

Record suicide toll in New Zealand

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Annual provisional suicide statistics, released this month, show that 564 New Zealanders took their own lives in the year to July 1. This was 34 more than the previous year and the highest number since records started in 2007.

With a 5 percent population increase, the figure represents a slightly lower suicide rate per capita than the peak in 2010, when there were 558 suicides. However, the toll is persistently high, with 529 the lowest annual number reported in the past 8 years.

Young people are worst affected, with 61 suicides among 20- to 24-year-olds and 62 among under 20-year-olds. In 2012, New Zealand's male youth suicide rate was the fourth highest among the OECD industrialised countries and the female youth suicide rate was second-highest.

The latest statistics also show a record number of males and retired people committing suicide.

The indigenous Maori population, one of the most exploited layers of the working class, is disproportionately represented, with 130 deaths, another record high. That is approximately 23 percent of the total, although Maori make up 17.5 percent of New Zealanders.

The leading factor in these tragic deaths is the country's deepening social crisis and widening inequality. One recent study linked one fifth of suicides internationally to unemployment. According to a 2013 analysis in the journal *New Zealand Sociology*, 28 percent of NZ suicides were unemployed.

The toll has grown as successive governments have attacked working people's living standards, including through the drastic austerity measures imposed by the ruling National Party following the 2008 economic crisis.

The impoverished Northland region experienced a 33 percent increase in suicides during the past year, with 28 people taking their own lives. This number has

steadily risen since 2009. Unemployment in Northland is officially 8.6 percent, the highest in the country (the national rate is 5.9 percent).

Kaikohe, a small town in that region with just over 4,000 inhabitants, recorded 8 suicides in the space of five weeks. All but one were under the age of 20, including a 13-year-old boy. Hundreds marched through the streets of Kaikohe on October 8 to mourn these losses and speak out against suicide.

An article on *New Zealand Doctor Online* in March described the appalling conditions in Kaikohe, including "run-down dwellings ... mere shacks, constructed from all manner of found and recycled materials, which almost anywhere else in the country would be deemed uninhabitable." According to census data, the town's median income went from \$17,900 in 2006 to \$18,000 in 2013. Adjusted for inflation, that equates to a decline of 15.6 percent.

Statistics show a significant increase in suicides in rural areas. In the Southern region there were 42 suicides, an increase of 35.4 percent compared with the previous 12 months. Federated Farmers suggested that many could be farmers, who face considerable financial pressure due to plummeting global prices for dairy products, New Zealand's main export. Reserve Bank figures show that dairy farmers' total debt trebled in the last 10 years from \$11.3 billion to \$34.5 billion.

Young people, who have the highest rates of suicide, suffer much higher unemployment (officially about 15 percent), lower wages, insecure work and ballooning student debts. In recent years the housing bubble, fuelled by out-of-control speculation, has led to soaring house prices and rents, especially in Auckland.

Government figures show the number of children in households that earn below 60 percent of the median income increased sharply from 260,000 in 2013 to 305,000 in 2014 after housing costs were taken into account.

There has been no response from the government to the latest suicide figures. Announcing a suicide “action plan” in 2013, Prime Minister John Key described suicide as solely a mental health issue. The plan does nothing to improve the financial situation or social conditions of those at risk.

Health and counselling services have suffered major funding cuts. Mark Bourassa, manager of Anti-Discrimination Group 101, told Fairfax Media the closure of groups like Relationships Aotearoa and the South Canterbury Violence Intervention Project this year, after the government cut their funding, could affect future suicide statistics.

A mother from Masterton whose 16-year-old son took his life in 2011 told the *New Zealand Herald* of her outrage at cost-cutting by the District Health Board. In 2011 the full-time suicide prevention coordinator was replaced with a part-time role, which has since been removed altogether. The region has the third highest suicide rate in the country.

Many sick and mentally ill people who previously received sickness benefits have been forced to look for work under the government’s policies to push thousands of people off welfare.

The state’s brutal attitude toward desperate and vulnerable people was underscored in August and September, when two unemployed and apparently suicidal young men were shot dead in confrontations with police in Auckland and Upper Hutt.

The opposition Labour Party’s justice spokesperson Jacinda Arden issued a statement on October 6 calling for “a more comprehensive focus on the links between suicide, deprivation and family violence/childhood abuse.”

Labour, however, also bears responsibility for the high suicide rate. The 1984-1990 Labour government of Prime Minister David Lange implemented sweeping pro-market restructuring, including the privatisation of government departments and public services, resulting in tens of thousands of job cuts. Labour introduced the regressive goods and service tax (GST), while slashing taxes for the wealthy.

The 1990s National Party government continued the attacks, including a 25 percent cut in the unemployment benefit for 20-24 year olds. From the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s, inequality widened faster in New Zealand than any other developed country.

A recent book exploring the impact of these policies, *Ruth, Roger and Me* by Andrew Dean, noted that “young people’s real median incomes almost halve[d] between 1986 and 2001.”

Dean writes: “Until the mid-1980s, 15-24 year olds had the lowest rates of suicide of any working age group ... [F]rom the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, the youth suicide rate almost tripled from just over 10 per 100,000 to almost 30.” He notes that “the number of young male welfare recipients who completed suicide rose from just 8 in the 1980s to 165 in the 1990s, the years that saw the deepest cut to the standard of living of those on government support.”

The record suicide toll is a symptom of a profoundly sick society, in which growing numbers of people, deemed surplus to the requirements of big business, are thrown on the scrap heap. Alienated and desperate, many see no future and in some cases seek to end their lives. They are the victims of an increasingly brutal, irrational and crisis-ridden capitalist system.



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