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The role of media in preventing student suicides: a Hong Kong experience
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Abstract

Introduction

In view of the surge of student suicides in March 2016, a large-scale media involvement was engaged to minimize copycat effects and to extensively spread more preventive information.

Methods

Trend differences between student suicides in overall as well as youth suicides between 2003 and 2016 were examined. Impacts of media involvement were examined as to the changes of their intensities in reporting student suicides in different manners. Local polynomial smoothing method was used to estimate the intensities throughout the study period.

Results

The intensity of students' suicides has been slowly increasing since 2006, which was in contrast to the decreasing trend of overall suicide intensity. After our engagement with the media, acute descriptive-reporting in student suicide news has sharply dropped and remained low since then, whereas preventive-reporting has increased sharply in March and April 2016, but dropped back to normal afterwards. The higher intensity of preventive-reporting seemed to have a protective effect on student suicide.

Limitations

Data of student suicides in 2016 were substantially extracted from the local news, which may not contain complete information. The analyses suggested, but could not confirm, a causal relationship between the changes of student suicide news-reporting and the incidents of suicides themselves.

Conclusions

The recent surge of student suicides in Hong Kong was statistically abnormal. Media engagement has changed local suicide news-reporting to become more preventive, which could have contributed to the drop of student suicides. It is essential to sustain the media's coverage of preventive reporting to maintain its enduring effect.

Keywords:

Student suicide; Asia; Media engagement; Suicide news; Media effect; Papageno effect.

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