

Group suicides in Japan: a symptom of social malaise

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Two cases of group suicide in Japan have again highlighted the tragic consequences of the country's sharpening social and economic tensions. All of those who killed themselves were young and appeared to have contacted each other through Internet suicide web sites.

On the morning of October 12, Japanese police found seven people dead in a rented van on the outskirts of Tokyo. The van's windows were sealed with vinyl tape and charcoal stoves were found inside. The seven, some of whom had taken sleeping pills, died from carbon monoxide poisoning. Police found the bodies after receiving a call from a friend of one of the victims, who hinted in an email about suicide.

One of the dead was a 34-year-old mother who apparently posted a notice in early October on a web site seeking others who wanted to commit suicide. The rest were in their teens or early 20s, including a university student, a part-time worker and an unemployed woman—all from widely separated regions of Japan.

On the same day, police discovered two women dead in a car parked near a temple at Yokosuka, about 60 km southeast of Tokyo. The methods used were similar. Police are still investigating the possibility that the two cases are related. The two women were believed to be in their 20s.

These are not isolated instances. According to Japan's National Police Agency, 45 people committed suicide in groups between January 2003 and June 2004 after meeting through Internet web sites.

Public shock over the recent suicides has provoked calls for the government to close down suicide web sites, which provide information about methods and the means for contacting others. Yet, the causes of such suicides, which are a tiny fraction of the total number

of suicide cases in Japan, do not arise from the Internet. They lie in the immense psychological pressures produced by the country's growing economic and social uncertainties.

Japan has one of the highest rates of suicide of industrialised countries. It has been rising throughout the 1990s—a decade of economic stagnation, failing businesses and growing levels of unemployment. Many of those who killed themselves were middle-aged men who had lost their jobs or faced financial problems for which they saw no solution.

Last year, a record 34,427 people took their own lives. An article published by *Asia Times Online* entitled "Suicide also rising in land of rising sun" pointed out that Japan's suicide rates of 40.2 per 100,000 for men and 14.9 per 100,000 for women were approaching levels "witnessed in countries suffering severe economic hardships such as Russia, Latvia and Lithuania".

Just over a quarter of the suicides were officially put down to financial problems. *Asia Times* commented: "Some of the dominant economic factors that have contributed to the current suicide crisis include large-scale bankruptcies, increased unemployment, a sluggish business climate, accumulated debts, lower incomes, inadequate bankruptcy laws, prolonged economic stagnation, an unregulated financial loan market and corporate restructuring."

The cases of Internet suicide have, however, highlighted a disturbing trend toward younger people taking their lives. The number of people in their 30s committing suicide jumped by 17 percent to 4,603 in 2003 as compared to the previous year. Among school and college students the percentage increases were much higher—the largest, 54 percent, being among elementary and middle school students.

Hiroshi Sakamoto, a retired local government official and volunteer suicide counsellor, explained to *Asia Times* that the growing problem of youth suicide is barely addressed either by government or the media. “We only read about suicide in the press, it is never on TV. They say it is too gloomy, too dark, not a happy subject. I feel the whole country is in a state of denial. This is perhaps why we cannot solve this problem. We are trying to ignore it, but wishing it away gets us nowhere,” he said.

The attempts by the media and government to ignore the problem are matched by a lack of services to cope with the growing number of people contemplating suicide. Lifeline, which was founded in 1971, now has 8,000 trained counsellors operating 50 call centres round-the-clock to handle a variety of emergency calls. In 2001, it received more than 700,000 calls, of which nearly 25,000 were suicide related. Lifeline, however, is one of the few such services.

An article in *Newsweek* in June, highlighting an earlier group Internet suicide, pointed to the limited character of mental health services in Japan. “While mental health care is widely available in Japan, it is heavily centred in mental institutions. Newer medications, including most anti-depressants common in the United States, are not widely available. And out-patient counselling, where it exists, is still in its infancy.”

In comments to *Asia Times*, former MP Keiko Yamauchi berated Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi for doing nothing. “How many children, young people, fathers or mothers have to die before our government takes any real action? Instead of wasting so much energy and national resources in assisting in the destruction of human life in Iraq, why doesn’t Koizumi declare war on suicide in Japan and save thousands of lives in this country?” he asked.

But the lack of government action and preventative services, while significant, does not explain the rising number of youth contemplating taking their own lives. All the evidence points to a profound and growing alienation among young people who are under enormous pressure to succeed at school and university and to find and keep a job. Over the past decade, competition for the top schools and universities has become increasingly intense and unemployment among young people has risen sharply.

These pressures are compounded by a culture in which relationships, even within the family, continue to be rather formal. As a result, young people often feel isolated and unable to discuss their personal problems.

Yukio Saito, who founded Lifeline, explained to *Newsweek*: “Generally, they have a serious emotional problem, which is that they have difficulty dealing with others face-to-face, a kind of phobia or fear of talking about their feelings in front of others. Maybe this is quite a Japanese-type emotion. They have difficulty having personal relations, so they tend to use the Internet to communicate their feelings.”

Saito noted what appears to be a related social phenomenon—“hikikomori”—young people who withdraw completely from society for months and even years and refuse to leave their homes, or even their rooms. According to some estimates, more than a million young Japanese have cut themselves off from the world and barely communicate.

While such intense alienation may take particular forms in Japan, similar processes are occurring internationally. Confronted with a society that offers them no future and a world increasingly dominated by militarism and war, layers of young people, lacking any vision of a progressive alternative, retreat into a variety of destructive activities, including drug abuse, violent anti-social behaviour and in some cases suicide. Japanese capitalism is no more capable of dealing with these problems than its counterparts around the world.



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