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NHS accused of undercounting number of homicides by mental health patients

Families of victims who died at the hands of patients under the care of the public service have asked for transparency after fewer deaths were reported

[Fiona Hamilton](#)

, Chief Reporter

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Mental health

NHS

Depression



The family of Barnaby Webber last year during a memorial event at the University of Nottingham to mark the first anniversary of Valdo Calocane killing three people

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The NHS and government have been accused of undercounting the number of mental health homicides by campaigners who call for “honesty and transparency” over how many patients commit violence.

Over four years there were 115 fewer homicides by mental health patients recorded in official statistics compared with information released under the Freedom of Information Act, it has emerged.

The FOI request, collected by Hundred Families, a charity that supports bereaved families, asked NHS England for the number of patient homicides — which refers to both manslaughter and murder — that had been reported to them, by region, for each of the years between 2018 and 2023.

It found a total of 442 homicides, a figure that is still probably an underestimate because it counted perpetrators, rather than victims, so did not account for cases with multiple fatalities or cases where the offender was just under the care of their GP. The request also only related to England rather than the rest of the UK.

Julian Hendy, of Hundred Families, said: “There simply cannot be accountability without transparency. How is the mental health system supposed to learn lessons from these terrible events, and try and prevent future homicides, if they don’t face up to the scale of the issue and try to understand it?”



Julian Hendy

He said he was also aware through FOI requests of mental health trusts not reporting all suspected patient homicides to NHS England.

Even so, the FOI statistics eclipsed the number of mental health homicides reported in official statistics.

The National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Safety in Mental Health (NCISH), is generally considered the most comprehensive source because the Office for National Statistics does not break down homicide into perpetrator

categories. NCISH is based at the University of Manchester and is funded by the NHS and other government departments.

It collects data for the whole of the UK and reported 55 mental health homicides committed by mental health patients in 2018, compared with the 78 revealed in Hendy's FOI to NHS England.

The following year NCISH reported 59 homicides compared with the 74 disclosed in the FOI, while in 2020 it reported 50 homicides compared with the FOI's 86 — an anomaly of three dozen.

In 2022 the NHS England FOI reported 84 homicides whereas NCISH published 43.

NCISH has specific parameters that differ to those in the FOI, as its figures only included patients convicted of a homicide offence, not those accused. However Hendy said it was incumbent upon the NHS to publish statistics with parameters that reflected the full position.

The NHS has faced repeated criticism over a [lack of transparency](#) over mental health killings in the wake of the Nottingham fatal stabbings in 2023 where a paranoid schizophrenic killed university students Barnaby Webber and Grace O'Malley-Kumar, both 19, and caretaker Ian Coates, 65.



Ian Coates, Barnaby Webber and Grace O'Malley-Kumar were killed in 2023

PA

NHS England initially tried to [suppress a report](#) which detailed failings in the treatment of the killer Valdo Calocane, although it was published in full after The Times revealed its plans. NHS officials have blocked the families of other victims of mental health homicides, citing data protection and patient confidentiality issues.

NCISH said that about one third of homicide suspects overall were not convicted. It said it was “not aware of any figures suggesting that the number of proceedings not initiated or concluded without conviction are different in mental health patients”.

Hendy questioned how NCISH could equate general homicide outcomes to mental health homicides, given the nature of the latter category of offending. Even accounting for offenders who were totally unfit to plead or found not guilty by reason of insanity, which is extremely rare, “the majority of perpetrators will be found guilty of murder or manslaughter”.

NCISH said it was a “complex and sensitive area of research. A reliable and valid definition of homicide is essential for inclusion and conviction provides this. It

would be challengeable, including on ethical grounds, if we were to include patients acquitted or never charged.”

Because NCISH publishes data based on homicide convictions, it does not include perpetrators who have gone on to commit suicide. They include Emma Borowy, 32, who killed 74-year-old Roger Leadbeater as he walked his dog in a park in Sheffield in 2023, and Chris Stone-Houghton, 66, who killed his wife Ruth, 60, in a psychotic episode before taking his own life.

- **[How Anthony Esan flew under the radar before trying to kill soldier](#)**

While NCISH said that separate data showed an average of just one suicide annually by mental health patients involved in homicide, Hendy said the true scale of incident was “simply not being reflected”.

The NCISH process has recently been overhauled to work closely with clinical services, including real time surveillance, to “explore different ways of interpreting the number of homicides involving people with mental illness”.

Dr Mary Docherty, national clinical director for adult mental health at NHS England, said: “Each case is a tragedy for all the families involved. NHS England has instructed every local mental health system to review the practices they have in place to ensure they are providing appropriate care to people with severe mental illness who might need intensive and assertive community care, while £150 million of capital investment has been committed to mental health infrastructure next year, including 24/7 neighbourhood mental health centres and mental health emergency departments, to improve access to round-the-clock support closer to home.

“Clear direction has also been issued by the NHS to not discharge people with a severe mental illness for missed appointments, to involve families and carers in their treatment, and ensure long-term care plans are in place, with outcomes of these reviews to be shared at local public boards.”

The Department for Health and Social Care declined to comment.

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