

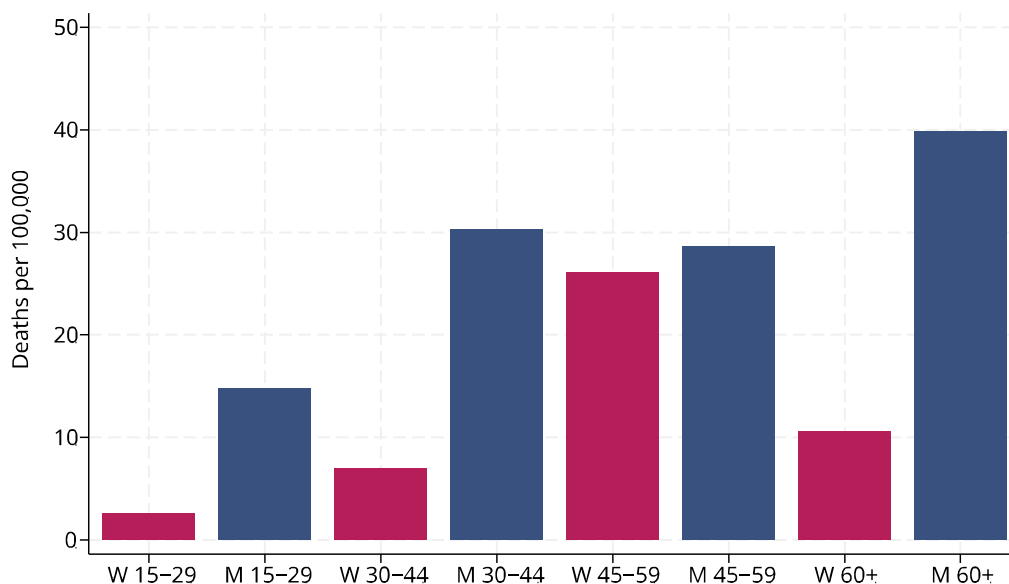


Supporting others: How prosocial behaviour can prevent deaths of despair

WORLD HAPPINESS REPORT

The latest study of STATEC's Research department investigates the protective capacity of prosocial behavior to systematically save lives. The study is released as part of the 2025 edition of the World Happiness Report, published each year on the 20th of March in occasion of the International Happiness day. Prosocial behaviour like donating, volunteering, and helping others contribute not only to individual well-being but also to the creation of societies where people are supportive of each other, cooperative, and trusting. Since the year 2000, the number of suicides, drug and alcohol abuse – collectively known as deaths of despair – have been declining in Luxembourg, as well as in most other countries worldwide. The most vulnerable persons are men and elderly people.

FIGURE 1: DEATHS OF DESPAIR BY AGE AND GENDER, LUXEMBOURG 2019



Legend: W indicates women; M stands for men. The numbers refer to age brackets. Hence, the height of the bar for W 15-29 indicates the number of deaths of despair among women in the age group 15-29.

Note: authors' own elaboration of mortality data from the World Health Organization Mortality Database. The study ends in 2019 because of limited data availability and because the pandemic might have affected deaths of despair and pro-social behaviours in unpredictable ways.

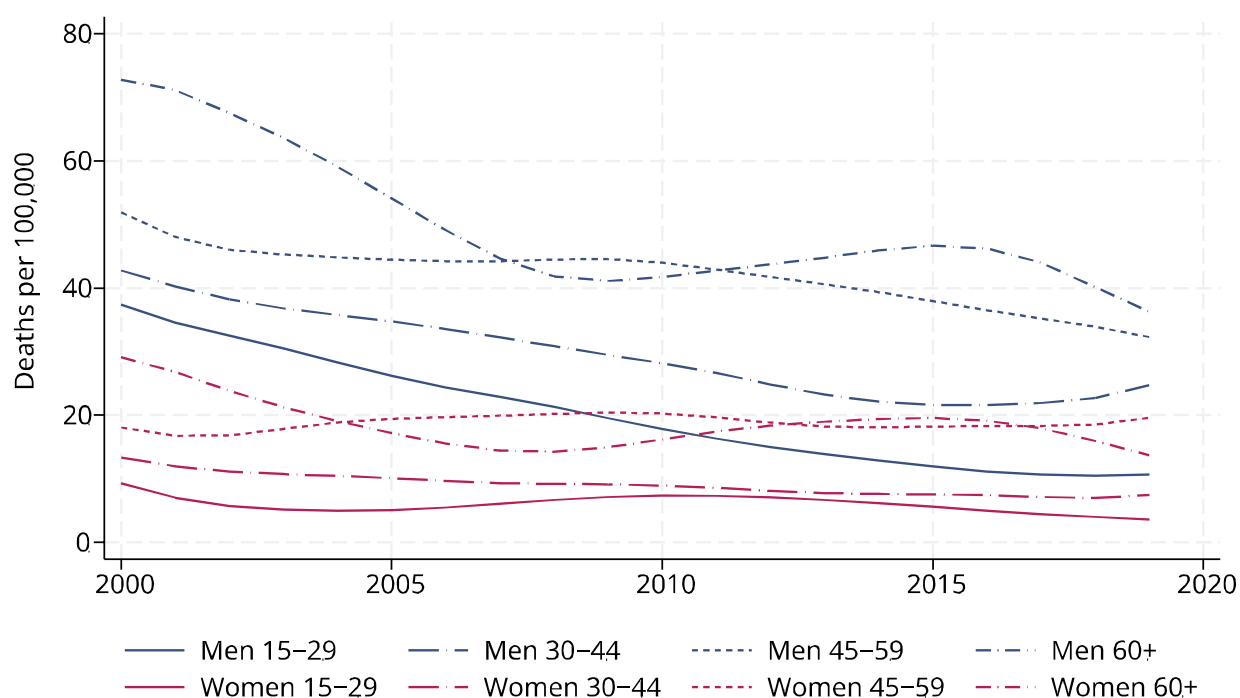
The results of the study indicate that a ten percentage-point increase in the share of people engaging in prosocial behaviour is associated with approximately one fewer annual life lost per 100,000 in population. For Luxembourg, with an adult population of approximately 520 thousand in 2019 (aged 15+), that is equivalent to about 5.2 annual saved lives.

In Luxembourg, the deaths of despair in 2019 amounted to 20 per 100,000, slightly less than in the analysed sample, which averaged 23¹. As in other countries, the vast majority of lives were lost to suicide; specifically, 14.6 lives to suicides, 2.9 to alcohol abuse and 2.5 to drug abuse per 100,000.

Men are more exposed than women, 28.3 compared to 12.4 per 100,000, especially older men (60 years or more), with 39.9 lives lost per 100,000.² Around the world, deaths of despair are nearly four times higher among men than women, and more than double among those aged 60 and above compared to 15- to 29-year-olds. Three quarters of these lives are lost to suicide, followed by alcohol and drug abuse.

These figures are decreasing. On average, in 59 middle- to high-income countries deaths of despair decreased by nearly 5 deaths per 100,000 people over the period 2000–2019. The largest declines occurred in North-Eastern European countries, such as Lithuania and Latvia, which tended to have very high initial levels. In Luxembourg, the decrease was even greater – from approximately 31 to 20 annual lives lost per 100,000. However, the figures vary substantially across demographic groups. There was a very large decline in drug abuse-related deaths among both women and men aged 15 to 29, of 7.6 and 25.3 respectively (per 100,000). In Luxembourg today, there are nearly 0 recorded deaths due to drug and alcohol abuse among women 15 to 29.

FIGURE 2. CHANGES IN DEATHS OF DESPAIR IN LUXEMBOURG FROM 2000 TO 2019



Although the number of deaths of despair is generally declining, they are still high and rising in some countries – such as the United States and Republic of Korea. In 2019, Slovenia had the highest level, with more than 50 deaths of despair per 100,000.

The study finds that prosocial behaviour is a potential buffer against deaths of despair. However, prosocial behaviour decreased in most of the countries analysed by the authors, and Luxembourg was no exception. From 2009 to 2019, the share of population engaged in prosocial behaviour decreased from 42.8% to 35.0% in the Grand Duchy.

¹ The focus of the study is on an international comparison of deaths of despair. The example of Luxembourg was included for comparability in this press release.

² This amounts to approximately 24 deaths, as the male population 60 years and older numbered 63,000 in 2019.

Investing in the conditions that support prosocial behaviour could help create societies where people are more supportive, cooperative, and trusting, and where more lives are saved.

For more information

Press office | ☎ **+352 247-88455** | ✉ press@statec.etat.lu

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