

INTERNATIONAL SUICIDE RATES AND PREVENTION STRATEGIES

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Suicide is currently considered responsible for the loss of at least a million lives every year around the world and it has been well known for some time now that the official suicide death rates tend to underestimate the real dimensions of the phenomenon.

In response to growing concern about suicidal behavior, particularly amongst the younger age groups, many countries have developed national strategies designed to reduce suicide mortality rates. Finland was the first to experiment with a prevention program, which was started in 1992, followed by other countries around the world. The World Health Organisation has indicated suicide prevention as a priority public health policy, also publishing guidelines to support the development of adequate national prevention schemes.

The first part of this book provides a clear and detailed overview of the most recent tendencies of suicide rates around the world, based on information contained in the World Health Organisation's database. It considers the entire life span, from childhood (under 15 year-olds) up to old age (over 65 years of age). The analysis of the trends of the international suicide rates gives a thorough picture of suicide in the second half of the 20th century, focusing particularly on the details for the more recent period. The authors emphasize that the global picture still contains areas where suicide mortality data are either insufficient or completely lacking, such as Africa, the Middle East, South America and parts of Asia, making it impossible to obtain a complete picture.

The second part of the book examines the impact of national suicide prevention strategies, mental health schemes and policies relating to the use of drugs, alcohol and antidepressants on the suicide phenomenon. Judging from a recent ecological study, conducted in a hundred industrialized countries, the development of policies to prevent drug dependence appears to have significantly reduced the suicide rates, whereas specific suicide prevention programs not only failed to demonstrate such an effect, in some cases they even seem paradoxically to have coincided with an increase in the suicide mortality rate since their introduction. The authors dedicate ample space to further analyzing these issues, separately considering the trends in the various countries where suicide prevention programs are currently operating and providing some original, thought-provoking ideas on the state of the art.

The last part of the book considers the consequences of unemployment and the influence of the cohort effect on suicide rates. The cohort effect, i.e. when individuals born in the same year or period of a few years reveal an unusual suicide rate seems to be of particular interest. This may depend on a given cohort being exposed to particular factors at some stage in their development or as they grew older, or it may reflect a unique historical condition. Applying findings relating to the cohort effect to the field of suicidology has given rise to contrasting results, but there is no doubting that this effect has an impact on the trends of suicide rates.

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