

Research Article

Changing Pattern of Suicide Trends in Sri Lanka

H Pathum Niwantha¹, E M S Ekanayaka², W S N Siriwardhana³, P D Wickramage⁴

¹Lecturer in Criminology (Temporary), ²Professor in Sociology and Criminology, ³Lecturer in Sociology (Temporary), ⁴Lecturer in Sociology (Temporary), Department of Social Sciences Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Rajarata University of Sri Lankances and Humanities, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, India.

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Corresponding Author:

H Pathum Niwantha, Department of Social Sciences Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Rajarata University of Sri Lankances and Humanities, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka, India.

Email Id:

hpnpathum@gmail.com

Orcid Id:

<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6796-1169>

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction: Suicide is a significant social problem in Asian societies, characterised as the voluntary ending of one's life. Despite its long-standing presence in social and cultural contexts, modern social patterns and human civilisation have increasingly defined suicide as a regressive societal act. This study aims to examine whether modernisation has altered suicide tactics in Sri Lanka and how these changes correlate with population trends.

Method: This macro-level study analysed suicide data reported to the Sri Lanka Police from 2000 to 2019. The research utilised both statistical data and existing literature to identify prevalent suicide methods during this period.

Results: The study identified several primary suicide methods, including pesticide poisoning, strangulation, drowning, self-inflicted injuries with sharp objects, and train jumping. Pesticide poisoning and strangulation emerged as the most common methods. In 2000, pesticide poisoning accounted for 37% of suicides, but this trend reversed by 2012, with strangulation rates increasing. By 2013, 46% of suicides were by hanging, rising to 55% in 2017, and further to 59% in subsequent years. The rise in hanging suicides is attributed to legal restrictions on pesticide availability and the relative ease of hanging.

Conclusion: The study concludes that the increase in hanging suicides in Sri Lanka is linked to regulatory changes and the practical ease of this method. While the total number of suicides has not seen a significant numerical increase, it is essential to address the underlying factors contributing to this trend. Improving mental health support, strengthening family and economic stability, and implementing crime prevention through environmental and social planning are crucial steps in mitigating this issue.

Keywords: Aberrant, Tactics, Pesticides, Social, Suicidality

Introduction

Every human being born dies one day and we can identify two main ways of dying. One is death due to natural causes and unnatural death or dying under conditions created by human society. These unnatural conditions include human wars, accidents, and suicide. In the literal sense of the word, suicide is taking one's own natural life voluntarily.

Every suicide is a tragedy. According to the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Global Burden of Disease study, nearly 800,000 people die by suicide each year. That's one person every 40 seconds.¹ The average annual suicide rate is between 4000 and 4500, which is quite high for a small country like Sri Lanka in global terms. Historically, we are a country that has had a lot of experience with suicide. Ramayana is a well-known epic poem of the South Asian society, where we have heard the story of Sita jumping into the fire and killing herself in order to explain her fate before the Lord, and the story of Rama and Lakshmana drowning themselves in the later Ramayana. Similarly, the Mahavansa also mentions how King Kasyapa, who ruled the kingdom with Sigiriya as his headquarters during the Anuradhapura period, killed himself with his own sword in front of his brother Mughal's army. It is also a piece of well-known legendary news that King Sirisanghabo committed suicide by burning his head in Attanagalla during the Anuradhapura kingdom. Against such a historical background, suicide will not be a new social phenomenon for Sri Lankans. In the same way, when focusing on the Asian religious culture and social philosophy, there are religiously supported suicide methods such as Sati Puja, which is the Vedic Brahman teachings, where the religious concept of Sati Puja is supported by the religious concept of Sati Pooja, where after the death of one's master, he jumps into the burning pyre to take his own life. Suicide has taken place based on the customs imposed by the socio-cultural environment rather than the will.

Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, was the first to do a scientific and philosophical study on suicide. In his book *Suicide*, he classified suicide for the first time according to the causes, and according to those classifications, there are four types of suicide.²

Selfish Suicide

In this case, the person who commits suicide is unable to fulfil his personal desires, does not receive the love of others, is distant from someone he loves, has emotional isolation, and shame caused by an event that affects him personally, suffering from an incurable disease that can cause severe physical or mental pressure, suicide for personal reasons, etc. Taking is called selfish suicide. This is known as one of the most common suicides in the world. Examples of such suicides include the loss of a loved one,

the loss of a close relative, a serious illness, a shameful incident, etc. known as Selfless suicide.

He commits suicide not for his personal purpose but for the achievement of the expectations of the group he represents. Sacrificing one's life for the sake of one's spouse is called altruistic suicide. We will get many examples of such suicides from contemporary society. A soldier named Hasalaka Gamini, who once carried out a suicide attack against LTTE terrorists at Alimankada Camp during the Northern Eelam War in this country, committed selfless suicide. Thus, many suicide bombers are altruistic suicide bombers.

Anomalous Suicide

In sociology, the most attention is focused on this anomalous suicide. A sudden change in society due to a disturbance, the lack of idealism is known as an anomalous condition. The Greek word ANOMIE means lawlessness. The word anomalous is derived from these Greek words. When a society is in an anarchic state, man is tempted to act by transgressing the rules of morality. It creates a disorganised form in society. Due to this, various criminal abuses and deviations develop in the society. Due to this, people who are under pressure are tempted to commit suicide. Such anomalous situations are caused by sudden changes in the social structure, racial struggles, racial conflicts, military situations, sudden natural disasters, sudden economic collapses, and sudden changes in personal social conditions.

Fateful Suicide

This includes suicides that occur due to frustration with one's life due to the activities hindering the development of a person by society or by those units. Suicide is often a tragic consequence of the immense pressure and frustration caused by social circumstances.

This classification is recognised in sociology as the most accurate classification of suicide to date.

Although suicide has been recognised under these classifications, from time to time, some evolutionary conditions can be seen in the causes of suicide and the tactics used to commit suicide. Compared to the techniques used in the distant past, when it comes to modernity, those methods have developed into the least immediate methods of pain. Accordingly, in recent times, even the rules that support suicide are being developed around the world. Accordingly, in Austria, arrangements have been made since January 1, 2022, for the terminally ill or terminally ill elderly to choose assisted suicide. Assisted suicide, which means facilitating someone to end their own life, is also legal in Austria's neighbouring Switzerland. Also, it is not considered criminal in several European countries including Spain, Belgium, and the Netherlands.³ Likewise, in 2021, Dr Philip Nietzsche in Switzerland developed a machine called

Sarco for suicide, and that year the machine was approved in Switzerland.⁴ This machine will provide support to take care of oneself in a very comfortable way.⁵

In a period where there is only positive and negative background regarding suicide, it is timely to study the trends of suicide tactics in Sri Lanka. This study is purely a sociological and criminological research and suicide as a social problem and a criminal offence should be considered in scientific studies.

Literature Review

Although suicide has existed in both written and oral forms of human history since primitive times, there was no word for this phenomenon until the seventeenth century. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word suicide was first used in 1651. But Alfred Alvarez (1972) notes that the word was mentioned in Sir Thomas Browne's (1642) *Religio Medici*.^{6,7} The Oxford Dictionary, which further defines the word linguistically, indicates that the derivation of the Latin word *Suicidium* has influenced the word *Suicide*. However, the Latin word means to kill oneself deceitfully. In 1938, Henri Romilly Fedden stated in his book *Suicide* that the Romans defined suicide using the Latin phrase *vim sibi inferre* (to do violence to oneself), *sibi mortem consciscere* (to procure one's own death) and *sauci*.^{6,7} English words such as self-murder, self-killer, and self-destruction in the language have directly correlated suicide with the deviant behaviour of killing. However, linguistically, suicide has been defined as a depraved act.⁶

If you look carefully at the current society, you can see how much suicide is a social problem in India. Especially in an economically developing country like Sri Lanka, we need to understand to what extent the temptation to commit suicide by groups belonging to the labour and intelligence forces is harmful to the present and future of the country. Therefore, sociological studies on suicide are academically important. In identifying what suicide is, attention should be paid to the interpretations that have been presented sociologically in relation to it. Accordingly, Emile Durkheim, a well-known sociologist, states in his book *Suicide* that knowing that the victim's positive or negative action will directly or indirectly lead to death is suicide. According to Duchyme's definition, suicide is an act that is directly carried out consciously by the individual.⁸ If the definition is further analysed in a broad way, it is understood that the person committing that act knowing that the end result of some kind of voluntary human action is death is suicide. Staples and Widger, who engaged in sociological studies based on Duchyme's ideas, interpret suicide as a problem that arises in the endurance of human needs.^{8,9} In the analysis of this idea of James and Tom, suicide is one approach that is personally faced with the problematic situations that arise when the individual's basic and residual needs are

met. In their study, *Situating Suicide as an Anthropological Problem: Ethnographic Approaches to Understanding Self-Harm and Self-Inflicted Death*, they show that suicide is very low in countries with a socioeconomic environment where individual needs can be met.⁹ Moving beyond sociological definitions and focusing on psychological definitions, the American Psychological Association states that suicide is the result of substance abuse and other disorders occurring in the context of depression.¹⁰

However, it has been emphasised through sociological studies that there is a direct social influence on psychologically analysed depressive conditions. In Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic paper, *Mourning and Melancholia*, he states that suicide is caused by anger and aggression when a person is unable to possess something that is tightly held. It is defined by Freudian theorists as self-punishment expressing hatred. The anxiety state that occurs when one cannot control one's own impulses, causes the person to commit suicide.¹¹

Among the legal interpretations of suicide, the statement made by Bustamante, a Mexican Court of Appeal judge, in the *Solorano vs Bristow* trial is a very positive statement. He states there that suicide is the voluntary and intentional self-destruction by a person of sound mind. According to that definition, suicide can only be considered a legal offence and historically even punishment has been recommended for it. According to historical sources, the Athenians were legally guilty of committing suicide to the point of amputating the corpse of the suicide. Plato (427–347 BC), a famous Greek philosopher, once said that man is a prisoner and has no right to escape from prison.¹² This attitude persisted for centuries and in 1759 English jurist Blackstone made suicide a criminal offence and called it suicide. Considering it as an affront to the king and God, Blackstone provided laws and severe punishments, and based on those ideas, a suicide bill was built in Britain in 1961, which clearly states that suicide is a crime and thus breaks the rule of law.¹³

Jeanne Marecek's study titled *Young Women's Suicide in Sri Lanka: Cultural, Ecological and Psychological Factors* will focus on the cultural, environmental, and psychological factors that influenced young women to commit suicide. In this study, she emphasises that the main reason that motivates women to commit suicide is the anger and psychological conditions associated with the family environment. She further mentions that not only in Sri Lanka but also in many agricultural societies including China, women use pesticides to commit suicide. Although little attention has been paid to suicide tactics, the researcher's focus on suicide tactics during the research sheds light on this study, but it is hoped to go beyond that and conduct a formal study on suicide tactics.¹⁴ de Silva et al., who

researched suicide in Sri Lanka during 1988–1997, mention that the majority of the time, the hospital data indicated that the suicides were mostly young boys and the main method was poisoning.¹⁵ Accordingly, even though such a situation arose in a period when there were no laws for the regulation of pesticides and poisons, it is a matter that needs to be paid attention to how the change in the tactical conditions has happened. Although the group engaged in a psychological study, some academic notes on suicide tactics have been made. They demonstrate that 19 out of 27 suicide cases studied, if not 70%, were due to self-poisoning. It is also special that the second most valued strategy has been the use of pesticides. Both of these strategies are considered as the use of harmful chemicals or reactive poisons and their study also shows that 90% of the deaths are due to the use of poisons.¹⁶ Although there was some attention in that study regarding suicide tactics, we can understand that there is a study void due to the fact that there was no macro-level study or study regarding its evolution over time.

Although some studies have been written regarding factors such as the causes of suicide trends in Sri Lanka, the influence of gender, and the psychological impact, there are very few studies that have been done on whether there is a systematic transmission of the suicide tactics and what are the changes. In such a situation, these studies will help to fill the relevant research gap.

Objectives Of The Study

The purpose of this study was mainly influenced by the lack of research on suicide tactics in Sri Lanka. Accordingly, the main objective of this study is to study whether there has been a change in suicide tactics due to the modernisation process and if there has been a change, to identify the main factors that have affected it. Apart from that, it is also expected to study whether there has been any change in the suicide rate compared to the population and to study the effect of the existing social and legal environment.

Research Methodology

This study employs a descriptive study design. It is based on research literature written and published about suicides in Sri Lanka between the years 2000 and 2020. Data on all suicide incidents during this period, obtained through the police department, were analysed. Trends in suicide attempts were studied using simple statistical methods.

Results And Discussion

According to the data received through the police department, there are several methods used to commit suicide mainly in Sri Lanka. These methods include using poisons and pesticides, strangulation, jumping into the water, embracing death by firearms, using bombs and explosives, setting fires, jumping on trains, drinking acid

and fuel, and using natural poisons, from high places. The methods of jumping and drug overdose are more positive. When studying the data from 2000 to 2020, we can identify some of the most popular suicide tactics in Sri Lanka. Among those tactics, we can identify the use of poisons and pesticides and hang as the most popular suicide tactics in Sri Lanka.

In Sri Lanka, which inherits a more historical agricultural economic pattern, due to the widespread use of pesticides as chemical resources needed for agriculture, it has become common for Sri Lankan people to use pesticides to commit suicide. By the year 2000, 37% of the total 5412 Sri Lankan suicides were due to the use of poisons. During that year, the number of strangulations as a trick has taken a minimum value of about 18%. This situation is further aggravated by the fact that by 2002, 51% of the total number of deaths were converted into deaths due to consumption of poisons. Although there is a very low rate of recourse to other residual methods, the reason for the popularity of poisoning may be due to the belief that it is possible to embrace death with less pain. However, we can see a decrease in the suicide rate from 2000 to 2004 (Figure 1). In the year 2000, 5412 incidents were reported to the police, but by 2004, it had decreased to 4876.

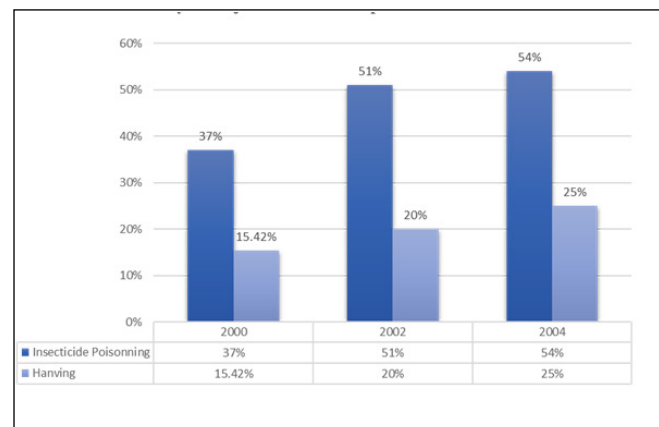


Figure 1. Variability in Major Suicidal Attempts from 2000 to 2004¹⁷

The trends of 2004 continued into 2006, but by 2008 the suicide rate had reached a very low level compared to 2000. In 2000, the number was 5412, and by 2008, it had come down to 4120. There has also been some change in the methods of public poisoning and hanging, and there has been a slight decrease in poisoning, but there has been some growth in the rate of hanging. In 2008, only 48% of all incidents were due to poisoning, while strangulation, which was 25% in 2006, increased to 32% in 2008. There has been a trend of increasing the trend of hanging people during this period due to the economic decline and the fact that the economic decline was strong among the reasons that influenced suicide.

From the year 2012, we can identify a positive change in suicide attempt trends. That is, the increased tendency to consume poisons has translated into hanging by 2012. The main reason for this is the 2011 amendment of the Pesticides Control Act No. 33 of 1980. It has banned 36 types of pesticides and even tightened the rules for obtaining pesticides. Due to these reasons, the consumption of poisons, which used to be a tendency to commit suicide, has become somewhat less trending and by 2012, the total number of suicides had decreased to 3526, of which 41% are strangulations, and consumption of poisons has decreased to 38. This situation has worsened by 2016 and with the suicide rate decreasing, the use of poisons has decreased and the number of hangings has increased. By 2016, strangulation accounted for 52% of all incidents, while poisonings had dipped to a low of 28% that year. At the same time, by 2018, strangulation has been reduced to 58% and consumption of poisons has reduced to 24% (Figure 2).

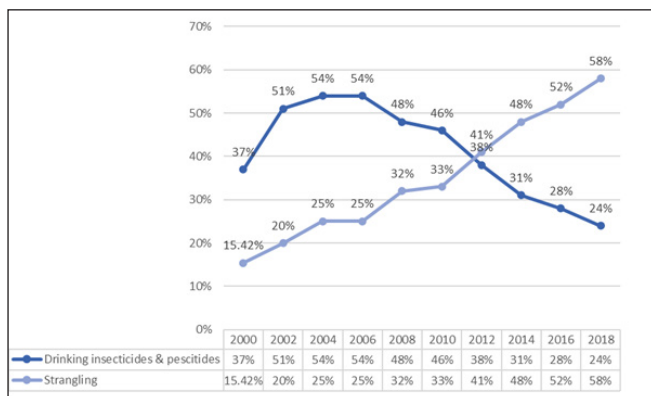


Figure 2. Changing Trends in Poisoning and Hanging Tactics¹⁷

Accordingly, as a trend, we can identify a way in which suicide tactics have undergone some changes based on the legal and economic framework of modern Sri Lanka. There we can identify a way in which the situation has evolved towards hanging the neck due to the strengthening of the legal situation for the use of pesticides and poisons. Also, the rate of suicide compared to the year 2000 has undergone a clear change and by the year 2018, the situation has decreased to 3281 incidents, which is a social achievement for Sri Lanka.

We can identify a way in which the number of suicides decreased from the year 2000 to the year 2018 due to issues such as education, globalisation, and urbanisation, which were developing in modern social attitudes in Sri Lanka. Although subtle, the strengthening of legal status has had the effect of reducing suicide rates in some ways. Due to the digital social transformation and globalisation factors that occurred after 2012, we can identify a gradual decrease in the motivations for suicide. It can be believed

that the young community, who are often tempted to commit suicide, has reduced their urge to commit suicide by seeking the help of new technology and digital media to manage the situation in times of frustration (Figure 3).

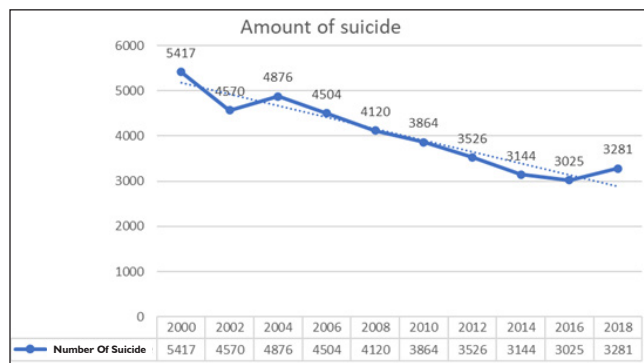


Figure 3. Number of Suicides between 2000 and 2018¹⁷

Suggestions And Conclusion

At the beginning of the year 2000, Sri Lanka had a high suicide rate. But with the evolution of society and the passage of time, the situation changed to a slightly lower value. Here, focusing on the main suicide tactics. Drinking poisons and hanging themselves were the most prominent suicide tactics, and among these tactics, drinking poisons was the most popular in the early days, as the laws related to pesticides became more difficult to obtain, the suicide rate and the rate of poisoning gradually decreased. Although hanging became proportionally more common after 2012 than poisoning, there was no statistically significant change, so we can identify a more impactful trend change in tactics. However, suicide is not a deviant act that cannot be reduced in one moment, and it should be ended by a systematic transformation. By analysing the related data, we can understand that Sri Lanka is currently moving through a period of systematic transformation, and presenting some social and legal proposals to ease the situation is a valuable research activity. As mentioned earlier, since the legal reforms regarding pesticides after 2012, the suicide rate has come down decisively, but it will be quite difficult to apply legal provisions to reduce hanging. Therefore, it is very timely to present some suggestions in society in order to reduce suicide as a whole. To control this situation, the criminological approach called the control of deviant actions should be used through social development and thus it will be possible to reduce the social environment conducive to suicide by measures such as neighbourhood influence, and strengthening social relations. In the same way, by building personality development programmes targeting the youth community in schools and youth societies and by providing education to the youth to successfully cope with stress management and mental disorders, it will be possible to further reduce suicide in Sri Lanka. Similarly,

the government as a state has a responsibility to introduce new economic policies and employment programmes to remedy the disparity in resource allocation. For that, it is extremely important to introduce new foreign employment projects, bursary and foreign scholarship projects, and self-employment projects aimed at the youth community. Based on such a situation, the suicide rate in Sri Lanka will gradually be developed to a low value.

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