

Essay
Suicide in London in the 17th Century

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Abstract: It is rare to find rates of suicide from previous centuries. Data from a book published in 1662 enabled suicide rates by hanging to be calculated for London, England in the mid-1660s. The estimated suicide rate by hanging was in the range of 2.41 per 100,000 per year to 3.32.

Keywords: suicide rate; London; hanging

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David Sisler (davidsisler.com) drew my attention to a book published in 1662 by John Gaunt entitled *Natural and political observations mentioned in a following index, and made upon the Bills of Mortality*. In this book, Gaunt provided numbers for causes of death in the city of London. In a 20-year period beginning in 1629, Gaunt noted 229,250 deaths (Anon, 2009). Gaunt's list of causes of deaths did not, of course, match modern classifications, but he did note that 222 persons hanged themselves, while 86 were murdered during this period (Anon, 2009). However, 829 people died from drowning, some of whom may have been suicides, while 14 were poisoned, 26 smothered and 7 shot, possible murders or suicides too.

Gaunt estimated the population of London to be 460,000, while Emsley, Hitchcock and Shoemaker (2019) estimate the population in the mid-1670s as 500,000. Using Gaunt's population estimate, and assuming that the period was 20 years (Anon [2009] does not specifically state which years are being referred to), then the estimated suicide rate by hanging in London during this period in the mid-1660s is 2.41 per 100,000 per year and the estimated murder rate is 0.93.

A listing of the suicides by hanging is from a reprint of a page from Gaunt's book ("https://www.jstor.org/stable/25487673?seq=1" \ | "page_scan_tab_contents" \t "_blank") is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Suicides by hanging (1647-1660).

Year	n
1647	11
1648	10
1649	13
1650	14
1651	9
1652	14
1653	15
1654	9
1655	14
1656	16
1657	24
1658	18
1659	11
1660	36
<i>Total</i>	<i>214</i>

The estimated suicide rate by hanging in London during this 14-year period in the mid-1660s is 3.32 per 100,000 per year¹.

The table provided by Jstor is not completely clear, but suicides by hanging are given for earlier years as

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¹ The Great Plague was in 1665 and, in that year, there were 97,306 burials of which 68,598 were deaths from plague (Anon, 2009).

presented in Table 2. The yearly average number of suicides by hanging rose from 6.9 per year in 1629-1636 to 14.9 per year in 1651-1658, more than doubling.

Sincere there were almost certainly suicides by other methods, a suicide rate of either 2.41 or 3.32 is an underestimate, but the true suicide rate was probably in the single digits, much as the (more accurate) suicide rate is in modern times in England and Wales when the age-standardized suicide rate for England and Wales in 2016 was 9.3 (<http://www.ons.gov.uk>).

Table 2. Suicides by hanging (1629-1636).

Year	n
1629	8
1630	8
1631	6
1632	15
1633	0
1634	3
1635	8
1636	7

References

- Anon. (2009). John Gaunt on cases of death in the city of London. *Population & Development Review*, 35(2), 417-422.
- Emsley, C., Hitchcock, T., & Shoemaker, R. (2019). London history – a population history of London. *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, May 8. (www.oldbaileyonline.org)