

How a Public Suicide Harms the People Who See It

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One evening last March, Nancy Bacon saw a stranger die. She had just touched down in Toronto and set off for a business meeting, chatting on her phone as she navigated the rush-hour traffic of the financial district. She was jaywalking, hurrying across a particularly busy street, when a fire extinguisher seemed to fall from the sky, smashing to the ground just a few feet away from her.

“I was actually annoyed,” she says. Her first thought was that some mischievous kid had thrown the extinguisher through a window high above. But when she lifted her gaze, Bacon’s annoyance turned to horror. What she witnessed next would haunt her for months. “I saw the guy falling,” she says. “I saw him hit the ground.”

Bacon looked on as the police arrived and attempted CPR. She noticed that the man’s shoe had come off.

A suicide can be dangerous to those closest to the victim, leaving family and friends [vulnerable](#) to depression and self-harm. When the act is committed in public, any incidental observers are left to grapple with it, too. While studies on witnessing strangers’ suicide are scarce, a small body of research—alongside a larger body of anecdotes—has begun to show that the experience can be damaging, even traumatic.

Each year in the United States, approximately [45,000](#) people kill themselves. There’s little data on how many of these suicides occur in public view, and even less on how many people witness them when they do. One study [analyzed](#) all completed suicides in Riverside County, California, from 1998 to 2001, and estimated that around 17 percent took place in public places, like roads, railways, and fields. Another study, from 1994, [reviewed](#) forensic reports of 1,183 suicides among people affiliated with the U.S. Air Force and found that 4 percent were committed in the presence of at least one other person.