

Suicide and the media

What we know and what we don't know

Jane Pirkis

September 2008

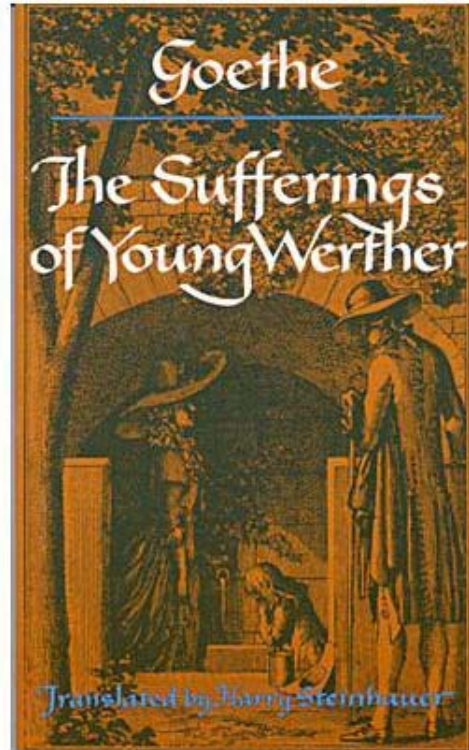


What we know and what we don't know about ...

- The relationship between media reporting of suicide and actual suicidal behaviour
- The development, dissemination and impact of resources on media reporting of suicide

The relationship between media reporting of suicide and actual suicidal behaviour

The Werther effect



Sources of evidence

- At least 100 studies have been conducted internationally examining the relationship between media reporting of suicide and actual suicidal behaviour

Phillips (1974)

- Examined number of US suicides in months in which a front-page suicide article appeared in the *New York Times* between 1947 and 1968, and compared this with number in corresponding months in which no such article appeared (i.e., observed vs expected)
- Found statistically significant increase in the observed number after 26 (out of 33) front-page articles
- The more days a story appeared on the front page, the greater the rise in suicides after that story

Hassan (1995)

- Examined Australian national suicide rates before and after 'high impact' suicide stories published in the *Age* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* between 1981 and 1990
- Found that the national daily average suicide rate increased after such stories for males but not for females

Yip et al (2008)

- Used interrupted time series analysis to determine whether reporting of entertainment celebrity suicides in Hong Kong, Taiwan and South Korea led to increases in suicide rates
- Found 25% increase in the risk of suicide in the four weeks following report, 49% increase among people in the same age-sex group as the celebrity, and 63% increase in suicides by the same method as that chosen by the celebrity
- Effect greatest in first week; attenuated by the fourth week

Etzersdorfer et al (2001, 2004)

- Examined changes in Austrian suicides in the 3 weeks prior to and 3 weeks following reporting of a celebrity suicide by gunshot in the country's major tabloid in 1990
- Found significant increase in firearm suicides between the two periods, which was not apparent in any other year
- Increases were highest in regions with widest distribution of the tabloid

Schmidtke and Hafner (1988)

- Used ABABA design to examine effects of a 6-episode series depicting the railway suicide of a 19yo student, shown in Germany 1981 and 1982
- Found that after each screening there was a significant increase in suicides by the same method, with the effect lasting at least 70 days and being most marked for 15-19yo males

Hawton et al (1999)

- Used interrupted time series analysis and questionnaire data to determine whether depiction of a paracetamol overdose in *Casualty* led to increases in emergency department presentations for deliberate self poisoning
- Found that presentations for deliberate self-poisoning increased by 17% in the week after the broadcast
- 32 patients who presented during this week were interviewed and had seen the episode – 20% said that it had influenced their decision to take an overdose and 17% said it had influenced their choice of drug

Coverage of selected studies

	Year	Country	Media type	Media focus	Outcome of interest	Level of data analysis
Phillips	1974	United States	Newspaper	News	Completed suicide	Aggregate
Hassan	1995	Australia	Newspaper	News	Completed suicide	Aggregate
Yip et al	2008	Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea	Newspaper	News	Completed suicide	Aggregate
Etzersdorfer et al	2001, 2004	Austria	Newspaper	News	Completed suicide	Aggregate
Schmidtke and Hafner	1988	Germany	Television	Entertainment	Completed suicide	Aggregate
Hawton et al	1999	United Kingdom	Television	Entertainment	Attempted suicide	Aggregate, individual

A causal relationship?

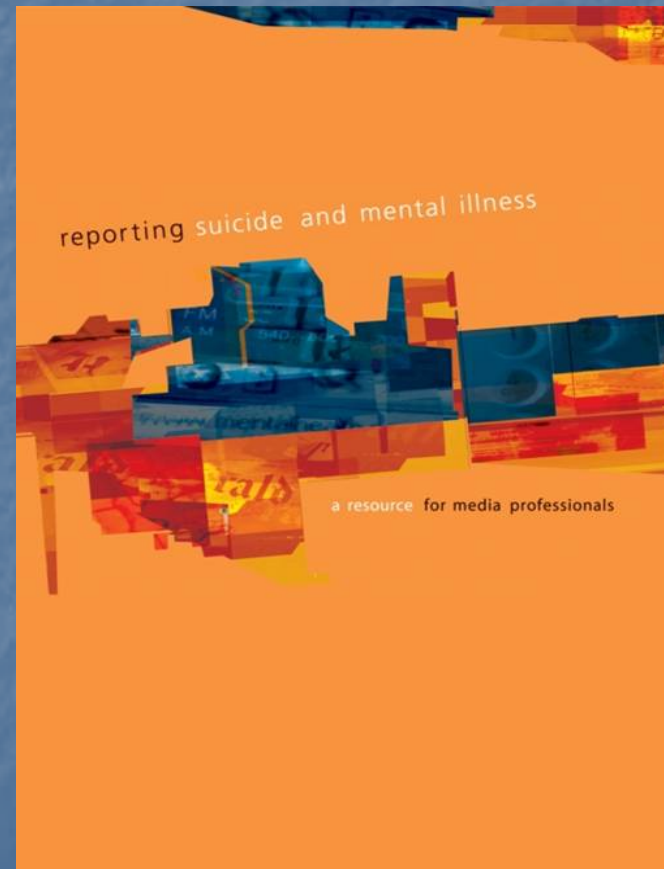
- **Consistency:** The association between media coverage of suicide and an increase in actual suicides is consistently observed, regardless of study design and population sampled
- **Strength:** The association is statistically significant, and there may be evidence of a dose-response effect such that the greater the exposure to the media coverage of suicide, the greater the increase in suicide rates
- **Temporality:** The association makes sense in chronological terms, in that the exposure variable (media coverage of suicide) occurs before the outcome variable (actual suicides)
- **Specificity:** The association is clear, such that media exposure is a consistent risk factor for suicide
- **Coherence:** The association is in line with known theories concerning suicide

Conclusions about the Werther effect

- The body of evidence points to a causal relationship (at least in the case of news media)
- Factors associated with this relationship include:
 - Timing
 - Amount and prominence of coverage
 - Model/observer relationship
 - Method

The development, dissemination
and impact of resources on
media reporting of suicide

Australia's resources



International resources have similar
content ...



DoHA

MoH

CDC

WHO

Samaritans

Mediawise Trust

Avoid sensationalising or glamorising suicide, or giving it undue prominence

Avoid providing specific detail about the suicide

Recognise the importance of role models

Take particular care in special situations

Take the opportunity to educate the public

Provide help/support to vulnerable readers/viewers

Consider the aftermath of suicide

Acknowledge that journalists are vulnerable too

... but differ in terms of the way they have been developed and disseminated

- e.g., in the extent to which media professionals, suicide and mental health experts, and consumer organisations have been involved in these processes

Mindframe Media and Mental Health Project

- Conducted by the Hunter Institute of Mental Health
- Aims: To support media organisations in their understanding and use of the resources
- Strategies:
 - face-to-face briefings (full briefings and drop-in sessions)
 - offering ad hoc advice
 - distributing hard and soft copies of the resources and supporting materials
 - working with peak media organisations to incorporate aspects of the resources into codes of practice and editorial policies
 - providing ongoing follow-up and promotion

Evaluation of media resources

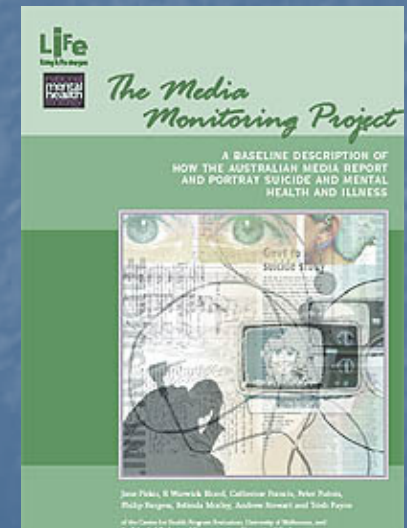
- *'There has been little evaluation of the extent to which [resources] have been embraced by and/or changed the practices of journalists, and still less evaluation of their influence on rates of completed and attempted suicide'* (Institute of Medicine, 2002)

Evaluation of media resources

- Pre- and post- study in Switzerland (Michel et al, 2000)
 - Demonstrated that the introduction of resources led to less sensational and higher quality reporting
- Pre- and post- study in Austria (Etzersdorfer et al, 1992; Sonneck et al, 1994; Etzersdorfer and Sonneck, 1998; Niederkrontenthaler and Sonneck, 2007)
 - Showed that the introduction of media resources regarding reporting of suicides on the Vienna subway led to a reduction in the reporting of these suicides and, in turn, a decrease in the rate of subway suicides and in the overall suicide rate
 - The positive impact was more pronounced in regions with strong media collaboration and largely maintained over time

The Media Monitoring Project

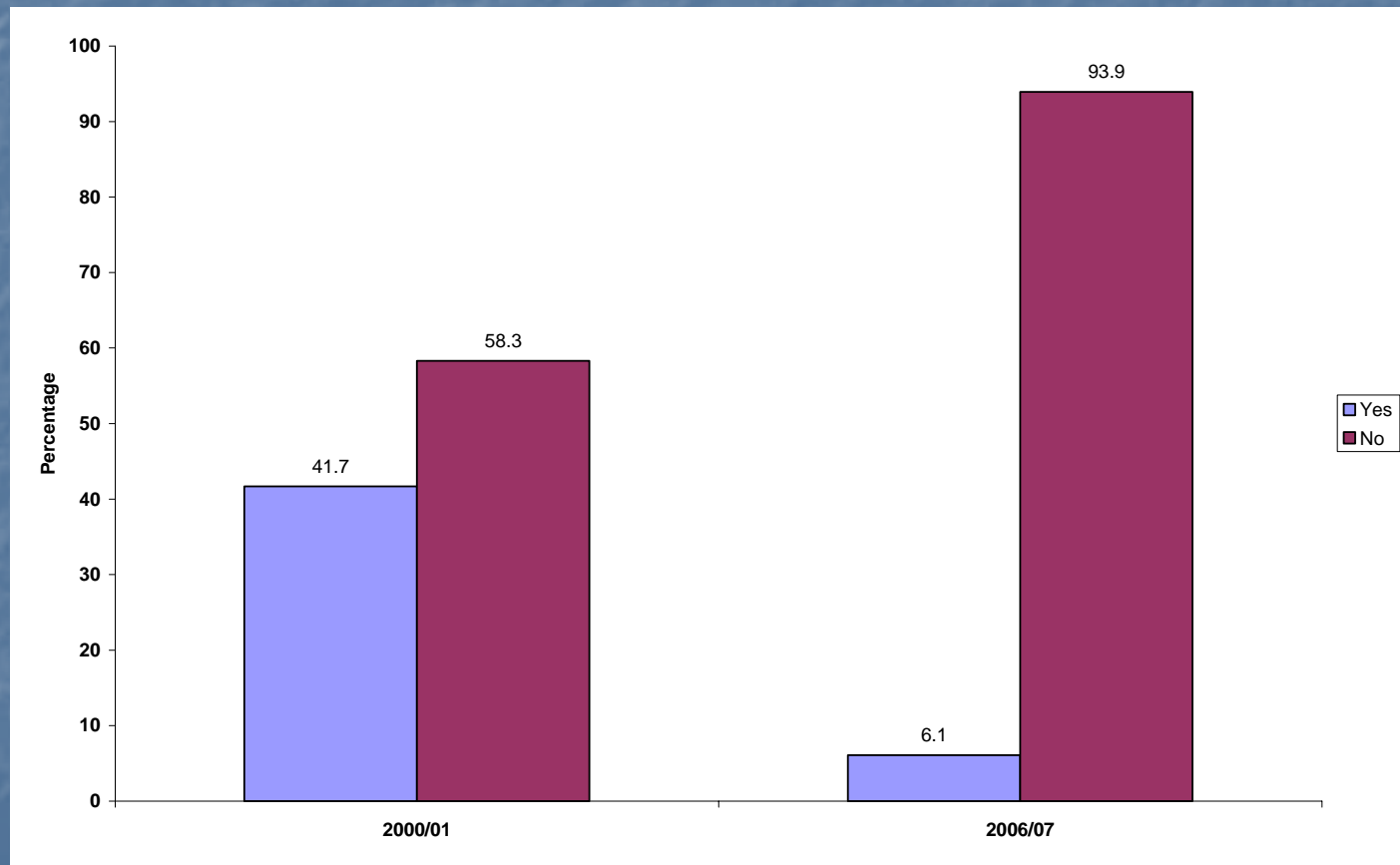
- Australian newspaper, television and radio items on suicide retrieved over two 12-month periods - 2000/01 and 2006/07
- Analysis of items examining:
 - Extent
 - Nature
 - Quality



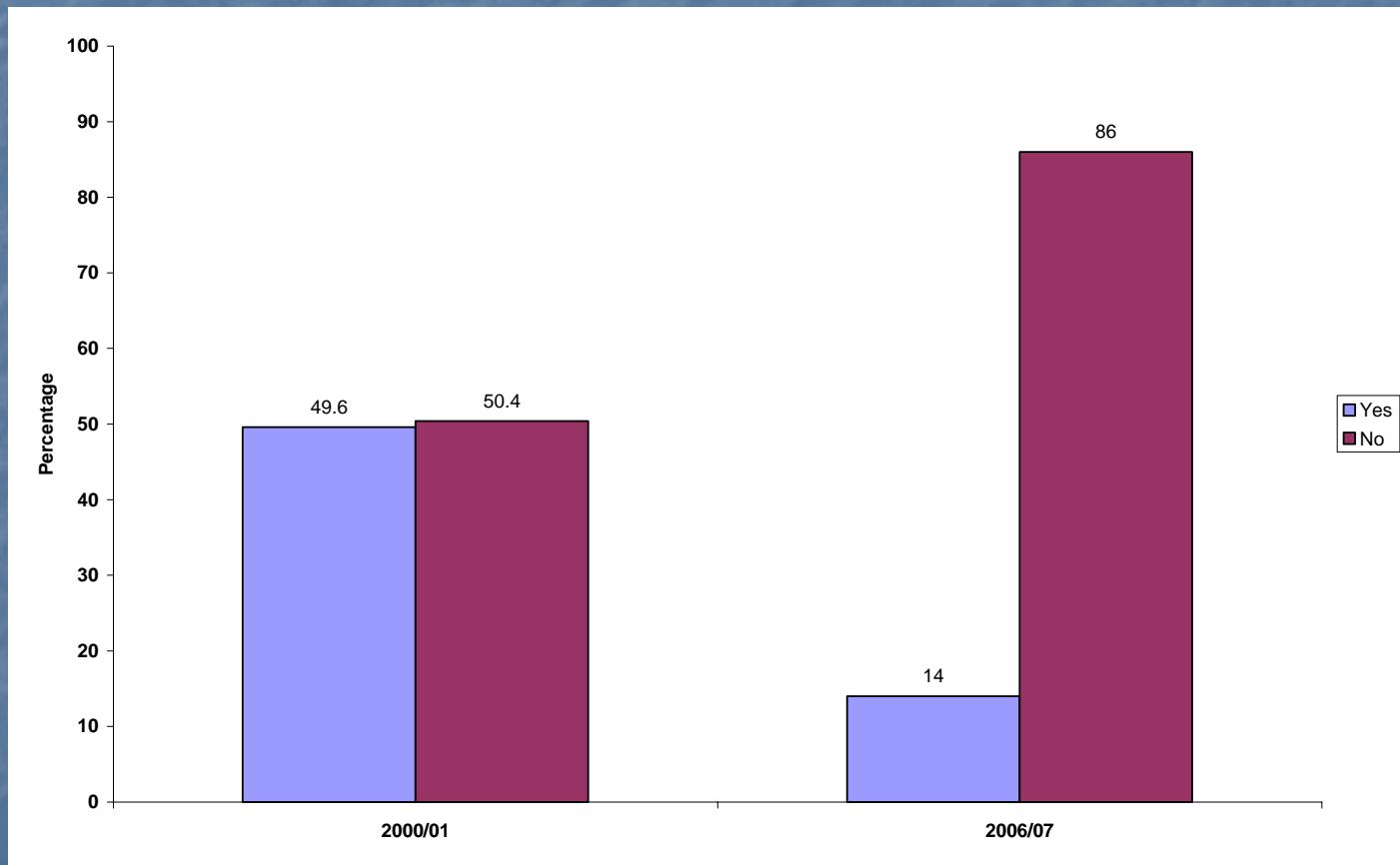
Extent and nature of reporting

- Almost a two-fold increase in reporting: 4,813 items retrieved in 2000/01 and 8,363 in 2006/07
- The nature of media reporting showed some variability, with an increased emphasis on items about individuals' experiences and a reduced emphasis on policy and program initiatives

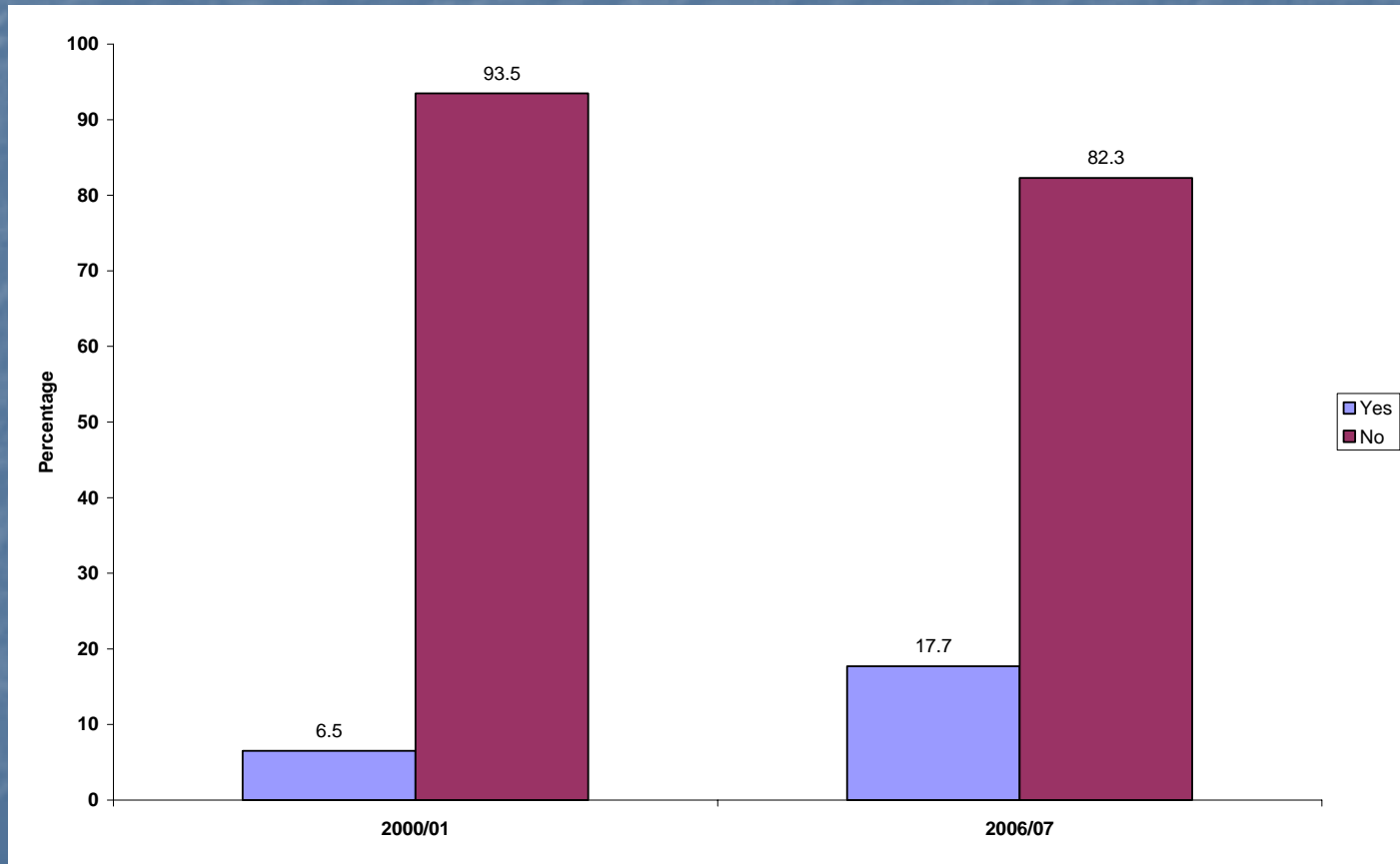
Does the item have any examples of inappropriate language? (2000/01 n=415; 2006/07 n=347)



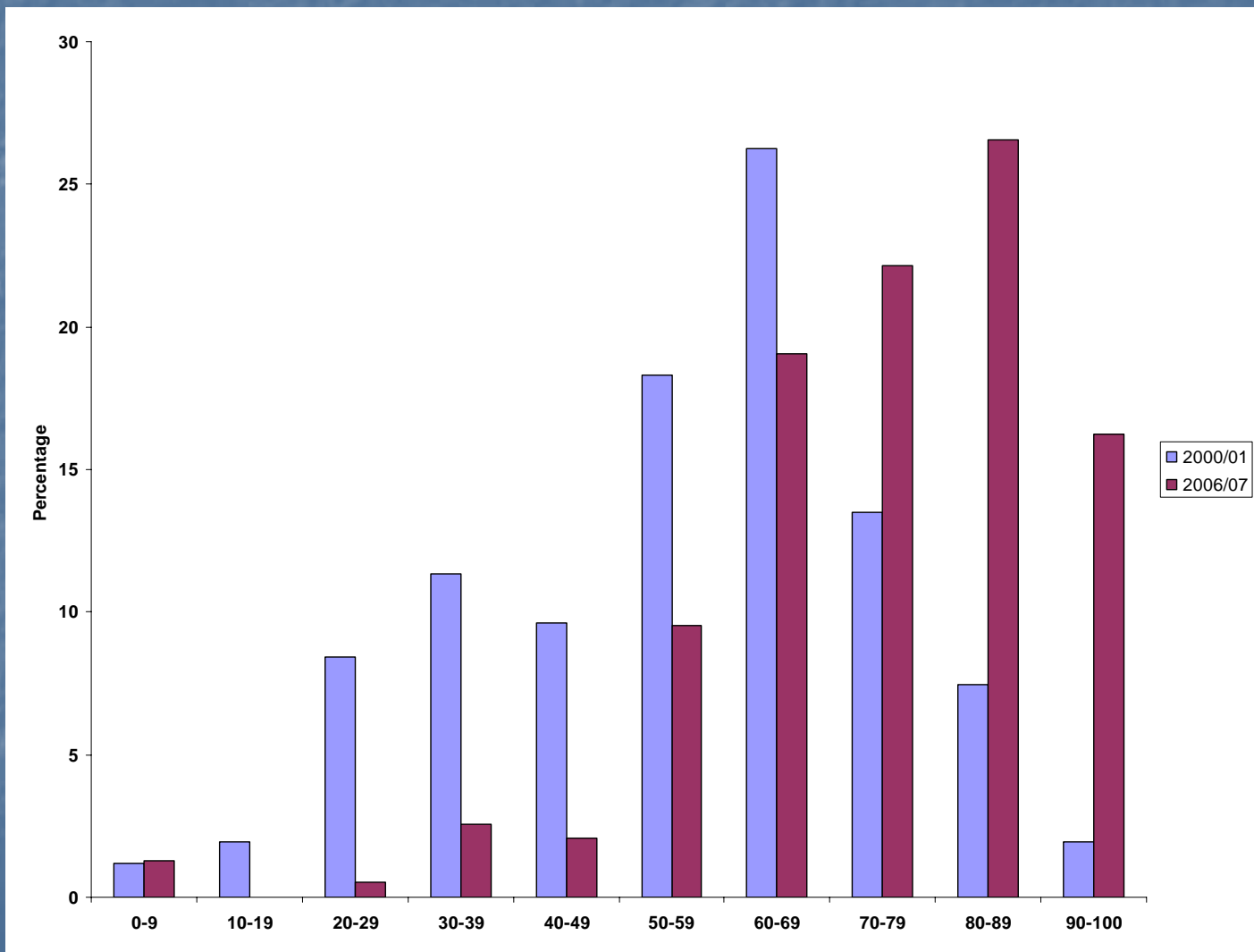
Is there a detailed discussion of the method used? (2000/01 n=232; 2006/07 n=264)



Does the item provide information on help services? (2000/01 n=415; 2006/07 n=334)



Distribution of total quality scores (2000/01 n=415; 2006/07 n=388)



Summary and conclusions

What we know

- There is a clear relationship between media reporting of suicide and actual suicidal behaviour
- Many countries have developed resources on media reporting of suicide – these are similar in content but vary in the way they have been developed and disseminated
- Reporting of suicide in the Australian media has improved in quality since the introduction of *Reporting Suicide and Mental Illness*

What we don't know

- Sufficient about journalists' experiences with reporting suicide and using media resources
- Sufficient about how members of the public interpret media information about suicide
- Sufficient about the nature of the impact media resources might have on journalists' reporting practices and rates of completed and attempted suicide