Lunch
1.45 pm	**Ian Marsh and Rachel Winter** Online discussions of suicides on the railways
2.15 pm	Discussion
2.45 pm	Afternoon break
3.00pm	**Group Activity:** Dissuasion by Design
3.45pm	Concluding Comments and Close

Appendix 3. Author Biographies

Dr Ian Marsh is a Reader in the School of Allied Health at Canterbury Christ Church University, and the Suicide-Safer Communities project lead for Universities in the region. He has worked in suicide prevention for 27 years, initially as a clinician in community mental health, then as an academic and as a policy advisor. He is the Academic Lead for the Kent and Medway Suicide Prevention Steering Group. His academic qualifications include BA (Hons) Economic & Social History: University of Hull, 1988; DipCOT, Derby, 1992; MSc (Distinction) Psychological Counselling: City University, 1999; PhD University of Brighton, 2008. Ian's main teaching and research interests are in critical approaches to health and social care, particularly as they relate to suicide and suicide prevention. His publications include *Suicide: Foucault, History and Truth* (Cambridge University Press, 2010); *Critical Suicidology: Toward Creative Alternatives* (UBC Press, 2016) (co-editor), and *Suicide and Social Justice* (co-editor), as well as numerous journal articles and book chapters. He has organised and presented his work at conferences and workshops worldwide. He has received research grants from funders including the National Institute of Health Research (NIHR), HEFCE, NHS England, and the Department of Health. He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy in the UK.

Dr Lisa Marzano is Associate Professor of Psychology at Middlesex University, specialising in suicide and mental health research. Formerly a Research Fellow at the Oxford University Centre for Suicide Research, she has been involved in a number of studies focusing on both self-harm and suicidal behaviour, including research focusing specifically on railway suicide.

Lisa is editor of *Evidence-Based Mental Health* (EBMH), and an active member of several groups and organisations focusing on suicide prevention and mental health promotion (examples include the Task Force on Suicide and the Media of the International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP) and the National Crime Agency Suicide Prevention Working Group). Her work at the intersection of psychology, psychiatry, public health and computer science has had a direct impact on policy and practice, and has resulted in a number of publications in academic and professional journals.

Professor David Mosse is Professor of Social Anthropology at SOAS University of London, and Fellow of the British Academy. He has interests in cultural psychiatry and global mental health, the historical anthropology of religion, social-political systems and livelihoods, especially with reference to Indian caste inequality, the anthropology of knowledge, institutions and international development. His books include The Rule of Water (2003), Cultivating Development (2005), The Saint in the Banyan Tree (2012), Adventures in Aidland (ed. 2011). He has worked for Oxfam as representative for south India, and for other international development agencies as a social development adviser. He chairs the Haringey Suicide Prevention Goup, and is a Mind in Haringey trustee. He is a member of the Haringey SIRG (Serious Incident Review Group) for Barnet, Enfield and Haringey Mental Health Trust. He served as a lay member on the NICE Public Health Advisory Committee on Preventing Suicide in Community and Custodial Settings (2016-2018). He is a peer-support group leader for Survivors of Bereavement by Suicide, and core member of The Alliance of Suicide Prevention Charities - TASC and the Support After Suicide Partnership.