

A Survey of Suicide Over the Last Half Century

Update on Suicide in FSM

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This paper presents the data gathered on recent suicides in Federated States of Micronesia, 2007-2015. It summarizes trends in the suicide epidemic that began in the late 1960s, offering conclusions and recommendations. An appendix provides additional data on suicides of FSM migrants that occurred on Guam in 2003-2015, a period that showed an extremely high rate of suicide. The paper concludes with comments on a hitherto unstudied element in suicide: disrupted families (those in which multiple suicides occurred).

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Aims

The purpose of the project was to gather data on suicides that occurred in FSM during the period 2007 through 2015. The collection of suicide data for this report would represent the completion of more than a half century's data on suicide in the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM). The earlier material, a database on suicides from 1960 to 2006, was created by Micronesian Seminar. The enlarged database that resulted from this project records 1,051 suicides from 1960 through 2015. When added to the previous data on the region, the information collected in the course of this project would provide us with nearly complete documentation on a 55-year span of historically high suicide in the islands.

In the course of the project, the research team also had the opportunity to gather data on the many suicides of FSM people that occurred on Guam from 2003 to 2015. This secondary fund of data will be treated separately in this report.

The recent suicide data was then compared with the earlier data and examined for significant differences in the profile of victims, reasons for suicide, circumstances surrounding the death, and the like. We were hoping to find some indication that the very high suicide rate that had persisted in the islands for the past thirty years was beginning to drop.

Finally, we had hopes that the project might uncover clues of what could be effective prevention strategies in the future. Such strategies have been conspicuously absent in the past as suicide rates soared in FSM.

Methods

The research team obtained a full set of the Micronesian Seminar suicide data and reviewed the data labels and coding system for its suitability to this project. We also found a copy of the interview sheet used for acquiring information of new suicides. This was adapted with very few changes in order to keep the interview procedures as close to the original procedures as we could.

The research team was composed of the young American woman serving as project manager and an older multilingual Yapese woman who had traveled widely and work in various parts of FSM. The author of this report, Francis X. Hezel, assisted them on Guam, where he compiled a file of recent suicides involving FSM people on that islands.

The methodology employed in earlier data collection was used again for this project. All death certificates at the national and state levels were examined for any information on suicides. Accounts of suicides were then pulled from official death certificates and supplemented by personal inquiries in the local communities. The principal informants usually selected were those in the community who were close to the victim but who, as a rule, were not from the victim's family. The reason for the exclusion of close family members was that the information they furnished on the events leading up to the suicide often were unreliable due to their desire to protect the family's interests.

Researchers used questionnaires nearly identical to those that had been used from the start in gathering suicide information. The entry for each suicide included as much biographical information as was available. The data gathered included birth rank in the family, level of educational achievement, employment status, history of alcohol and drug use, previous suicide attempts or warning, past family problems, details surrounding the death and probable motives for the act. Whenever possible, the research team tried to corroborate the information gathered with others from the community in which the suicide occurred.

Background: The Pattern of Suicide

The explosion of suicide throughout Micronesia began in the late 1960s, drawing the attention of island leaders and prompting efforts by outside researchers to explain this shocking phenomenon. Don Rubinstein, cultural anthropologist and professor at University of Guam, and the author of this report have published several articles on the subject.

The pattern of suicide in the islands was pronounced, as these and other writers have noted. Victims tended to be young (nearly 75 percent of them fell in the age range 15-30) and overwhelmingly male (over 90 percent). The motivation for the act was also closely patterned: it was clearly interpersonal in nature, occasioned by what is perceived as a disruption in a significant relationship. A suicide was “almost always triggered by some conflict, actual or anticipated, between the victim and a parent, an older relative (including an older sibling), or occasionally a spouse” (Hezel 1987: 284). Micronesian suicides are markedly different in etiology from those in the West. “There is almost none of the chronic depression, the vague sense of meaninglessness of life, or even the despondency at failure in business or school that seems to play such a large part in suicides in other parts of the world” (Hezel 1987: 284).

Most often the victim is angry after he has been denied a request, chastised or rebuffed in some way by parents or an older sibling. Sometimes the suicide is the impulsive response to a riff with an older member of the family, but often there is more to it than that. Some of the victims have nursed a grievance towards their family for months or even years. The incident that occasions the suicide is often just the latest expression of the tension between the victim and his family. It is difficult for young men to express their hurt feelings directly toward a parent or older member of the family because of cultural sanctions. Consequently, the young person can choose either to suffer in silence or to act out his anger upon himself by cutting himself with a knife or refusing to eat for a time. Increasingly, however, this self-inflicted sign of unhappiness has been taking the form of suicide. Even the method almost universally chosen—leaning into a noose tied around the neck, slipping into unconsciousness, and dying of anoxia—reflects the meaning of the act. As an earlier article on suicide explained, “Their act of self-destruction... is not a gesture of blind rage, much less defiant retaliation against the family; rather, it is seen by Micronesians as a poignant plea for understanding and reconciliation with the family” (Hezel 1987: 285).

In their writings, both Hezel and Rubinstein have attempted to explain this sudden outburst of suicide from a cultural point of view. Both authors point to changing family structure as a key factor in the rapid rise of suicide. While Rubinstein looks primarily at the decline of those institutions embedded in the lineage that once played a large part in the socialization of young islanders, Hezel emphasizes the decline of the lineage itself and the loss of those who once functioned as mediators in family conflicts. In the eyes of both, the sociocultural changes in the family figure heavily in the suicide increase of the day.

General Survey Data

The research for this project produced information on 203 suicides by Micronesians living in FSM during the period 2007-2015. Table 1 shows the distribution of these recent suicides by state along with the suicide rate (number of suicides per hundred thousand) during that period in each state.

Table 1: FSM suicides in FSM, 2007-2015, number and rate (per 100,000)

	Suicides (2007-2015)	Average per year	Rate (per 100,000)
Chuuk	104	11.6	23.2
Pohnpei	63	7	20.0
Kosrae	10	1.1	15.7
Yap	30	3.3	29.2

With the recent cases added to the data previously collected, Table 2 shows the number of suicides in FSM by state from 1961 through 2015.

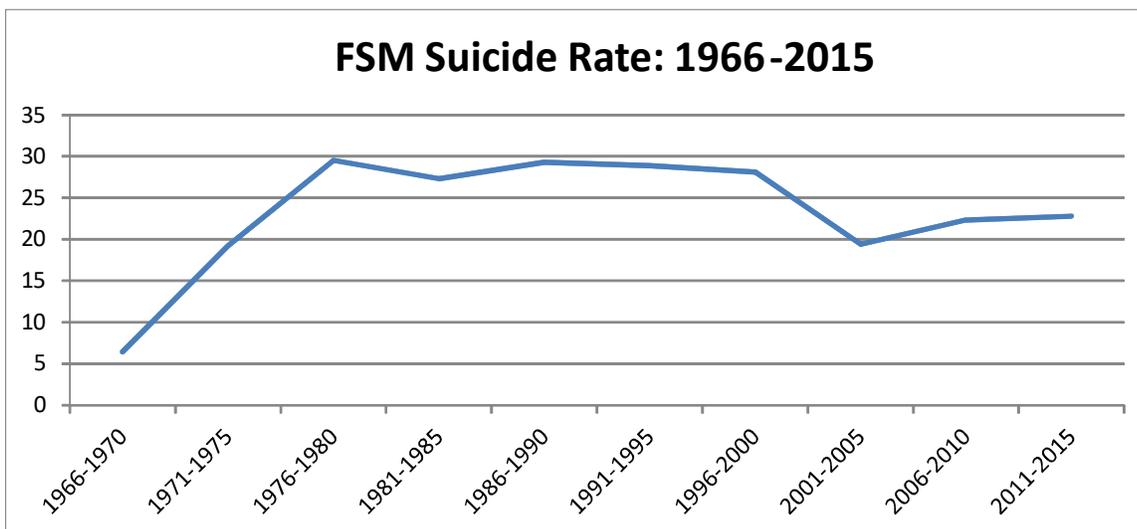
Table 2: FSM suicides in FSM, 1961-2015, number of suicides

	Chuuk	Pohnpei	Kosrae	Yap	Total
1961-1965	4	1	0	0	5
1966-1970	10	2	1	4	17

1971-1975	37	14	0	9	60
1976-1980	65	24	4	13	106
1981-1985	70	11	7	16	104
1986-1990	67	34	6	22	129
1991-1995	86	37	5	22	150
1996-2000	85	37	10	17	149
2001-2005	41	23	14	22	100
2006-2010	54	43	5	13	115
2011-2015	58	36	5	17	116
Total	577	262	57	155	1,051

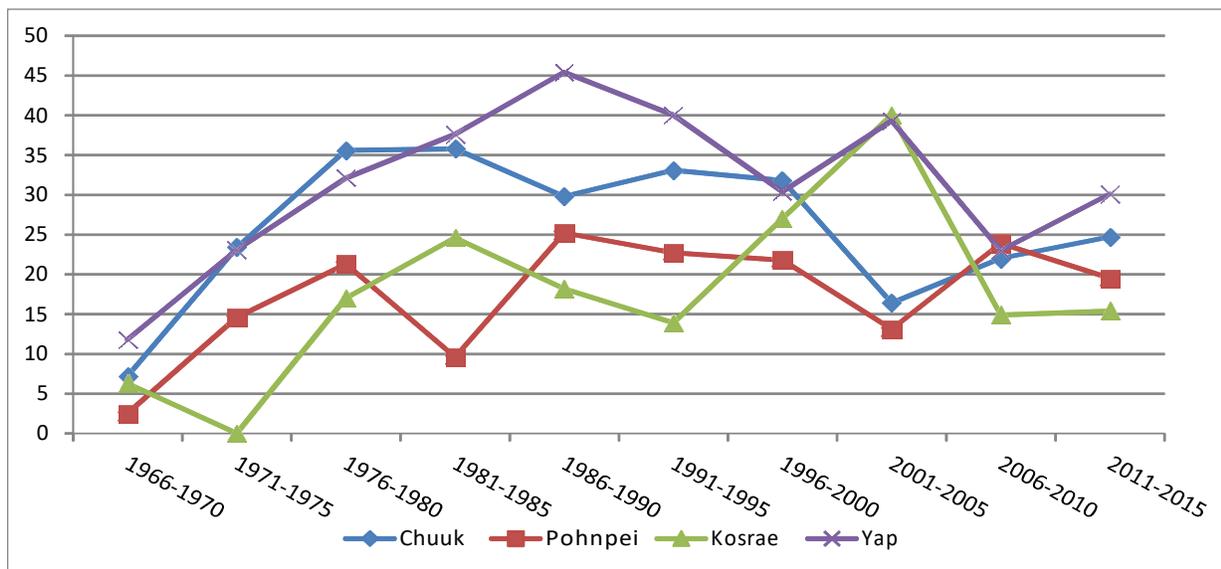
The suicide data shown here is for FSM citizens who died in on their home islands. (It does not include the many others took their lives in the US or on Guam.) When converted into the conventional yearly suicide rates per hundred thousand, the data for FSM overall show a rapidly rising suicide rate during the late 1960s and early 1970s. The rate remained at a high plateau of nearly 30 for twenty-five years (1975-2000) before dropping to about 20 during the last fifteen years. (Table 3)

Figure 1: Annual Suicide Rate (per 100,000) for FSM: 1966-2015



The recent drop is not nearly as steep as the rise in the 1970s, but this could suggest that the suicide rate is at last beginning to decline to its historically “normal” level—something in the range of 6 to 8 per hundred thousand. The drop in the suicide rate since the year 2000 also suggests that Micronesians are getting accustomed to dealing with the stripped-down family and the concentration of authority that it represents.

Figure 2: Annual Suicide Rate (per 100,000) for FSM States: 1966-2015



As Figure 2 shows, Yap has the highest overall rate of the states, peaking at 45 per hundred thousand in the late 1980's. Although the rate spiked again in the early 2000's, there has been a downward trend since the late 1980's. The present rate is 30 per hundred thousand.

Pohnpei's rate also peaked in the late 1980s, but at a much lower rate than Yap's: 25. After steadily decreasing over the following years, Pohnpei's rate spiked in 2006-2010.

Chuuk peaked at over 35 in the period 1976-1985, and has tended slowly downward since then. Still, the figures show that Chuuk's suicide rate has maintained the longest high plateau of any of the states. In the late 1970's the rate reached 35 and remained between 30 and 35 until 2000, before it dropped sharply. Hence, for 25 years the Chuuk rate remained at about the same high level.

Kosrae's suicide rate peaked in 2001-2005 at 40, but fell sharply afterwards. During the years 1995-2005, Kosrae with its population of about 8,000, was experiencing 2 or 3 suicides a year.

Findings

The suicide rate in FSM has dropped significantly over the last fifteen years. It has fallen from a rate of about 30 per hundred thousand to a little over 20. Each of the states shows a general downward trend despite considerable fluctuation over the years.

Although Yap's suicide rate has decreased in recent years, the share of the Outer Islands is larger than ever before: 17 of 30, or 57 percent, of the Yap suicides for the period 2007-2015 were from the coral atolls that account for nearly half the state's population. This is the first time suicides from those atolls outnumbered suicides from the main island. During the period covered by the earlier data set (1960-2006), suicides from the Outer Islands accounted for just 17 percent of the total. The current suicide rate for Yap Outer Islands during this period, at 45 per hundred thousand, is higher than the rate for the entire state (30).

The suicide rates in more remote atolls in other parts of the nation vary. The number of suicides was high on Nama, for instance, but low in the rest of the Chuuk atolls. In Pohnpei the number of suicides associated with Pingelap—both on the atoll itself and in its population in the Pingelapese settlements of Mwalok and Mand on Pohnpei itself—appears high.

Past attempts to analyze of suicide patterns in the islands have noted the low rate of suicide in the remote atolls. This they have ascribed this to the insulation of such places from the stronger effects of modernization, particularly its erosion of the traditional extended family. The sudden rise in the suicide rates of at least some of these atolls suggests that some of the impact of modernization on the social organization of atoll communities is already being felt. Thus, the atolls may already be less immune to suicide than ever before.

Table 3: Suicides by Gender, with Female Percentage of the Total, 1960-2015

	Males	Females	Female %
1960-1969	16	1	5.8
1970-1979	136	9	6.2
1980-1989	206	25	10.8
1990-1999	282	26	8.4
2000-2006	126	24	16

2007-2015	183	27	12.9
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Suicide has been overwhelmingly a male phenomenon over the years, but Table 3 shows that over the years females have accounted for an increasing percentage of the total. The female share has doubled over the years, from about 6 percent of all suicides during the 1960's and 1970's to nearly 13 percent over the last decade.

The percentage of suicides among those aged 15 or below has dropped considerably—from 15 percent to 9 percent, as Table 4 indicates. The percentage of suicides in the 16-20 age cohort has also fallen—from 35 percent in earlier years to 28 percent in more recent years.

Overall, suicides of teenagers, those in the two youngest age cohorts in Table 4, have dropped significantly over time. In earlier years this age group accounted for more than half (50.9 percent) of all suicides, but in recent years only 37.6 percent of all suicides have fallen into this age group. This is an encouraging trend because it suggests that the impulsiveness strongly associated with the suicides of younger victims might be less a factor today.

Table 4: Percentage of Total Suicides by Age Cohort

Years	<15	16-20	21-25	26-30	31-35	36-40	41-50	>50	Unkn	Total
1960-2006	15.3	35.6	21.5	11.1	5.0	3.0	3.9	3.3	1	100
2007-2015	9.5	28.1	23.3	14.3	6.7	6.7	3.8	3.3	4.3	100

Recent suicide victims were much more educated than those in the past. In the past 25 percent of the victims never even finished elementary school, while this dropped to 17 percent in recent years. The gap is even greater for those who never went beyond completing elementary school: 21 percent in earlier years compared to only 9 percent in recent years.

Correspondingly, the more recent suicide victims showed a much higher completion rate for junior high school and senior high school: 24 percent and 22 percent compared with 11 percent and 15 percent in earlier years.

Table 5: Educational Attainment (by %) of Suicide Victims

Highest education attainment	1960-2006 (% of total)	2007-2015 (% of total)
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Info missing	25	22
elementary school incomplete	25	17
elementary school finished	21	9
junior high school finished	11	24
high school finished	15	22
college finished	3	5
Total	100	100

The reasons reported for recent suicides follow the traditional pattern. The incident leading up to the suicide, however insignificant it might seem, is the cause of the rift between the victim and his family. There may have been previous altercations like the one that precipitated the death of the victim, but the evidence suggested that the victims were reacting to particular incidents that had endangered or broken the bond between them and their families.

The most recent data hints more clearly than ever at the importance of a hitherto unstudied element in island suicides: familial disruption. In earlier studies of Micronesia suicide, major emphasis was placed on the broken relationship between the victim and his family. Little attention was given to the quality of family life itself. In the recent data set, however, the deficiencies in family life have been better captured in the background information on victims. Even if family disruption can not be easily quantified, it appears to be an important although understudied factor in island suicides.

Exploring a New Dimension: Family Disruption

One strong marker of family disruption is that more than one of the children in the family have taken their own lives. In the nine-year period (2007-2015) covered by the recent data set, eight families in FSM suffered the loss of at least two siblings to suicide, with one of these families experiencing three deaths. In general, the interval between the deaths of the siblings was shorter than was found in the earlier data. In two of the families the deaths occurred only a year apart, and in another two cases the interval was two years.

Even the older data set offers numerous instances of this. The earlier data (1960-2006) records 27 families in which at least two siblings committed suicide; in all but five of the cases the siblings shared both parents. In four of those same 27 families three siblings committed suicide. The multiple suicides were distributed rather evenly throughout the time period covered by the early data set. In two cases the first suicide in the family occurred in the 1960s; in seven cases, it occurred in the 1970s; in nine cases it occurred in the 1980s. Three had their beginning in the 1990s, and six in the period 2000-2006.

Clearly suicide is far more likely to occur in some families than in others. In this there appears to have been little change. Past writings on the subject have examined suicide clustering as a phenomenon observed in islands or villages, but no study has been done of suicidal families in Micronesia. As the general rate of suicide in FSM slowly sinks, a few families seem to bear a greater share of the suicide burden in the islands.

The background data gathered on suicides during the recent period (2007-2015) offers some understanding of examples of disruption in the family that might have played a part in the decision of the victims.

The split up of parents or the death of a parent can be a major cause of family disruption. This is true today despite the common practice of traditional adoption in the past, with the son or daughter shifting from natural parents to adoptive parents with relative ease. From the anthropological literature on adoption, one could get the impression that parental ties were of secondary importance to young people, who were expected to move within broader family circles freely. There is abundant testimony to the easy circulation of young people in the past. To judge from the suicide rates then, this mobility does not seem to have occasioned suicide.

Yet, the background information on recent victims suggests that the death or departure of one or both parents may be a strong motivating force in suicide today. In one family the death of a mother was soon followed by the suicide of two of her sons. When the father remarried, the sons sought out other family members with whom to live, but they experienced problems with those they moved in with.

Another young man took his own life after his mother abandoned his father to live with another man. The victim was reportedly ashamed at what his mother had done and bothered by the way in which his father responded to her departure. Another suicide victim, a few years later, was in a very similar situation when his mother left the family to marry another man. He, too, seems to have been motivated both by shame at his mother's behavior and anger at his father's reaction to the situation.

After suffering the loss of one or both parents, the children sometimes leave home and move around among other relatives. One woman, who had three children by different men, would not allow her children to stay with her after the man she married died. Accordingly, they moved off island to different places, taking whatever their father had left behind with them. Soon afterwards one of the sons took his own life. In a similar case, a woman who had just lost her husband disposed of her land and began traveling back and forth between islands. Faced with the disintegration of his family and the prospect of leaving home, one of the sons hanged himself.

In some cases, even when the parents remain married to one another, they or their children may be propelled for one reason or another into a nomadic lifestyle. One couple from two different islands spent much of their time traveling from one island to another, leaving their sons unattended as they moved around. Within a few years two of their sons committed suicide. In another case, the parents remained at home but the children shuttled from one relative to another, perhaps in search of the peace they could not find at home. One young man in this family eventually took his own life after an argument with his parents over his behavior.

Occasionally, young men and women who have left home—often to escape an unhappy home life—find themselves in the care of other relatives who may treat them even worse than their parents did. In one such case, a young man and his siblings went to live with an aunt who was not very well off and unprepared to care for the young people who came to live with her. The young man committed suicide after a scolding by one of his older siblings, but the act was no doubt conditioned by the difficulty he had been having with his aunt and his parents before that. In a different situation, a woman whose husband had just died was compelled to live with her parents-in-law, who took every opportunity to embarrass her. She soon died at her own hand.

The recent data suggest that suicide is not simply the impulsive response of a young person to a quarrel or misunderstanding with his family. Several of the recent cases redirect our attention from the individual suicide victim to systemic problems in the family itself. This represents a new dimension of suicide that might profitably be explored.

Conclusions

- The overall suicide rate for FSM has begun to drop at last from its previous height of nearly 30 per hundred thousand to about 20. Rates have dropped correspondingly in each of the states.
- The incidence of suicide in remote atolls, especially for the Outer Islands of Yap and Pingelap in Pohnpei, has risen sharply. In the last ten years the rate of suicide in the atolls of Yap has become higher than for the Yap mainland.
- The share of female suicides has grown over time from 6 percent to 13 percent of all suicides.
- Fewer suicides are occurring to people in the youngest age cohorts, those in their teens. This, combined with the higher educational attainment of the average suicide victim, suggests that the suicides are less impulsive than they were at one time.
- Recent suicide victims seem to be better educated than those in the past. Far more have completed high school today.
- Hanging, always the dominant method of suicide in the islands, has become even more so in recent years.

- The immediate causes of suicide—anger at an offense by someone in the immediate family or shame at some offense given to a family member—are much the same as they have always been.
- The damage to the victim’s relationship with his family plays as important a role in motivating the suicide as ever. The recent fund of data, however, includes information on the relationship between the victim and his family over time. It has opened up another potential dimension to future research on suicide in the islands.
- Multiple suicides in a single family is not a new phenomenon; it has been occurring since the escalation of rates in the 1970s and perhaps even earlier. Suicidal families offer a portal to the examination of the importance of family disruption as a critical factor in suicide.
- Family disruption can involve, although it is not limited to, divorce of parents, absence of parents for other reasons, and frequent relocation of the family. These, however, may be as much results of family disruption as they are causes.

Appendix: Suicides on Guam, 2003-2015

General Data

Since the project director was living on Guam, he initiated a search for data on suicide of FSM citizens who were living on Guam. For various reasons, including the easy availability of data from Government of Guam Vital Statistics Office, he decided to extend the period back to 2003. He hoped that the data gathered on Guam might provide an added dimension to the work being done on suicide in FSM. The migrant FSM population on Guam is estimated at an average of about 13,000 during this period.

The tally of suicides of migrants on Guam was derived from an anonymous listing of death certificates for Micronesians who took their own lives during this period. No names or personal information was given other than the ethnicity, age, month and year of death, and manner of death. Extensive interviews were conducted with Micronesian informants on Guam to fill in as much of the missing data as possible. The research, conducted over three months, produced this tally.

Table 6: Suicides of FSM People on Guam by State and Year

Year	FSM	Chuuk	Pohnpei	Kosrae	Yap
2003	5	4			1
2004	6	6			
2005	11	8	1	1	1
2006	4	3			1
2007	9	9			
2008	4	3	1		
2009	13	12	1		
2010	12	11	1		
2011	3	3			
2012	13	9	4		

2013	10	8	1	1
2014	6	6		
2015	15	8	6	1
Total	111	90	15	2

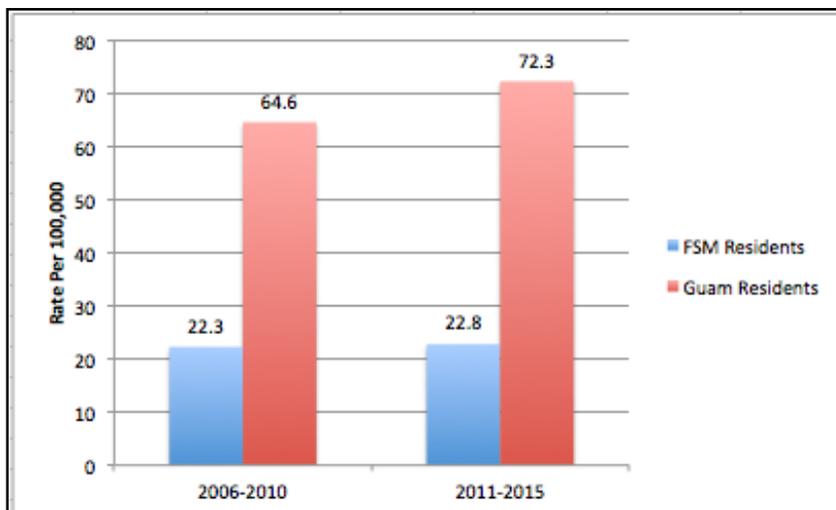
The number of FSM suicides on Guam for the period 2003-2015 averaged 8.5 a year. Since 2009 the number of suicides has been in double figures every year except for two (2011 and 2014). The figure for 2015 was 15 suicides, the highest number for a single year yet.

Most of the suicides by far (90 of 111) were of Chuukese. They averaged nearly 7 a year. Since Chuukese made up 78% of the migrant FSM population on Guam, with about 10,500 on the island, the Chuukese suicide rate was about the equivalent of that for the entire FSM, notwithstanding Chuuk's high numbers. Most of the remainder of the suicides on Guam were by Pohnpeians.

Assuming an FSM population of 13,000, the suicide rate for FSM people on Guam during the period 2003-2015 would be 65.7 per hundred thousand. This is by far the highest rate yet recorded for the island population.

The comparative suicide rates for FSM people residing on their own islands and those living on Guam over the last ten years are presented in Figure 3. The figure shows that over the most recent ten years the rate of suicide of FSM people residing on Guam has been three times as high as it has been among FSM residents on their home islands.

Figure 3: Suicide Rate for FSM People Residing in FSM and on Guam, 2006-2015



Because of the surprisingly high rate among FSM people on Guam, we will look at the data more closely in the hope of finding conclusions that will help us understand the shift in island suicide over recent years.

Other Findings

Of the 111 suicide victims on Guam during this period, 11 were females. Females represent 10 percent of the total number of suicides, a percentage that is line with the growing female share in Micronesia.

As we have noted above, the prevalence of suicide among the youngest age cohorts (preteens and teens) has dropped significantly in FSM over recent years—from over 50 percent to 38 percent. The percentage is even lower (29 percent) for those residing on Guam, suggesting that the impulsiveness characteristic of these young age groups plays a decreasing role in suicide throughout the islands.

All but eight of the 111 suicides on Guam were by hanging. The prevalence of hanging on Guam (93 percent) closely reflects the pattern in FSM in recent years (94 percent).

At first glance, the events triggering suicide on Guam appear to be indistinguishable from those that would occasion suicide back in the FSM. The parents had strong objections to the girl that one young man wanted to marry. A young man had an automobile accident when drunk and ruined a car that his family had just purchased. A young girl was denied permission to go out with some friends, and a 16-year-old boy was not permitted by his parents to perform at a public dance contest.

Yet, further investigation often reveals another dimension to the problem between the victim and his family—what has been previously referred to as family disruption. The high incidence of suicide on Guam in recent years appears to have little to do with the financial struggles of migrant families, nor is it due to the belittling treatment that Micronesian migrants sometimes complain of receiving from local people on Guam. To get a better understanding of this family disruption, we might look at those families with multiple suicides, as we did earlier in our review of the recent suicide data in FSM.

Families with Multiple Suicides

The data set of FSM suicides on Guam (with a total of 111 names) shows seven families with deaths of more than one sibling; two of these families lost three siblings to suicide. The concentration of suicide in certain families, therefore, seems to be a stronger element in Guam than it is in FSM. Besides those

families with the deaths of two or three siblings, others have experienced multiple deaths of close relatives. One young man who hanged himself in 2010 lost two cousins to suicide just one month apart from one another and two months before his own death. Another young victim, aged 10, was reportedly the third person to take his own life in the house in which he had been living.

The two families on Guam that lost three siblings to suicide offer some hints on the kind of family disruption that might make young people more susceptible to suicide. In one family in which all three boys took their own lives, their father died when they were all quite young, leaving their mother to care for them on an island that was not home for the family. None of the boys received much schooling, and all went to work while still young in the struggle to provide for family needs. All three seem to have been sadly lacking in family support.

In the other family with three suicides, the parents split up against the strong desire of the children. Each of the boys in the family finished high school and was able to find a job, but their ardent hope to reconcile their parents was frustrated. Each of them attempted to bring their parents together and failed. The suicide of each occurred after the failed attempt, although other personal problems may have more directly prompted the suicidal act.

Family Disruption

Some of the most tragic cases of such disruption are those in which parents have split up against the desires of their children, as in the case described above. A ten-year-old boy, who had been living on Guam for just three years, watched his parents break up and then took his life seemingly in frustration. Another boy, who had also experienced the break up of his parents, was living with his mother and watched helplessly as his mother's new boyfriend was preparing to drop her for another woman.

Other victims did not have parents on Guam and so were staying with other relatives. One was having problems with the shrewish aunt with whom he was staying. Another moved from one aunt to another, but apparently could not find peace with either of them. Yet another young man found little support from the aunt who was caring for him when his girlfriend left him. A girl who took her life was staying with an uncle and his family and helping take care of the home when she encountered difficulties with the uncle. Another young woman, from a broken family, moved from one house to another since she had a difficult time getting along with her relatives.

In a few instances, the suicide victims fell in love with persons judged to be too closely related to them and they were denied the opportunity to marry them. This happened to one young man in 2013, and to another two years later. It is easy to understand that young people might not have had the benefit of the detailed schooling on who their relatives were that they would have received back home, so they could unknowingly fall in love with a girl who was related. In some cases, the mere fact that they were living with close relatives just outside their immediate family might have made it easier for them to disregard their blood bond.

Overall, there are strong suggestions in the Guam data, as in the recent FSM data, that circumstances in the family, even apart from those that might spark direct conflict between members of the family, may provide an environment that occasions suicide. As in the FSM data we have already reviewed, loss of one or both parents, moving back and forth between relatives, and custodial care by an unsympathetic relative without any fallback are all markers of the sort of family disruption that can result in suicide.

An Added Dimension to Island Suicide

The recent research done on suicide on Guam, while it can track some of the differences between the patterns of suicide there and in FSM, can not explain the escalation of rates on Guam any more than it can explain the drop in FSM rates. Nonetheless, it can point us in another direction and bring to our attention another dimension in island suicide.

The pattern of Micronesian suicide that has been described in past research has been confirmed in this study with a few minor exceptions. Suicide remains preponderantly male, although slightly less so than in the past. The young remain at greatest risk, although the very young are resorting to this strategy less frequently than before; thus, an increasing percentage of those who take their lives do so in their 20s and 30s. Suicide remains, as it has always been, a resort for those who feel that their bonds with family have been severely damaged, and the motives remain, as before, anger and shame at something that either the victims or their family have done. In short, the basic dynamics of suicide along with its cultural meaning remain what they have always been.

For some years now it has been clear that the Micronesian family has been undergoing a major transformation. The lineage group, whether based in a single residence or not, was losing its privileged position, possibly because the cash income that was becoming available to ever more islanders had become a challenge to the old land-based economy that was central to the way in which the lineage functioned. The effect of the cash economy was, in the judgment of some, to weaken the bonds that kept the lineage functioning as an economic and social unit. This traditional lineage, with its multiple parents and the strong role of the maternal uncle, reduced the authority role of the natural father and provided for a number of intermediaries in the event that conflict broke out within the family. As the residential lineage unit lost its authority, the nuclear family achieved a degree of autonomy that it never enjoyed before. The authority of the father grew even as the nuclear family lacked the senior family members who might serve as mediators in conflict. There may have been other forces at work in escalating suicide rates, but in all probability this was one of the strongest.

If the original explosion of Micronesian suicide rates that began in the late 1960's was brought on by the breakdown of the extended Micronesian family, many of us hoped that social adjustments could be made to bring down the high suicide rate. Recent trends in FSM suicide data suggest that at last the rate is falling and may eventually drop to what it had been before the economic and social upheaval in the islands.

Yet, we have seen that the suicide rate of Micronesian migrants to Guam has rocketed in recent years to a new high surpassing any of the peak rates in Micronesia itself. The juxtaposition of the declining rate in the islands and the escalation of suicide among Micronesians on Guam might be paradoxical, but it might suggest that hitherto unexplored forces might be at play. Many of the recent victims on Guam appear to have come from incomplete families or damaged families. Is migration, if only because it denies vulnerable young people access to the support of family members they might have relied on back home, another factor contributing to suicide?

Often enough among the migrants who have been moving to Guam in large numbers, not even the nuclear family system is intact. This means the migrants are often denied even the relatively frail support system that the nuclear family provided. When additional stressors are brought to bear on young people, it is not surprising that they don't find the support needed to help them. This is what we have called family disruption.

In the face of the contrary suicide trends in recent data, showing a decrease in FSM and an increase in Guam, we might explore family disruption even as we refine the concept. This would offer a new and perhaps fruitful avenue of research in Micronesian suicide.

Recommendation

Prioritize tracking of suicides of FSM migrants on Guam, working through the Micronesian Resource Center on Guam. This organization is probably best positioned to gather information and to provide the personal support necessary to help suicidal families.

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