

# The life and death COVID-19 curve no one is talking about

*Laura Armstrong*

As Canada works to flatten the [coronavirus](#) curve, the combination of anxiety, economic insecurity and isolation has mental health experts concerned that suicide rates in the country could be headed in the opposite direction.

A recent study co-authored by University of Toronto professor of psychiatry Roger McIntyre, the head of the University Health Network's Mood Disorders Pharmacology Unit for more than two decades, projected suicides as a consequence of the impact of COVID-19 on unemployment alone could lead to an increase of 27.7 per cent to Canada's annual average of deaths by suicide — about 4,000 per year — in both 2020 and 2021.

The study predicted three scenarios, with no mitigation, over the two-year period.

- Minimal increases in unemployment rates between 2019 and 2021 would cause 4,127 suicides in 2020 and 4,143 in 2021, slight increases compared to the 2018 rate of 3,811, according to Statistics Canada.
- Moderate increase in unemployment rates to between 7 and 7.5 per cent — should the pandemic be contained and lockdown measure be lifted during the late half of 2020 — would see a 5.5 per cent increase in suicides per year, for a total of 418 excess suicides between 2020 and 2021.
- Extreme increase in projected unemployment rate, about 15 per cent, would result in 2,114 suicides beyond what's expected in 2020 and 2021, representing that 27.7% increase in suicides per year.

Canada's official unemployment rate currently sits at 13.7 per cent. That number is "knocking on the door of extreme," said McIntyre, and projects to an increase of about 750 suicides each this year and next.

"I started thinking the objective is not to flatten the curve," McIntyre said when asked why he engaged in the study. "The objective is to flatten the curve and prevent the curve of suicide and mental illness. The World Health Organization defines health as physical and mental and social well-being, so how does it add up that you can protect someone's physical health by destroying their mental health? No one's going to say that's a good outcome."

The study's findings ring true based on research following previous pandemics, epidemics and economic shocks, like the 2008 financial crisis, the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s and even the great depression, said McIntyre. Generally, for every one per cent increase in unemployment in the wake of those crises, there was a commensurate one per cent increase in suicide, he said.

"Economy is part of your health," McIntyre said. "The question is not one or the