

This week, ONS releases separate reports on the numbers of suicides and of alcohol-related deaths which were registered in the UK in 2012.

The Royal Statistical Society wishes to draw to the attention of commentators that only around 60% of the suicides that were registered in 2012 in England and Wales will actually have occurred in 2012, the other two-fifths will have occurred in preceding years. The ONS is to be congratulated that the title for their release on suicides is '2012 registrations' making the issue of registration-year clearer, and that Key Findings also flag up that the extent of registration-delay is substantial outside of Scotland. These welcome improvements do not resolve the underlying issue, which bedevils ONS, the public health, and record-linkage studies - that England and Wales need legislation to end the late registration of deaths.

Calendar-year trends in suicides in England and Wales are seriously confounded by the registration-delays for inquest-verdicts on suicides. In Scotland, by contrast, all deaths must be registered within 8 days of death having been ascertained and so, for suicides in Scotland, registration-year and year-of-death are, in effect, the same. The Royal Statistical Society is calling for urgent, comparable legislation to ensure that all deaths in England and Wales are registered within 8 days of death - irrespective of whether cause-of-death has yet been established.

The Royal Statistical Society also urges that the ONS should cease the potentially-misleading practice of combining Scottish suicides by death-year with suicides by registration-year for England, Wales and Northern Ireland. In public health terms, the only sensible basis for pooling UK's data on suicides is by the year-of-occurrence of suicides. Commentators rightly expect reporting by year-of-occurrence, and hence tend to overlook the ONS's cautionary caveats (now further strengthened) on registration-year. The answer is to analyse on the proper scale - that which common-sense commends and public health requires.

Registration-delays are less severe for alcohol-related deaths, only one in 20 being subject to a registration delay of more than six months in England and Wales. However, no death in the UK should be subject to more than minimal delay in registration of fact-of-death.

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