

# “Horrendous” increase in New Zealand suicide rates

By John Braddock  
9 September 2019

New Zealand suicide deaths have reached their highest level since official records began 12 years ago. The annual statistics, released on August 26, showed there were 685 suicides in the year to June 30.

It was the fourth year in a row the numbers have increased. Since 2014-15, when there were 564 suicides (then an all-time high) the total has risen by a staggering 21.45 percent. The suicide rate now stands at 13.93 per 100,000 people. Rates of suicide among youth, Maori and Pacific Island people have risen dramatically.

Among 15- to 19-year-olds, 73 died, up from 53 last year. The rate for this age group was 23.14 per 100,000, up from 16.88—a 37 percent increase. In the 20–24 age range, suicides increased from 76 to 91. That put the rate at 26.87 per 100,000, up from 21.21, a 27 percent increase and the highest rate of all age groups. The next highest was the 45–49 year-old group, with 67 deaths. Suicide rates for men are more than twice as high as for women.

“This is a really horrendous result,” Sean Robinson of the Mental Health Foundation said. Monique Faleafa, from the Pasifika support service Le Va, described the increase as “devastating.” Psychotherapist Kyle MacDonald said New Zealand was in the grip of a “mental health crisis.”

The ballooning suicide rate is an international phenomenon. Suicides had been declining in the UK, Europe, US and Canada before the 2008 financial crisis, then numbers rose dramatically. In a 2014 paper published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, Oxford University researchers compared data from before and after 2007 and found more than 10,000 “economic suicides” associated with the recession across those regions. US suicides are currently at their highest since World War II, with the opioid epidemic, social stress

and lack of security among contributing factors.

In New Zealand, as elsewhere, the social layers worst affected are the most oppressed sections of the working class. Of the country’s 20 District Health Board catchment areas, Auckland, the city with the highest concentration of working class people, had the biggest increase of suicides with 73, a 70 percent rise from last year.

Maori suicides nationally—already disproportionately high—jumped further, with 169 Maori people dying in the year, up 27 from 142 last year. Pacific Islander suicides also rose, from 23 to 34 deaths. The rate among Pacific Islanders is lower than the national average but jumped markedly in the past year.

The Maori suicide rate now stands at 28.23 per 100,000 people, while the Pacific Island rate is at 11.49 per 100,000. Maori and Pacific peoples are over-represented in all the social statistics related to poverty, illness, homelessness, poor education and imprisonment rates.

According to figures cited by the *Dominion Post*, of the 6,889 people who committed suicide between 2007 and 2019, 1,884 were unemployed. That is more than a quarter of the total. Another 625 were students.

The suicide statistics are a damning indictment of the failure of the Labour-NZ First-Green Party government to address the spiralling social crisis. Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern said there was “no question” the suicide rate was too high. But she told a press conference the issue was “long-term,” and not just a “challenge” for the government. “We are moving quickly, but it is going to take time to create the kind of change we need as a nation,” she said.

In fact, Labour has done nothing to address the underlying causes of social distress—poverty, rampant inequality, lack of social services and the housing

crisis. Last week Ardern announced that the government was abandoning its flagship KiwiBuild housing scheme, portending another hike in the price of rents and housing, a major factor in mental health and suicide rates.

Mental health groups called for urgent action over the suicide crisis. Kyle MacDonald said he was “frustrated” with the rate of progress. A program to allow people to see a doctor to get immediate support had been funded in this year’s government budget but was still in the planning phase.

Labelling the figures a “sad reminder” of the mental health “challenge,” Health Minister David Clark said a new Suicide Prevention Strategy and a Suicide Prevention Office would be announced within weeks.

However, the budget in May included only \$1.9 billion more for mental health and addiction programs over five years. This was presented as a focus of the so-called “well-being” budget. From this, it is intended to include a new “frontline” mental health program costing at \$455million for 325,000 people by 2023/4. Specific suicide prevention programs get a mere \$40m boost.

In order to meet its stated targets, it is estimated that the total psychology workforce, including psychologists, counsellors and social workers, would need to be doubled by 2023. The budget provides no details on how this will happen.

Meanwhile, social inequality is worsening. The *National Business Review* boasted last month that the country’s multi-millionaires boosted their combined wealth by \$9 billion to \$90 billion last year. In July, media reports showed welfare beneficiaries queuing from 2 a.m. outside the Work and Income office in Manurewa, South Auckland for emergency grants to feed and clothe their families. Without volunteer advocates to help with their claims, many said their desperate pleas for cash are almost always denied.

More than \$100 million was paid in emergency hardship grants in the last three months of 2018—a record. More than 385,000 individual grants were made—an increase of almost 95,000 on the same period the previous year. Child poverty remains entrenched—1 in 6 children (174,000) live in households with less than 40 percent of the median income, after housing costs.

The Chief Censor David Shanks seized on the suicide

statistics to call for more regulation of the internet. He hit out at streaming services such as Netflix and the show *13 Reasons Why*, saying there had to be “better protections for vulnerable viewers.” Shanks misleadingly claimed improving regulation “could make a difference” to the suicide problem. Shanks has played a key role in ramping up censorship of online material since the March 15 Christchurch terror attack, in which 51 people were killed, including by banning the revealing political “manifesto” posted by the alleged killer, Brenton Tarrant.

Responsibility for the social crisis rests with the entire ruling elite. Governments of all stripes have systematically suppressed the social conditions of the working class in order to satisfy the demands of big business and the international financial markets. Particular blame rests with the Labour Party and the trade unions, which have enforced the corporate offensive on jobs, wages, working conditions, social services and basic rights.

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