Preventing Suicide on Railroad Tracks

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According to the authors of a study in Canada, prevention efforts targeting railroad track locations where suicides take place would be ineffective given the low number of deaths that occur in any one spot in that country. They also found that many of these suicides occurred on “open tracks” rather than in stations or at road crossings. Thus, interventions commonly used in Europe, such as video surveillance at stations and training station staff as gatekeepers, may not be useful in Canada. The authors recommended better suicide prevention training for mental health staff at facilities located near tracks, since more than one-third of railroad suicides take place in close proximity to mental health services.

The study found that men made up 76.6 percent of suicides and 78 percent of unintended deaths on railroad tracks in Canada between 1999 and 2008. The average age of those who died was just under 40. People who died by suicide were more likely to be unemployed (43.3 percent) than those who died unintentionally (19.1 percent). The Canadian unemployment rate was between 6 and 7.6 percent during the study period.

Of those who died by suicide, 45.8 percent had alcohol or drugs in their system at the time of death. Many had histories of mental health diagnoses, including depression (57.3 percent), substance use disorders (30 percent), and schizophrenia or psychosis (17.4 percent). Among the people who died after unintentional train-related injuries, 72.5 percent had alcohol or drugs in their systems; 8.5 percent had a history of depression; 18 percent were identified as having substance abuse problems; and 5.2 percent had been diagnosed with schizophrenia or psychosis.

According to the authors, their finding that the patterns of railway-related suicides in Canada differs from that in some European countries shows that “it is important to conduct an in-depth analysis of the local situation” before choosing suicide prevention strategies.
