

Suicide is a significant cause of death in many EU member states, with approximately 60 000 such deaths in 2011. Suicide rates vary widely across European countries, with the lowest rates in southern European countries – Cyprus, Greece, Malta, Italy and Spain – as well as in the United Kingdom, and the highest rates in Lithuania, Hungary, Slovenia and Latvia (where suicide rates are more than 50% higher than the EU average). There is an eight-fold difference between Lithuania and Cyprus, the countries with the highest and lowest death rates. The high suicide rates in Lithuania have been associated with a range of factors, including rapid socioeconomic transition, increasing psychological and social insecurity, and the absence of a national suicide prevention strategy.

Death rates from suicide are around four times greater for men than for women across the European Union (Figure 1.7.1). The gender gap is narrower for attempted suicides, reflecting the fact that women tend to use less fatal methods than men. Suicide risk also generally increases with age.

Between 2000 and 2011, suicide rates have decreased by 20% across European countries, with pronounced declines of over 35% in some countries such as Estonia and Latvia, although suicide rates in these two countries remain above the EU average (Figure 1.7.2). On the other hand, death rates from suicides have increased in a few countries. In Portugal, suicide rates increased mainly between 2000 and 2002, and have remained fairly stable since then.

Previous studies have shown a strong link between adverse economic conditions, higher levels of stress, anxiety and depression, and higher levels of suicide (e.g. Ceccherini-Nelli and Priebe, 2011; van Gool and Pearson, 2014). Suicide rates rose at the start of the economic crisis in a number of European countries, mainly among men (Chang et al., 2013), but in many countries this trend did not persist. In Greece, the absolute number of deaths due to suicides increased substantially in recent years, from 328 in 2007 to 477 in 2011 and 508 in 2012 (Hellenic Statistical Authority, 2014). This amounts to an increase of over 50% during this five-year period. Nonetheless, the suicide rate in Greece remains relatively low compared with other countries, although this can be explained at least partly by under-reporting.

The European Pact for Mental Health and Well-being, launched in 2008, recognised the prevention of depression and suicide as one of five priority areas. It called for action through improved training of mental health professionals, restricted access to potential means for suicide, measures to raise mental health awareness, measures to reduce risk factors for suicide such as excessive drinking, drug abuse and social exclusion, and provision of support mechanisms after suicide attempts and for those bereaved by suicide, such as emotional support helplines (European Commission, 2009).

Suicide rates can play an important role in signalling weaknesses of mental health systems, in particular unmet needs for care (OECD, 2014).

Definition and comparability

The World Health Organization defines suicide as an act deliberately initiated and performed by a person in the full knowledge or expectation of its fatal outcome. The number of suicides in certain countries may be under-reported because of the stigma associated with the act (for religious, cultural or other reasons). The comparability of suicide data between countries is also affected by a number of reporting criteria, including how a person's intention of killing themselves is ascertained, who is responsible for completing the death certificate, whether a forensic investigation is carried out, and the provisions for confidentiality of the cause of death. Caution is required therefore in interpreting variations across countries.

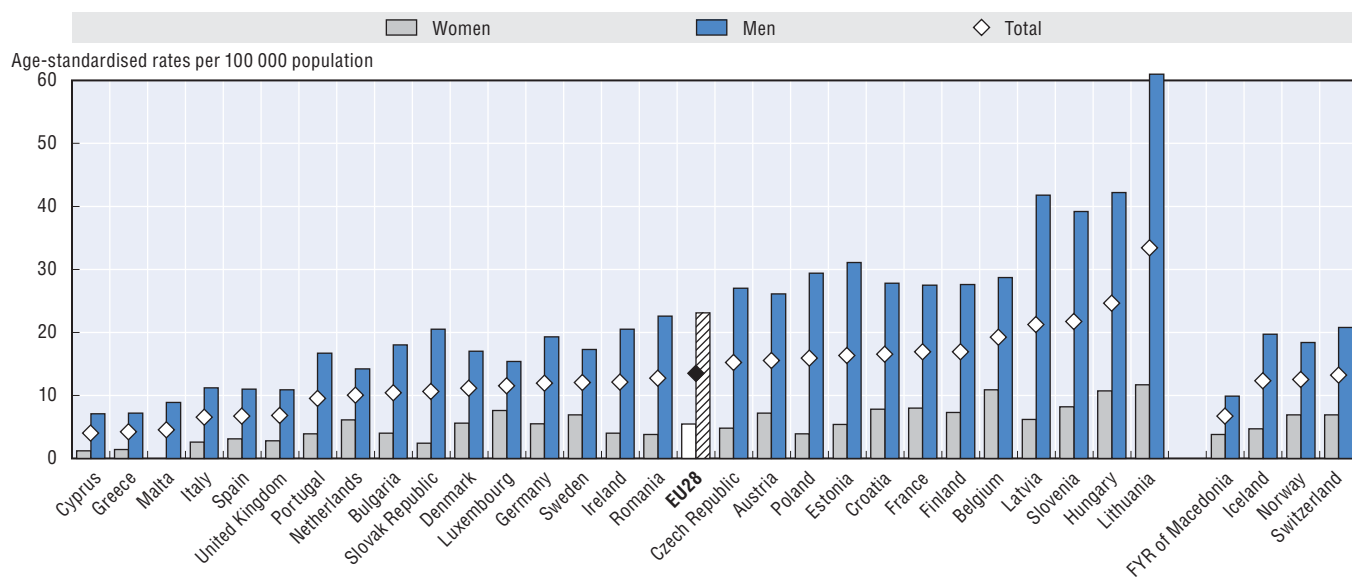
Mortality rates have been age-standardised to the revised European standard population adopted by Eurostat in 2012, to remove variations arising from differences in age structures across countries and over time. The change in the population structure in this edition of *Health at a Glance Europe* compared with previous editions has led to a general increase in the standardised rates for all countries.

Deaths from suicide relate to ICD-10 codes X60-X84 and Y870.

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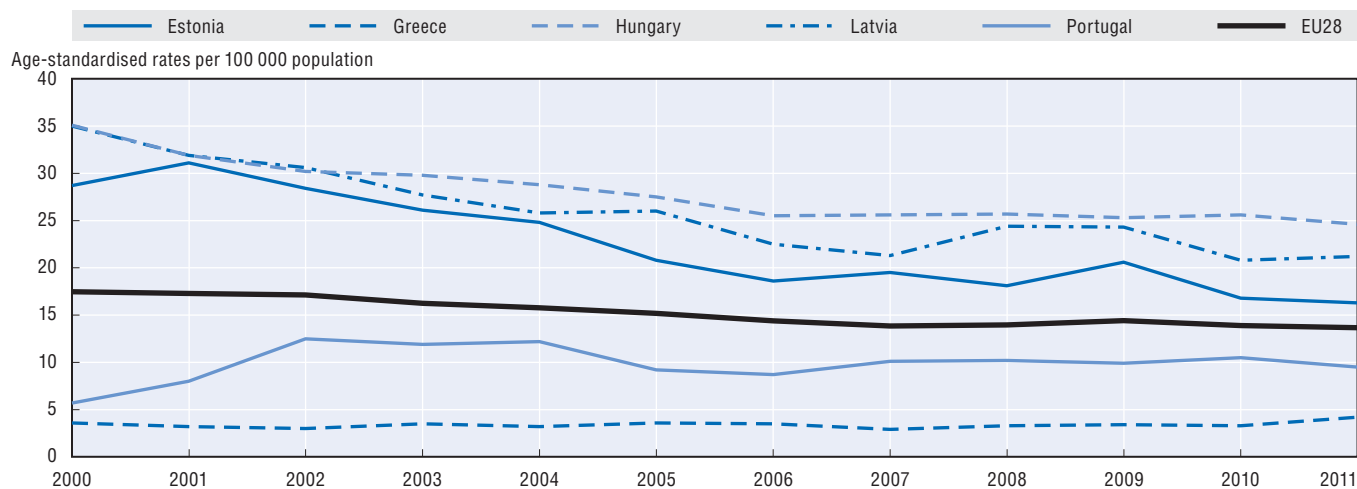
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1.7.1. Suicide mortality rates, 2011



Source: Eurostat Statistics Database.

1.7.2. Trends in suicide rates, selected European countries, 2000-11



Source: Eurostat Statistics Database.

StatLink <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/888933155405>



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