

Preface

As social scientists who are familiar with Japan and as members of society, we have been seriously concerned with the problem of suicide in Japan. Suicide is part of everyday life in Japan: there is not a single day when news media do not report stories on suicide deaths; commuters in the Tokyo Metropolitan area experience train schedule disruptions almost every day because railway and metro suicides are so frequent. In fact, from 1998 to 2011, more than 30,000 people lost their lives by suicide every year. This means that more than 80 individuals died by suicide per day on average during this period. Japan's suicide rate, defined as the number of suicide deaths per 100,000 people, reached 27.0 in 2003, which was the highest among the OECD nations with a similar level of economic development. Although the suicide rate in Japan had declined to 18.9 by 2015, it remains relatively high compared with that of other OECD countries.

These striking numbers led us to ask ourselves several questions. Why did such a large number of people have to end their lives by themselves? What is an implication of high suicide counts to society? Should the government intervene to stop people from taking their own lives? What are the effective policies to prevent suicide? Has the suicide rate in Japan recently declined because the Japanese government initiated a national suicide prevention program in 2007 or simply because society recovered from an economic recession? And what can we, as researchers, do to stop this tragedy?

This book is a part of our effort to address these questions as social scientists. Over the last 10 years, we as a team have been studying the causes and consequences of suicide as well as the effectiveness of suicide prevention programs. Because our academic background is in economics and political science, our focus mainly lies in examining the socioeconomic factors of suicide and suicide prevention policies that target societal factors, rather than addressing individual mental and physical disorders as risk factors of suicide. However, this is not to play down the role of these individual risk factors. Suicide is a complex phenomenon that involves a multitude of causes and factors, and we believe that understanding both micro (individual)- and macro (societal)-level determinants is essential for effective suicide prevention.

The findings of our studies have been published as articles in international and Japanese academic journals and as a book. The book was titled “Jisatsu no nai shakaihe” and published by Yuhikaku Publishing. It received the Nikkei Prize for Excellent Books in Economic Science in 2013. This volume combines the findings of our published works into a single volume in the hope of contributing to an understanding of suicide from a social science perspective. It also contains some of the unpublished recent findings and updated results of our previous studies. Although the evidence presented in this book comes primarily from Japan, we believe that our conclusion offers important implications for other countries as well.

Our ultimate goal is to achieve society in which nobody is forced to die by suicide. We sincerely hope that the collection of studies included in this volume helps readers in Japan and other countries achieve this goal.

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Economic Analysis of Suicide Prevention

Towards Evidence-Based Policy-Making

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