



### The portrayal of suicidal behaviour in police television series

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## The portrayal of suicidal behaviour in police television series

### Abstract

Objective: Fictional suicidal behaviour can affect the public as a risk or a protective factor, and it may reflect how suicide is perceived in a society. However, surprisingly little is known of how suicidal behaviour is portrayed in television series. The aim of this study was to investigate the characteristics of televised fatal and non-fatal suicidal behaviour, preventative interventions, and the portrayal of people bereaved by suicide.

Methods: All episodes ( $N = 475$ ) of four Belgian police series were screened against inclusion and exclusion criteria, and 87 episodes with a total of 54 suicides, 13 attempted suicides, 13 suicide threats, and 20 characters bereaved by suicide were included in a quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Results: Televised suicidal behaviour was primarily motivated by external motives, such as social/relational issues or the death of a significant other, and to a lesser extent, by internal motives, such as mental or physical health related issues. Interventions were likely to prevent suicide. People bereaved by suicide were mostly portrayed as individuals seeking justice. Shame, revenge, and escape were the major qualitative themes associated with suicidal behaviour. Two prototypes emerged: a ruthless, 'psychopath'-type, criminal who kills him/herself before being arrested, and a suicidal individual struggling with devastating life events.

Conclusion: The study provided unique insights in how suicidal behaviour is televised in Belgian police series. Though some characteristics were portrayed adequately, mental health related issues were overlooked, spectacular suicide methods were overrepresented, and the bereaved characters were mostly unidimensional revengers. Strategies for improving the accuracy of televised suicidal behaviour should be studied.

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5 Keywords  
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8 Attempted suicide, bereavement, imitation, mass media, suicide, television  
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## Introduction

Media reporting of suicide can affect the occurrence of suicidal behaviour, either as a risk or a protective factor (WHO-IASP, 2017). Most research in this field has been focused on non-fictional media (Pirkis et al., 2016; Sisask & Värnik, 2012). Systematic reviews consistently have found evidence of imitative effects (i.e., Werther effect) of the reporting of suicide in media, such as newspapers and television news, with risks related to, for example, the amount of coverage and the usage of sensational headlines (Niederkröthenthaler et al., 2012; Notredame et al., 2017; Pirkis & Blood, 2001a; Stack, 2005). Conversely, there is evidence that reduced (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998; Sonneck & Etzersdorfer, 2017) or modified (Michel et al., 2000) media coverage can decrease the imitative effect, and presenting adequate coping strategies of suicidal individuals has been associated with lower suicide rates (i.e., Papageno effect, Niederkröthenthaler et al., 2010; Niederkröthenthaler, 2017). Currently, resources with evidence-based practices to assist media professionals in the portrayal of suicide are available internationally (Bohanna & Wang, 2012; Dare et al., 2011; Maloney et al., 2014).

The imitative effect of non-fictional media coverage seems to be stronger than that of fictional media (Stack, 2003) with some studies finding imitative effects and others not (Ferguson, 2018; Pirkis & Blood, 2001b). Still, fictional presentations of suicide may cause public debate about viewers' safety (Ferguson, 2018), and research has uncovered important effects of fictional portrayals (Stack, 2009), including positive effects such as increased help-seeking (Holding, 1974), and negative effects such as imitation of the attempted suicide (Hawton et al., 1999), influence the choice of suicide method (Biddle et al., 2012), and imitation of suicide (Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988). Scourfield et al. (2016) found an increase of informative/supportive tweets, rather than increase of suicide intent, after an assisted suicide in a soap opera, and DeGroot and Leith (2018) reported on 'parasocial' grief, i.e., grief expressed by members of a social media group after the suicide of a television character. Only

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3 few empirical studies have investigated moderating variables of exposure to fictional  
4 portrayals, such as the frequency of exposure (Martin, 1996; Stack, Kral, & Borowski, 2014),  
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6 the suicidal status (Doron et al., 1998; Till et al., 2013) or cognitive characteristics of the  
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8 viewers (Pouliot, Mishara, & Labelle, 2011), and the content of the portrayal, for example,  
9  
10 whether the person dies or not (Biblarz et al., 1991). These studies revealed a nuanced picture:  
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12 the effects on viewers' emotional distress or feelings of mastery depended on a combination of  
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14 their psychological vulnerability, coping styles, and the type of fictional portrayal (Till, 2017;  
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16 Till et al, 2015). Also, the level of identification with a suicidal character may affect the  
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18 emotional reactions in viewers, as demonstrated in a study of a recent television series (Hong  
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20 et al., 2018).  
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27 In addition to serving as a risk or a protective factor for individuals at risk of suicide, it  
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29 has been argued that media representations of suicide reflect how suicide is perceived in a  
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31 society (Blood & Pirkis, 2001). While the characteristics of non-fictional reporting are well-  
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33 known (Pirkis et al., 2016; WHO-IASP, 2017), those of fictional reporting remain largely  
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35 unexplored. For example, comparing news reports of different countries, Fekete et al. (2001)  
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37 reported that criminalization and 'psychiatrization' of suicide was more frequent in the US,  
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39 Finland and Germany, while heroizing was more frequent in Hungary and Japan. However,  
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41 arguably, fictional portrayals, in particular, may shed light on the sociocultural values  
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43 associated with suicidal behaviour and its prevention (Stack & Lester, 2009). Some work has  
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45 been done regarding suicide in the arts (Krysinska & Andriessen, 2017; Stack & Lester, 2009),  
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47 opera (Pridmore et al., 2013; Vaughn & Lester, 2009), literature (Stack & Bowman, 2009), and  
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49 film (Stack & Bowman, 2012). Still, watching television is the pre-eminent leisure activity  
50  
51 across countries (<https://www.statista.com/stats/television%20consumption>). Echoing a  
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53 comment by Stack and Lester (2009, p. 4), it is, thus, conceivable that television, rather than  
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55 scientific literature, is the primary source of information of the public on suicide and its  
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3 prevention. However, surprisingly little is known of how fictional suicides are presented on  
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5 television, in terms of frequency, motives, and aftermath.  
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8 This study aimed to address this gap by investigating the characteristics of televised  
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10 fatal and non-fatal suicidal behaviour, preventative interventions with suicidal characters, and  
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12 the portrayal of people bereaved by suicide. The study was interested in the quantitative aspects  
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14 as well as in the themes that are associated with the televised suicidal behaviour.  
15

## 16 17 **Methods**

### 18 19 **Material**

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21 The study focused on police series on Flemish television in Belgium. Over the past two  
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23 decades this type of series has been among the most popular television shows in terms of the  
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25 number of viewers; the most popular episodes reached audience market shares of 60+% (CIM,  
26  
27 2018). Typically, the characters in these police series are presented as ‘real’ people: the  
28  
29 characters’ personal lives are part of the storylines and may intertwine with their professional  
30  
31 activities. Also, the series are located and filmed in real cities, which adds to their  
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33 recognisability.  
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37 The study included only completed series of which all episodes were available for  
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39 analysis. Eligibility of four older and short-term series (limited to two to four series each) could  
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41 not be assessed due to unavailability of the material. The study included episodes in which one  
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43 of the characters died by suicide, attempted or threatened suicide, or one of the characters was  
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45 bereaved by suicide. Any content that was not related to suicidal behaviour in the series was  
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47 excluded.  
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51 The study material comprised four police series: (“Flikken” [Cops, Coppers], 1999-  
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53 2009 (VRT), 10 series, 127 episodes; “Zone Stad” [Zone City], 2003-2013 (VTM), 8 series,  
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55 104 episodes; “Witse”, 2004-2012 (VRT), 9 series, 117 episodes; “Aspe”, 2004-2014, 10  
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57 series, 127 episodes (VTM)). All episodes (N = 475) of four police series (Table 1) were  
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3 screened against the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and 87 episodes (18%) with a total of 54  
4 suicides (in 51 episodes), 13 attempted suicides, 13 suicide threats, and 20 characters bereaved  
5 by suicide were included in the analysis (Table 2). Because of the low numbers of “attempted  
6 suicide” and “threatened suicide” cases, for some of the analyses (e.g., Table 13), these  
7 categories “attempted suicide” and “threatened suicide” were combined in one category of  
8 “non-fatal suicidal behaviour”. Also, conceptually it is possible to distinguish between fatal  
9 and non-fatal suicidal behaviour (Silverman, 2016).

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19 {Insert Table 1 about here}

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22 {Insert Table 2 about here}

## 23 24 **Analyses**

25  
26 The study adopted a mixed-methods approach. First, the number of fatal (i.e., suicide)  
27 and non-fatal suicidal behaviour, the preventative interventions, the characters bereaved by  
28 suicide, and the motives for suicidal behaviour were quantified using SPSS (IBM SPSS  
29 Statistics version 24). The suicidal characters were classified as ‘criminal’ (including suspects)  
30 or ‘other’. The suicidal behaviour in the interventions was classified according to the outcome  
31 of the intervention (e.g., as suicide, or threatened suicide). Classification of the motives was  
32 based on Stack and Bowman (2012), who had developed a framework of internal and external  
33 motives based on analysis of 1000+ suicides in movies. Internal motives applied in this study  
34 were: psychiatric problems, ‘psychopath’-personality, and physical illness. The external  
35 motives were: social-relational issues, death of a significant other, and economic-work-  
36 financial issues.

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52 Secondly, we conducted a thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012) according to the principles  
53 of Braun and Clarke (2018), based on the suicide-related content and the notes made by the  
54 authors of this study while watching all episodes. We created a codebook with inductive codes,  
55 i.e. a set of codes, definitions and examples (DeCuir-Gunby, Marshall, & McCulloch, 2011)

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3 based on analysis of a random sample of nine episodes. The analysis included recursive steps  
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5 of watching the episodes, (re-)reading of the notes, inductive production of initial codes, and  
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7 grouping of codes in potential themes. Reviewing of the potential themes against the data  
8  
9 resulted in the formulation of the final consistent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2018). The first  
10  
11 author (KA) coded all material, and both authors held regular team discussions to minimise  
12  
13 researcher bias (Braun & Clarke, 2018; Bryman, 2012).~~which was checked by the second~~  
14  
15 ~~author (KK). Any disagreement was resolved by discussion.~~  
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## 19 Results

### 20 21 Frequencies

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24 Eighteen percent of the episodes included suicidal behaviour (~~Table 2~~). The televised  
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26 male/female suicide ratio was 4/1, the gender ratio of non-fatal suicidal behaviour was 1/1, and  
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28 2/1 among the characters bereaved by suicide. Criminal characters accounted for 70% of the  
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30 suicidal behaviour (74% of suicides and 61% of non-fatal suicidal behaviour), and most of  
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32 them were males (M/F: 80%/20%;  $\chi^2 = 11.71, p < .001$ ). Regarding the suicide methods,  
33  
34 ~~firearms-weapons~~ and explosives (343.75%), self-poisoning (198.75%) and jumping from  
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36 height (143.75%) accounted for more than two-third across types of suicidal behaviour and  
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38 gender. ~~Table 3 presents the methods used in fatal and non-fatal suicidal behaviour, and reveals~~  
39  
40 ~~marked gender differences.~~ ~~Firearms-weapons/explosives~~, hanging and self-cutting were  
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42 (almost) exclusively male suicide methods, while jumping from height and self-poisoning were  
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44 equally used by males and females (Table 1). Jumping from height was ranked first among  
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46 females, but apart from that, there was no obvious female suicide method. Regarding non-fatal  
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48 suicidal behaviour, ~~firearms-weapons~~, hanging, and jumping from height were male methods,  
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50 while self-poisoning was exclusively used by female characters.  
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56 [Insert Table 13 about here]

### 57 58 Motives

~~Table 4 details the televised motives of suicidal behaviour.~~ External motives played a role in most of the suicidal behaviour, and these were found in 93% of fatal and 96% of non-fatal suicidal behaviour (Table 2). The primary motive was social and relationship issues (found in 88% of all suicidal behaviour), and secondly, the death of a significant other, found in almost half of all suicidal behaviour. Economic motives ranked on the third place (38%) in relation to threatened suicide, and psychiatric issues ranked third (23%) in relation to attempted suicide. The 'psychopath'-personality was found in relation to televised suicide only, and physical illness was found least of all motives in fatal and non-fatal suicidal behaviour.

The ~~average number median~~ of motives both for suicide and non-fatal suicidal behaviour was 2. ~~EAs shown in Table 5,~~ external motives alone were involved in more than two-thirds of the suicidal behaviour (70%), a combination of external and internal motives in another one in four events (24%), while little suicidal behaviour was explained by internal motives alone (6%).

[Insert Table 24 about here]

~~[Insert Table 5 about here]~~

## Interventions

The television episodes included 22 preventative interventions with an acutely suicidal person. Most interventions ( $n = 20$ ) were carried out by police officers (sometimes helped by family members), 2 interventions were done solely by a family member. Typical situations included, for example, a suicidal person who is standing on top of a tall building or a bridge, or a suicidal person with a ~~firearm-weapon~~ who has locked him or herself in a room. The outcome of the intervention (i.e., whether the suicidal person was rescued) depended on the suicide method (Table 36). When the suicidal person ~~used involved~~ ~~firearms-weapons~~ the likelihood of dying was high. Importantly, in 64% of the interventions the suicide was prevented. ~~As male and female characters tended to be portrayed using different suicide~~

~~methods, there was a small (non-significant) gender effect. The interventions prevented:~~ 8 out of 14 (57%) ~~threatened suicides by~~ males, and 6 out of 8 (75%) ~~by~~ females.

### Characters bereaved by suicide

All the characters bereaved by suicide ( $n = 20$ ) were nuclear family members, mostly husbands or sons (Table 47). Their primary role in the story lines was to take revenge by killing, attempting to kill or take hostage the person(s) who they hold responsible for the loss that they have suffered. By the end of their respective episodes, 35% of these characters died by suicide as well.

### Thematic analysis

The thematic analysis aimed to shed light on the qualitative themes that are associated with the suicidal behaviour in the television series, and resulted in three themes: shame, revenge, and escape.

#### *Shame*

Shame is a feeling that occurs when an individual suffers “loss of face”. In the series it occurred when a perpetrator had been identified as a criminal and experienced the risk of public humiliation, and loss or reputation. This seemed to increase other feelings such as guilt, or fear of losing family or a job.

*Example: The police found out that an older man (i.e., a ‘friendly’ grandfather-type) has committed a murder approximately 30 years ago. The case is too old for a court case, but one of the police officers threatens him to publicize the story so that his children and grandchildren will know the truth about him. The man returns home and hangs himself in his house (Flikken, 2/16).*

#### *Revenge*

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3 Revenge occurred when an individual had experienced severe injustice or the death of  
4 a significant other, and sought revenge on those who he/she considered to be responsible for  
5 their grief. This may result in a 'suicide mission'.  
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10 Example: *A young woman, bereaved by the death of her mother, died from a fall from*  
11 *a tall building. Police investigation incriminates several people, such as her drug*  
12 *dealer, a neighbour who sexually abused her, and her abusive stepmother. Her ex-*  
13 *boyfriend provides evidence to the police that she died by suicide hoping that the*  
14 *wrongdoers would get punished (Aspe, 10/11).*  
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### 21 *Escape*

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23 Rather than being arrested by the police, the perpetrator kills him/herself to escape from  
24 being trialed. For some, it is also a matter of power, of staying in control until the end.  
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28 Example: *A professor specialized in in-vitro fertilization has become the 'father' of*  
29 *numerous children. He has killed the people who had found out of his practice and*  
30 *threatens to shoot his wife who is about to leave him. When the police arrives to arrest*  
31 *him, he declares that he knew that he was not going to be around to see his children*  
32 *grow up, and shoots himself (Witse, 8/104).*  
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### 40 **Discussion**

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42 To the best of our knowledge, this was the first study to investigate how suicidal  
43 behaviour is presented in popular police series on television. A substantial number of the  
44 episodes (approximately one in five) included suicidal behaviour. Hence, the public is likely to  
45 be exposed to fictional suicidal behaviour, which underscores the importance of this research.  
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51 It is; however, a question how realistic suicidal behaviour has been portrayed.  
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54 The televised male/female suicide ratio (4/1) resembled the real ratio in the country  
55 (Agentschap Zorg en Gezondheid, 2018). Also the televised gender ratio of non-fatal suicidal  
56 behaviour (1/1) could be close to reality: over the last two decades the ratio varied between 1/1  
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3 and 1/2, though this ratio is based on medically treated non-fatal suicidal behaviour  
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5 (Agentschap Zorg en Gezondheid, 2018). Female characters bereaved by suicide seem to be  
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7 underrepresented (2/1), as it is conceivable that men and women are equally bereaved by  
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9 suicide (Grad, Treven, & Krysinska, 2017).  
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12 The portrayed methods of suicidal behaviour deviated from reality in favour of  
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14 spectacular methods. For example, ~~firearms-weapons~~ and explosives were used in one third,  
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16 and jumping from heights in one in seven televised suicides, compared to less than 5% and 3%  
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18 in reality, respectively (in the years 2014 and 2015, most recent data, Agentschap Zorg en  
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20 Gezondheid, 2018). Conversely, most suicides occur by hanging (approximately 55% of  
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22 suicides, Agentschap Zorg en Gezondheid, 2018) while this method accounted only for 15%  
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24 on television. Also, suicidal behaviour was overrepresented in criminal characters. These  
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26 characters pursued a wide range of criminal activities including substance abuse/dealing,  
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28 white-collar criminality, or murder. Some of these characters appeared to engage in criminal  
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30 activities to seek revenge due to experienced injustice of which they had been the victim of  
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32 crime themselves. While suicide mortality in Belgian prisons is high compared to the general  
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34 population (Favril et al., 2019), we could not find data regarding suicidal behaviour of  
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36 individuals involved in criminal activities in the general population Belgian society. However,  
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38 Stack and Bowman (2012) reported that there were more suicides of violence perpetrators in  
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40 the US movies compared to society (20.4% vs 4.8%). These findings may indicate that  
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42 storylines dictate the portrayal of suicide more than reality.  
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49 In the same vein, ~~it is noteworthy that~~ international studies have also found  
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51 overreporting of suicide by violent or sensational methods, and suicide in the context of  
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53 criminality, in non-fictional media (Fekete et al., 2001; Machlin, Pirkis, & Spittal, 2013;  
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55 Marzano et al., 2018; Pirkis et al., 2007). It is conceivable that such biased presentations may  
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57 contribute to misunderstanding and stigmatization of suicidal behaviour in the general  
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59 population.  
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3 population. Though further research in this field is needed, the impact of misrepresentations  
4 could be far-reaching. Research outside of suicide studies has linked public opinion to social  
5 policy (Burstein, 2003; Stack, Adamzyck, & Cao, 2010). If messages in television and film  
6 portrayals reflect public opinion, a link can be postulated between those portrayals and policies  
7 regarding suicide. For example, a review of 30 studies from 1990-2000 determined that 75%  
8 of the findings linked public opinion on a variety of issues including war, equal opportunity,  
9 health care and abortion to policy. In general, the more salient the policy issue, the stronger the  
10 impact of public opinion on policy, and responsiveness of policy makers to public opinion did  
11 not change over time (Burstein, 2003; Stack et al., 2010).  
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24 Several studies (Canetto & Sakinofski, 1998; Lester & Stack, 2015; Stack & Bowman,  
25 2017) have argued that cultural scripts influence the choice of suicide method. It is thus  
26 remarkable that in the television series ~~firearms-weapons~~ in fatal and non-fatal suicidal  
27 behaviour have been used almost exclusively by male characters, and self-poisoning in non-  
28 fatal suicidal behaviour by female characters. In one of the episodes this cultural script was  
29 illustrated when a suicidal female police officer ~~became suicidal and~~ ingested an overdose of  
30 medication and alcohol while she also possessed a ~~firearm-weapon~~ (Flikken, 6/68). As the  
31 portrayed gender discrepancy in suicide methods resembled reality, as in movie portrayals  
32 (Stack & Bowman, 2017), televised suicidal behaviour may both reflect and reinforce gendered  
33 suicidal behaviour.  
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47 The study found clear patterns in the motives ~~of related to~~ fatal and non-fatal suicidal  
48 behaviour of the characters. Typically, suicidal behaviour occurred in the context of was  
49 associated with external motives, especially social relationship issues, and the death of a  
50 significant other. Internal motives, including psychiatric issues, were far less important than  
51 external motives. As such, the portrayed motives deviated from some of the suicidology  
52 literature which tends to emphasize the link between psychiatric disorders and suicide (Mishara  
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3 & Chagnon, 2016). The motives were in line, though, with sociological research, which has  
4 demonstrated that weakened social integration and relationships increase the risk of suicidal  
5 behaviour (Stack & Kposowa, 2016). Obviously, integration of findings from different  
6 theoretical perspectives is essential to forward our knowledge in suicide prevention.  
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12 Still, this study was the first to apply the typology of motives developed by Stack and  
13 Bowman (2012) based on suicide in movies and it-I, and it proved to be highly applicable to  
14 televised suicidal behaviour. Distributions of motives of suicide were similar between this  
15 study and the study by Stack and Bowman (2012). There was a pre-dominance of external  
16 motives: social strains (89% in this study vs 58% in Stack and Bowman, 2012), death of a  
17 significant other (41% vs 8%), economic/financial problems (20% vs 16%), psychiatric illness  
18 (e.g., depression) (17% vs 21%), psychopathy (13% vs 18%), and physical illness (7% vs 7%).  
19 While Stack and Bowman (2012) found altruistic motives in 18% of the US movie suicides,  
20 this was only a minor motive (in one suicide and one attempted suicide) in this study. Also  
21 suicide in British movies (Stack & Bowman, 2012), Of note, also suicide in popular literature  
22 (Stack & Bowman, 2009) and opera (Pridmore et al., 2013; Vaughn & Lester, 2009) appears to  
23 be motivated mainly by external motives, though further research is needed. Overall, the  
24 findings suggest that there might be a tendency in non-fictional media, including television and  
25 film, to emphasize external, social motives of suicide. Maybe-Maybe suicide is easier to  
26 understand (or perceived as less threatening for people in the social environment?) when it is  
27 caused by forces-external forces, in to ourselves contrast ry to internal drives, though further  
28 research is needed to better understand this phenomenon.-?  
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52 Most interventions in the series were successful in preventing an acutely suicidal person  
53 to carry out the suicidal act. This constitutes an invaluable finding in terms of public education.  
54 Indeed, while suicide prevention services have adopted slogans such as “We can all prevent  
55 suicide” (<https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/how-we-can-all-prevent-suicide/>) and “Suicide  
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3 prevention is everyone's business" (<https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/about>), research  
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5 has shown that even if the public has basic knowledge of mental health and suicide-related  
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7 problems, people may lack the skills to intervene (Rossetto, Jorm, & Reavley, 2014; [Scheerder](#)  
8  
9 [et al., 2010](#)). Similarly, suicidal people may be reluctant to seek help because of high self-  
10  
11 reliance, perceived and self-stigma, shame, and accepting attitudes regarding suicide (Han et  
12  
13 al., 2018). As it is conceivable that television series reach more people than suicide prevention  
14  
15 media campaigns, [suicide prevention might benefit learn from televised portrayals.? For](#)  
16  
17 [example, television may depict naturalistic interventions and for the public acceptable help-](#)  
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19 [seeking behaviour acceptable for the public. T](#)elevising adequate interventions (in this case,  
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21 by police officers and family) or alternative coping by a suicidal character, should be  
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23 encouraged mirroring good practices in media reporting (WHO-IASP, 2017).  
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29 The portrayal of people bereaved by suicide was focused on nuclear family members.  
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31 Similar to the portrayal of choice of suicide methods, this limitation may be due to story lines  
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33 as the literature evidences that the number of bereaved non-family members outnumbers  
34  
35 bereaved family, and both family and non-family may struggle with social and mental health  
36  
37 problems, and suicidal behaviour (Andriessen et al., 2017; Maple et al., 2017). Interestingly,  
38  
39 the episodes also included [five](#) characters bereaved by other causes, also nuclear family  
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41 members, and all died by suicide.  
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45 Another intriguing finding was that the characters bereaved by suicide primarily acted  
46  
47 as revengers engaging in murderous and abductive activities, a pattern which has also been  
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49 observed in movies (Stack & Bowman, 2012). Although anger at others may constitute a core  
50  
51 grief feeling, the unidimensional portrayal of characters bereaved by suicide clearly dismisses  
52  
53 the variety of grief reactions, such as shock, sadness, yearning, rejection, or regrets (Grad &  
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55 Andriessen, 2016). Moreover, people bereaved by suicide often experience strong feelings of  
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57 guilt and anger at self, related to their perception of being at least partly responsible for the  
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3 suicide *themselves*. This contradicts with the televised pattern in which the bereaved characters  
4 seek revenge from *others*. Possibly, for a television series, it may be more attractive or easier  
5 to present the vengeful actions than the psychological process of, for example, personal growth  
6 after the loss. The portrayal of a man who had been suspected of kidnapping his daughter six  
7 years ago, and subsequently had lost his wife by suicide, was a notable exception (Aspe, 10/4).  
8 Being suspect of another child kidnapping (of which he will be let off, and eventually will be  
9 reunited with his lost child) he faced his ordeal with equanimity.

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Thematic analysis resulted in three main themes associated with the televised suicidal  
behaviour: shame, revenge and escape. Renowned scholars such as Baechler (1979), Douglas  
(1967), Leenaars (2004), Lester (1997), and Shneidman (1985) have introduced these concepts  
into suicidology. Shame is the sense of “loss of face” (Shneidman, 1985, p. 102), stemming  
from a persons’ feeling of general failure (Baechler, 1979, p. 100). According to Lester (1997,  
p. 352), a person experiences shame when he/she evaluates their actions or feelings and  
concludes that they “have done wrong”, the person feels inadequate and it “generates a desire  
to hide, disappear, or die”. Clearly, these descriptions of shame as a powerful emotion strongly  
resonate with the understanding of shame in this study. Shame also played a strong role in  
suicides in movies (Stack & Bowman, 2012), and has been reported in relation to suicide in  
opera (Vaughn & Lester, 2009).

Revenge was associated both with the actions of the characters bereaved by suicide (as  
mentioned above) and those of the suicidal characters. Both Douglas (1967) and Baechler  
(1979) pointed at the aggressiveness and logic of vengeful suicides: the ultimate goal of killing  
oneself is the death of, or hurting, someone else (Leenaars, 2004; Maltzberger & Buie, 1980).  
Interestingly, recently, Orri et al. (2014) reported that suicidal adolescents had found  
themselves in an individual and social impasse and unable to communicate before their suicide  
attempt. The adolescents in the study explained that the aggressiveness of their suicide attempt

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3 was intended to make other people (e.g., parents) feel guilty of their death, and to take revenge  
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5 for their neglect or carelessness. Televised revenge suicides may resemble such revengeful  
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7 suicide attempts.  
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10 Suicide to escape from an intolerable situation was one of Baechler's (1979) main types  
11  
12 of suicide. Shneidman (1985) postulated that suicide is stimulated by intolerable psychological  
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14 pain, for which the suicide must offer a solution by cessation of consciousness. Suicide is the  
15  
16 ultimate escape from self-awareness and the outer world (Baumeister, 1990). Over the decades  
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18 many studies have investigated motives of suicidal behaviour, and motives related to  
19  
20 experiencing and wanting to escape from an intolerable situation usually ranked highest in the  
21  
22 order of endorsed motives (De Beurs et al., 2018). De Beurs et al. (2018) also found that escape  
23  
24 thoughts were directly related to current suicidal ideas. In line with Shneidman's (1985)  
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26 postulates, the televised suicidal person may see suicide as the *only* thing that they could do.  
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### 30 **Limitations**

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32 The study was based on a well-defined sample of television series which allowed a  
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34 quantitative and qualitative analysis of a coherent sample of episodes. [Still, inclusion of more](#)  
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36 [series might have yielded additional information or allowed for more statistical analyses.](#) As  
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38 the study is based on one type of television series (i.e., police series) of one country (i.e.,  
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40 Belgium) it is unknown if findings apply to other types of television series, or other fictional  
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42 media (such as novels). Further research may also determine to what extent findings apply to  
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44 other countries.  
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### 49 **Conclusions**

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51 The study provided unique insights in how suicidal behaviour is televised. Overall, two  
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53 prototypes of suicidal persons emerged: a ruthless, egocentric, 'psychopath'-type criminal who  
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55 kills him/herself when exposed or before being arrested, and a suicidal individual who is  
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57 struggling with devastating life events. Suicidal behaviour is mostly motivated by external  
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3 motives, and people bereaved by suicide are mainly occupied with revenge. The study findings  
4 may indicate the existence of a pattern of non-fictional media emphasizing external motives of  
5 suicide.  
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10 Hence, a few important questions arise from this study.  
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12 Firstly, if fictional portrayals reflect how suicide is perceived in society, then what do  
13 these findings say about our views on suicide? Maybe suicide is easier to understand (or less  
14 threatening for people in the social environment?) when it is caused by forces external to  
15 ourselves contrary to internal drives? Secondly, can suicide prevention learn from televised  
16 portrayals? For example, television may depict naturalistic interventions and for the public  
17 acceptable help-seeking behaviour. Thirdly, as television series are a prime source of  
18 information for the public, there is a clear risk of biased presentation and stigmatization of  
19 suicidal behaviour by what are strategies for improving the accuracy of televised suicidal  
20 behaviour, for example in relation to overrepresentating on of violent methods,  
21 underrepresentating on of mental health issues (and other amendable risk or protective factors),  
22 and misrepresentation of people bereaved by suicide.? Involvement of academic, clinical and  
23 lived-experience (e.g., people bereaved by suicide) experts in the preparation of television  
24 series, as well as development of guidelines like those for non-fictional media professionals  
25 (WHO-IASP, 2017) constitute an important way forward. Strategies for improving the  
26 accuracy of televised suicidal behaviour should be studied.  
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49 Conflicts of interest: none  
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Table 1: Police series included in the study

<b>Name of series</b>	<b>Years of original broadcast (Station)</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Number of series</b>	<b>Number of episodes</b>
“Flikken” [Cops, Coppers]	1999-2009 (VRT)	Ghent	10	127
“Zone Stad” [Zone City]	2003-2013 (VTM)	Antwerp	8	104
“Witse”	2004-2012 (VRT)	Halle	9	117
“ASPE”	2004-2014 (VTM)	Bruges	10	127
				<i>N</i> = 475

Table 2: Television episodes and suicidal behaviour\* included in the study

	<b>N</b>	<b>% of episodes</b>	<b>M/F ratio</b>
Episodes	87 (of 475)	18%	
Suicide	54 (in 51 episodes)	11%	4/1
Attempted suicide	13	3%	3/4
Threatened suicide	13	3%	4/3
Interventions	22	5%	3/2
Characters bereaved by suicide	20	4%	2/1

\* There were no statistical differences between the four series.

Table 13: Methods of fatal ( $n=54$ ) and non-fatal suicidal behaviour ( $n=26$ )

	Suicide			Non-fatal suicidal behaviour		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
<b>Firearms weapons and explosives</b>	21 (95%)	1 (5%)	22 (100%)	5 (100%)	0	5 (100%)
<b>Jump from height</b>	3 (43%)	4 (57%)	7 (100%)	3 (75%)	1 (25%)	4 (100%)
<b>Self- poisoning</b>	5 (62%)	3 (38%)	8 (100%)	0	7 (100%)	7 (100%)
<b>Hanging</b>	7 (87%)	1 (13%)	8 (100%)	2 (100%)	0	2 (100%)
<b>Self- cutting</b>	3 (100%)	0	3 (100%)	1 (33%)	2 (67%)	3 (100%)
<b>Other *</b>	3 (50%)	3 (50%)	6 (100%)	2 (40%)	3 (60%)	5 (100%)
<b>Total</b>	42 (78%)	12 (22%)	54 (100%)	13 (50%)	13 (50%)	26 (100%)

\* Other Suicide: drowning ( $n=2$ ), moving vehicle, self-immolation, gasification, crossbow.

Other Non-fatal suicidal behaviour: drowning ( $n=2$ ), moving vehicle, self-immolation, gasification.



Table 24: Motives of suicidal behaviour

	<b><u>Suicide</u></b> <b><u>(n = 54)</u></b>	<b><u>Non-fatal</u></b> <b><u>suicidal</u></b> <b><u>behaviour</u></b> <b><u>(n = 26)</u></b>	<b><u>Attempted</u></b> <b><u>suicide</u></b> <b><u>(n = 13)</u></b>	<b><u>Threatened</u></b> <b><u>suicide</u></b> <b><u>(n = 13)</u></b>	<b><u>Total</u></b> <b><u>Suicide +</u></b> <b><u>Non-fatal</u></b> <b><u>(n = 80)</u></b>
<b><u>Internal motives</u></b>	<u>19 (35%)</u>	<u>5 (19%)</u>	<u>3 (23%)</u>	<u>2 (15%)</u>	<u>24 (30%)</u>
<b><u>- Psychiatric</u></b>	<u>9 (17%)</u>	<u>4 (15%)</u>	<u>3 (23%)</u>	<u>1 (8%)</u>	<u>13 (16%)</u>
<b><u>- 'Psychopath'</u></b>	<u>7 (13%)</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>7 (9%)</u>
<b><u>- Physical illness</u></b>	<u>4 (7%)</u>	<u>1 (4%)</u>	<u>0</u>	<u>1 (8%)</u>	<u>5 (6%)</u>
<b><u>External motives</u></b>	<u>50 (93%)</u>	<u>25 (96%)</u>	<u>13 (100%)</u>	<u>12 (92%)</u>	<u>75 (94%)</u>
<b><u>- Social relationships</u></b>	<u>48 (89%)</u>	<u>22 (85%)</u>	<u>11 (85%)</u>	<u>11 (85%)</u>	<u>70 (88%)</u>
<b><u>- Death significant other</u></b>	<u>22 (41%)</u>	<u>13 (50%)</u>	<u>7 (54%)</u>	<u>6 (46%)</u>	<u>35 (44%)</u>
<b><u>- Economic, financial</u></b>	<u>11 (20%)</u>	<u>6 (23%)</u>	<u>1 (8%)</u>	<u>5 (38%)</u>	<u>17 (21%)</u>

	<b><u>Total</u></b> <b><u>internal</u></b> <b><u>motives</u></b>	<b><u>Psychi-</u></b> <b><u>atric</u></b>	<b><u>'Psycho-</u></b> <b><u>path'</u></b>	<b><u>Phys.</u></b> <b><u>illness</u></b>	<b><u>Total</u></b> <b><u>external</u></b> <b><u>motives</u></b>	<b><u>Social</u></b> <b><u>relat.</u></b>	<b><u>Death</u></b> <b><u>sign</u></b> <b><u>other</u></b>	<b><u>Econ.</u></b> <b><u>finan-</u></b> <b><u>cial</u></b>
Suicide (n=54)	19 (35%)	9 (17%)	7 (13%)	4 (7%)	50 (93%)	48 (89%)	22 (41%)	11 (20%)

Non-fatal suic-behav (n=26)	5 (19%)	4 (15%)	0	1 (4%)	25 (96%)	22 (85%)	13 (50%)	6 (23%)
Att-suicide (n=13)	3 (23%)	3 (23%)	0	0	13 (100%)	11 (85%)	7 (54%)	1 (8%)
Threatened suicide (n=13)	2 (15%)	1 (8%)	0	1 (8%)	12 (92%)	11 (85%)	6 (46%)	5 (38%)
Total Suicide+ Non-fatal (n=77)	24 (32%)	11 (14%)	7 (9%)	4 (5%)	75 (97%)	69 (90%)	33 (43%)	17 (22%)

Table 5: Summary of motives of suicidal behaviour

	Internal motives	External motives	Internal + external
Suicide (n=54)	4 (6%)	35 (67%)	14 (27%)
Non-fatal (n=26)	1 (4%)	21 (81%)	4 (15%)
Total	5 (5%)	56 (71%)	19 (23%)

Table 36: Outcome of interventions according to suicide method

	<b><u>Suicide</u></b> <b><u>(n = 8, 36%)</u></b>	<b><u>Prevented suicide</u></b> <b><u>(n = 14, 64%)</u></b>	<b><u>Total (N = 22)</u></b>
<b><u>Firearms and explosives</u></b>	<u>4 (67%)</u>	<u>2 (33%)</u>	<u>6</u>
<b><u>Jump from height</u></b>	<u>4 (50%)</u>	<u>4 (50%)</u>	<u>8</u>
<b><u>Self-poisoning</u></b>	<u>0</u>	<u>2 (100%)</u>	<u>2</u>
<b><u>Hanging</u></b>	<u>0</u>	<u>2 (100%)</u>	<u>2</u>
<b><u>Self-cutting</u></b>	<u>0</u>	<u>2 (100%)</u>	<u>2</u>
<b><u>Drowning</u></b>	<u>0</u>	<u>2 (100%)</u>	<u>2</u>

	<b>Fire weapons</b>	<b>Jump from height</b>	<b>Self- poison- ing</b>	<b>Hang- ing</b>	<b>Self- cutting</b>	<b>Drow- ning</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Suicide</b>	4 (67%)	4 (50%)	0	0	0	0	8 (36%)
<b>Prevented suicide</b>	2 (33%)	4 (50%)	2 (100%)	2 (100%)	2 (100%)	2 (100%)	14 (64%)
<b>Total</b>	6 (100%)	8 (100%)	2	2	2	2	22 (100%)

Table 47: Characters bereaved by suicide ( $n = 20$ )

<b>Character</b>	<b>Relationship: The deceased was a ...</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Character suicide</b>
<b>Husband*</b>	Spouse	5	2
<b>Son</b>	Father	3	1
<b>Son</b>	Mother	1	1
<b>Son</b>	Mother + father	1	1
<b>Father</b>	Daughter	2	1
<b>Daughter</b>	Mother	2	0
<b>Daughter</b>	Father	2	0
<b>Brother</b>	Brother	2	1
<b>Sister</b>	Half sister	1	0
<b>Female romantic partner</b>	Male romantic partner	1	0

\* One husband lost spouse by suicide and children in accident