

Lies, Damn Lies, and Statistics

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I've been reading books about suicide and I've run across many statistics, not all of which match. This is not surprising given that many of the books are 15-20 years old. The most recent set of complete numbers I found was for 2001, in the National Vital Statistics Reports (vol. 52 #3 Sept 18, 2003) found on the web at www.cdc.gov. All of the following are the official U.S. government numbers for the U.S. for 2001. While these numbers may be the best that we have, remember that the stigma of suicide is responsible for a certain amount of underreporting. For instance, one book reported one coroner in California who only ruled a death a suicide if a note was found. Depending on which book you are reading, it is estimated that suicide notes are found in roughly 15-20% of the cases. Also, one has to wonder whether one-vehicle accidents, gun cleaning accidents and similar situations are accidents or suicides. It is estimated that suicide is underreported by about 30%. And this is a conservative estimate. It is unlikely that we will ever know the true numbers.

It is also estimated that for each suicide there are 6 survivors left behind. With roughly 30,000 suicides a year in the US, this leaves approximately 180,000 bereaved yearly. Over a 10-year period this works out to 1.8 million survivors of suicide in the U.S. alone.

In 2001, suicide was the 11th leading cause of death for all age groups with 30,622 suicides reported. The highest number of suicide deaths was in the 35-44 year old age bracket with 6635 deaths. In the 15-24 year old bracket there were 3971 suicides. Suicide was the third leading cause of death in this bracket, behind accidents (14,441), and homicide (5297). In Arizona, however, the suicide rate was higher than the homicide rate in this age group (767 suicides vs. 494 homicides). Suicide is the second leading cause of death in this age group in Arizona, behind motor vehicle accidents (1020). This means that a young adult in Arizona is more likely to die by his or her own hand than by that of another.

U.S. numbers show that males are more likely to commit suicide (24,672 male suicides vs. 5950 female suicides). Overall, the suicide rate is 10.8 per 100,000 people, with the male suicide rate at 17.6 and the female suicide rate at 4. While it is estimated that women attempt suicide six times more often than men, men complete suicide more often than females. The male rate of suicide is more than four times higher than the female rate, primarily due to the methods males tend to use.

Suicides are 1.3% of total deaths in the U.S. (2,416,425). There are 1.5 suicides for every homicide (20,308). So, remember that every time you hear a news account about a homicide, 1.5 people have died by their own hands. Every 17

minutes in the U.S. there is another suicide. People are uncomfortable when I bring up the topic of suicide and talk about my son's suicide, yet silence is too heavy a burden. It is time to talk about these numbers, numbers which I didn't know until my son died. I wish I had known the numbers before his death.