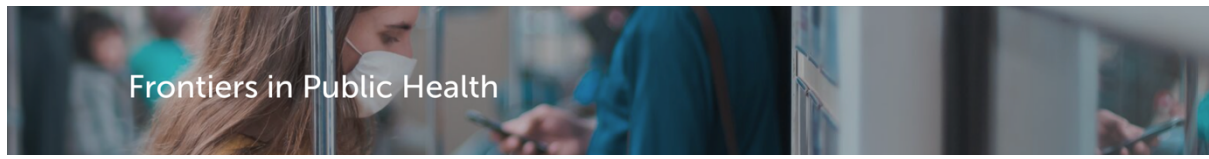


Suicide, the music industry, and a call to action

Dr. George Musgrave and Dr. Dorian A Lamis



*Dr George Musgrave is both a musician and an academic, with first-hand experience of the music industry's challenges. In this guest editorial, inspired by their moving and urgent new article in *Frontiers in Public Health*, he and co-author Dr Dorian Lamis, who is a clinical psychologist and suicide prevention expert, turn the spotlight on the toll of death by suicide in the music industry, and call for immediate action to support vulnerable artists.*

*Nirvana's Kurt Cobain, Linkin Park's Chester Bennington, Joy Division's Ian Curtis, country music singer Mindy McCready, Keith Flint of *The Prodigy*, Electronic Dance Music (EDM) DJ Avicii, K Pop stars Goo Hara, Sulli and Moonbin, and many more. This long and heartbreakingly incomplete list of musicians that have died by suicide represents not only tragedies, but cultural reminders of a devastating apparent connection between artists, mental health challenges, and early mortality.*

New data published today in *Frontiers in Public Health* documents the prevalence of suicide among musicians and warrants serious concern. Occupational mortality data from the Office for National Statistics in England (2011-2015) demonstrates that 'musicians, actors, and entertainers' rank among the five occupational groups with highest suicide mortality. Within the occupational classification of 'culture, media, and sport' occupations, these professionals exhibited the highest risk, with male suicide rates exceeding the population average by 20% and female rates surpassing it by 69%. Comparable patterns emerge in United States epidemiological data. While the 2022 age-adjusted suicide mortality rate was 14.2 per 100,000 in the general population, male musicians, singers, and related workers demonstrated the third-highest occupational suicide rate at 138.7 per 100,000, preceded only by logging workers (161.1 per 100,000) and agricultural and food scientists (173.1 per 100,000). Among females, the occupational category 'Arts, Design, Entertainment, Sports and Media', which encompasses musicians, recorded the highest suicide mortality rate across *all* occupational groups in 2012, 2015, and 2021. This phenomenon also extends beyond Anglo-American contexts. Although occupational data specific to musicians and suicide mortality in South Korea remains limited, the confluence of highly publicized deaths among K-Pop performers and research examining suicide risk associated with socially-prescribed perfectionism suggests that musicians globally may constitute a vulnerable population requiring targeted intervention strategies.

Beyond the 'tortured artist' myth

Historical discourse surrounding musician suicide has often perpetuated problematic narratives: either normalizing these deaths as inevitable or mythologizing them within a romanticized framework of artistic suffering. There has been, at times, a deeply uncomfortable sensationalizing of suicide in the context of a music industry which is a storytelling, myth-making industry, and a story which can be traced all the way back to Plato is that artists are troubled, brooding, dark, mysterious, mad, and by extension, in extremis, perhaps, suicidal.

However, contemporary research on suicide risk factors reveals a more nuanced etiology. Multiple occupational and psychosocial stressors characteristic of music careers warrant examination, including exploitative industry practices, prevalent substance use disorders, financial instability, heightened social media exposure, performance-related anxiety, internal achievement pressure, and irregular sleep patterns. Empirical evidence suggests that, beyond individual predisposition, these environmental and cultural factors significantly impact musicians' psychological well-being. Given our understanding of suicide risk factors, all of us who love and care about music should confront challenging questions about how we can change the *culture* of cultural professions. This necessitates moving beyond reductive narratives of artistic suffering toward evidence-based interventions that address systemic occupational stressors.

Therefore, in *Frontiers in Public Health* we have together outlined an approach to suicide prevention in the music industry which is supported by empirical evidence. Several exemplary organizations in the music industry are already doing important, life-saving work – from the Man Down Programme in the United Kingdom, to Backline in the United States, and Support Act in Australia – and yet we currently lack peer-reviewed work in this at-risk group. We have therefore offered what we hope is a comprehensive and multifaceted approach encompassing both individual and systemic preventative strategies to reduce the risk of suicide in this high-risk group.

A support plan for all musicians

In addressing suicide prevention among musicians, we draw on a seven-part approach provided by the Zero Suicide Framework, a systems approach to suicide prevention formulated following recommendations made by the National Alliance for Suicide Prevention. Adapting this framework in the music industry would involve music industry *leaders* facilitating conversations at the highest level about suicide prevention and de-stigmatizing suicide. Alongside this, *training* in the form of suicide gatekeeper training programs and empowering those in musicians' wider network (managers, friends, family) to have difficult conversations about suicide, and *identifying* musician-specific risk factors and warning signs are all essential. Additionally, we should *engage* those at risk of suicide (and their networks) with interventions which have demonstrated effectiveness in other populations, such as the Columbia Suicide Severity Rating Scale Screen Version, Safety Planning Intervention, and Counselling on Access to Lethal Means, as well as *treat* using existing interventions such as Dialectical Behavior Therapy, Collaborative Assessment and Management of Suicidality, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Suicide Prevention. For musicians on tour, *transitions* with warm hand-offs through providers alongside reminders and bridge appointments are important to maintain continuity of care. Finally, we must continually *improve* through data-driven research to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions in this understudied occupational group.

Through our collaboration, we hope together to have presented one of the first papers of its kind to synthesize and critically review the small body of emerging evidence in this field, as well as make suggestions to aid in suicide prevention among an at-risk, vulnerable population. Just as musicians enrich society through their artistic contributions, there exists a collective responsibility to safeguard their psychological well-being as music-makers. This imperative necessitates a collaborative approach between researchers, industry leaders, and mental health professionals to develop, implement, and evaluate effective prevention strategies.