



Japan's Success Story in Fostering Collective Responsibility in Suicide Prevention

The Power of Unity

Moses Adeleke Adeoye, Olaolu Paul Akinnubi

Educational Management, Faculty of Education, Al-Hikmah University Ilorin, Nigeria

princeadelekm@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Drawing insights from Japan's inspiring initiatives, this article uncovers the valuable lessons that can be learned in addressing suicide issues with collective responsibility. This study attempts to investigate the importance of cooperation in Japan's effectiveness in promoting collective responsibility for suicide prevention. Suicide is a significant public health issue around the world, and Japan has historically had high suicide rates. However, by employing several initiatives that prioritize shared responsibility and community involvement, Japan has recently achieved impressive strides in reducing suicide rates. This paper analyzes the crucial elements such as cultural elements, social support networks, and government initiatives that have contributed to Japan's success. It also looks at how these strategies affect suicide prevention and emphasizes the lessons that other countries can learn from Japan's experience. According to the study's findings, the power of unity in combination with targeted therapy can effectively address the challenging issue of suicide prevention.

KEYWORDS

Collective Responsibility; Destigmatization; Social Support Systems; Suicide Prevention.

ARTICLE INFO

First received: 04 October 2023

Revised: 31 October 2023

Final proof accepted: 15 December 2023

Available online: 25 December 2023

INTRODUCTION

Suicide has a lengthy history in Japan that goes back centuries and it is frequently influenced by societal and cultural standards. Suicide has historically been embedded in Japanese society, especially through the practice of *seppuku* (also known as *harakiri*). Samurai warriors employed *seppuku* as a strategy to restore their honor or evade capture. The historical link to suicide has shaped social perceptions of self-inflicted death. Suicide was occasionally considered a noble deed in traditional Japanese culture as a way to uphold one's self-respect or make up for wrongdoings.

Seppuku, a form of ritual suicide by disembowelment was practiced by samurai and other individuals in positions of authority who faced dishonor or defeat. There has been a tendency to view Japan as a 'suicide nation,' meaning that the Japanese are uniquely predisposed to end their lives which became the conventional story of suicide (Di Marco, 2016). Japan has one of the highest suicide rates in the world with approximately 20,000 suicides reported annually. This alarming statistic has prompted the Japanese government and various organizations to take action and address the root causes of suicide in the country. Over time, suicide came to be seen

as a means of escaping personal and social hardships. In the modern era, Japan experienced a surge in suicide rates during the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Durkheim (2005), a founding father of sociology, stated that each society has a definitive aptitude for suicide. Therefore, suicide is expected in every society and not unique to individual countries. Durkheim and others helped to establish suicide as a social ill and by-product of modernization (Cholbi, 2017; Hecht, 2013; Joiner, 2007).

Durkheim's theories became the basis of suicidology, whereas other prominent theories did not emerge until the latter half of the twentieth century (Hecht, 2013). A notable example is Schneidman, who believed that almost every suicide was caused by psychache or psychological pain (Joiner, 2007). This factor alone, however, is not sufficient to explain why people commit suicide. Schneidman argued that the decision must also contain a degree of lethality which Joiner elaborated upon in a contemporary context, stating that suicide victims possess not only the desire but also the capacity for self-injury (Joiner, 2007). Sugimoto (2010) defines *nihonjinron* as "theories of Japanese-ness", constructing Japan as homogenous and culturally unique. The scholarship of Japanese suicide can be summarized into four points (Di Marco, 2016): Japan has one of, if not, the highest suicide rates in the world. Japanese are predisposed to end their lives. Every facet of suicide follows a tradition of distinct patterns. Suicide in Japan is culturally unique and can only be understood by the Japanese. However, modern Japanese research seems to have turned away from this narrative.

Suicide prevention is a critical global issue with far-reaching consequences for individuals, families, and societies. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 800,000 people die by suicide each year, making it a significant public health concern that affects people of all ages and backgrounds worldwide. In response to this challenge, Japan has emerged as a success story in suicide prevention, demonstrating the power of collective responsibility in tackling this complex issue. Japan's journey in addressing suicide prevention has been remarkable. Historically, the country faced alarmingly high suicide rates, reaching a peak of 34,427 suicides in 2003. As of the latest available data (up to 2021), the suicide rate in Japan had declined for 11 consecutive years, reaching its lowest level in more than three decades. This substantial reduction

showcases Japan's effective approach to combating suicide. Japan's success in suicide prevention can be attributed, in large part, to its emphasis on collective responsibility. Several key factors contribute to this approach: community engagement and awareness, government commitment, public-private partnerships, education and training, and media and cultural sensitivity.

Japan extensively includes neighborhood communities in efforts to prevent suicide. To increase awareness, de-stigmatize mental health concerns and support vulnerable individuals, grassroots organizations, community leaders, and volunteers are essential. By encouraging people to voice their concerns and developing a sense of community, these community-based programs foster a culture of shared responsibility. With enormous funding allocated to create comprehensive and research-based programs, the Japanese government has shown a strong commitment to preventing suicide. The goal of policymakers is to ensure that the issue is adequately addressed by prioritizing mental health services and suicide prevention programs.

Japan encourages partnerships between the public and private sectors to maximize the impact of suicide prevention initiatives. Corporations, businesses, and non-governmental organizations actively contribute resources, funding, and expertise to support mental health programs and campaigns. Japan has invested in educating its citizens about mental health and suicide prevention. Mental health education is integrated into school curricula, increasing awareness from a young age. Additionally, mental health training programs are provided to teachers, healthcare professionals, and community leaders, equipping them to identify signs of distress and provide appropriate support (Kawashima et al., 2018). The Japanese media plays a vital role in suicide prevention by promoting responsible reporting and avoiding sensationalization of suicide incidents. Journalists are encouraged to follow guidelines that prioritize mental health sensitivity, thereby reducing the risk of triggering copycat suicides. For other nations experiencing comparable difficulties, Japan's achievement in promoting collective responsibility in suicide prevention serves as an inspiring model. Japan has exemplified the strength of unity in addressing this crucial global issue by actively incorporating communities, placing a high priority on mental health, establishing public-private partnerships,

encouraging education, and sensitizing the media. Emulating Japan's strategy can help to significantly lower suicide rates and give hope to people suffering from mental health issues all around the world.

METHOD

The paper utilized a survey research design to provide a comprehensive understanding of Japan's success in suicide prevention through the power of unity. The study aimed to understand the role of collective responsibility in Japan's successful suicide prevention strategies and to provide insights for other countries facing similar challenges. Japan's collective responsibility approach involves collaboration between various stakeholders such as government agencies, healthcare professionals, community organizations, and schools. The Researchers collected journal articles from Google Scholar, Research Gate, and the SINTA database.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Role of Government Initiatives

Japan has been successful in fostering shared responsibility for suicide prevention because of the government's deliberate policies and persistent efforts. Due to the alarming increase in suicide rates in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the Japanese government recognized the urgent need for an all-encompassing remedy. Act No. 85 of 2006, the Basic Act on Suicide Prevention was passed to improve matters. With the passage of this law, Japan's approach to suicide prevention underwent a dramatic transformation. It now has a legal framework for directing and coordinating national and local efforts to support the relatives of people who have died by suicide. Through these activities, a thorough suicide prevention plan was advanced while also attempting to address the underlying reasons for suicide. The government focused particularly on improving high-risk populations' access to mental health services, such as counseling and therapy, including students, the elderly, and the unemployed. It also made an effort to increase the number of mental health professionals to meet the growing need for support.

Recognizing the importance of community involvement, the government actively encouraged and supported grassroots organizations, community leaders, and volunteers to engage in suicide prevention efforts. This approach fostered a sense of collective responsibility and solidarity in tackling the issue. Programs for gatekeeper training were developed by the government to aid in spotting people who might commit suicide and in providing quick assistance. Teachers, healthcare workers, and community leaders who participated in these programs gained the ability to see warning signs and provide the necessary support. The government set up national and local crisis hotlines to provide immediate assistance and emotional support to those in need. These hotlines were essential in reaching out to those who were thinking about taking their own lives and offering them a lifeline. Mental health education has been incorporated into school curricula to lessen the stigma associated with mental health concerns. A more tolerant and sympathetic society was produced by the government by promoting knowledge from a young age.

Community Engagement and Awareness Programs

Japan has emerged in recent years as a ray of hope in the struggle against this dreadful issue. The strong sense of community that permeates Japanese society is among the main reasons why the country has been successful in preventing suicide. Communities are extremely important in Japan for helping those who might be suicidal. Empathy, compassion, and a profound appreciation of the value of human life serve as the cornerstones of this support system. Local organizations and individuals take up the cause of community engagement in suicide prevention at the grass-roots level. These groups put in a lot of effort to promote mental health education, offer support services, and increase awareness. To destigmatize mental health issues and provide a secure environment for people to get treatment, they arrange events, workshops, and campaigns.

The installation of "listening stations" or "yutori no to" in local communities is one of Japan's noteworthy projects. These listening stations are staffed by trained volunteers who offer individuals in need a sympathetic ear and emotional support. The volunteers are frequently regular people who have undergone intensive training to identify the warning signs of suicide and provide the necessary

support. This community-based strategy guarantees that assistance is easily accessible to anybody who requires it, encouraging a sense of shared responsibility. Schools have a critical role in reducing suicide by providing mental health education and safe spaces for children. Teachers and other school staff are trained to recognize warning signs of distress and to intervene properly. Students are advised to look out for one another and report any problems they may be worried about. By cooperating, the school community may feel more unified and responsible, ensuring that no one is left behind. This tactic not only serves to lessen the stigma attached to mental health.

Raising awareness and decreasing the shame and silence around suicide have been made possible by the “*Sekkyo Suru Shinjitsu*” (Speaking Out the Truth) campaign. This campaign has stirred significant debates and urged people to seek assistance when necessary through PSAs, educational initiatives, and neighborhood gatherings. Japan's dedication to encouraging collective responsibility is ultimately responsible for its effectiveness in preventing suicide. Japan has established a welcoming atmosphere that prioritizes mental health and offers essential services for those at risk by establishing initiatives that engage communities, companies, and individuals. While there are still obstacles to overcome, Japan's advancements in this field provide an example for other nations to follow.

Education and Mental Health Support

In Japan, combating the problem of suicide necessitates a strong feeling of communal accountability. It emphasizes the shared responsibility of people, communities, and society as a whole to prevent and reduce the suicide rate. This concept recognizes that suicide is a societal issue that needs the support of everyone in society to be effectively handled. One crucial part of our shared obligation is to remove the stigma attached to mental health concerns. Japanese culture has always stigmatized mental illness severely which has prevented many people from seeking assistance and forced them to suffer in silence. Collective responsibility seeks to create a setting in which people feel comfortable talking about their mental health and getting the help they need by fostering a culture of understanding, acceptance, and support. Collective responsibility highlights the value of early intervention and education in preventing suicide. By becoming more knowledgeable about risk factors, warning signs,

and available options, people may recognize when someone is in crisis and react properly. Collective accountability allows people to seek aid without worrying about being judged by others and helps to dissolve isolation barriers. These organizations can create elaborate plans that address the many issues surrounding suicide by coordinating their efforts and pooling their resources. Through this partnership, it is made sure that those who are vulnerable receive the help they need and have access to mental health treatments. Getting rid of the idea that suicide is just an individual issue is essential for dealing with the problem of suicide. Japan moved toward a more kind and helpful approach by acknowledging the shared social responsibility society has in avoiding suicide. This entails fostering an atmosphere that promotes candid discussions about mental health, lowering stigma, and offering sufficient support to individuals who are in need.

Collaboration between Public and Private Sectors

In Japan, Mr. and Mrs. Nishihara founded the Tokyo Suicide Prevention Center in 1998, 20 years after the establishment of OSPC. OSPC is a member of the international charity organization Befrienders Worldwide which originated from The Samaritans 5 in 1953 in London as the first charity in the world to offer telephone counseling to distressed people. OSPC specializes in suicide counseling while *Kansai Inochi no Denwa* (Kansai Life Telephone) deals with a wide range of issues, including suicide. The counselors at OSPC are volunteers who are not paid for their advice and this correlates with the philosophy of the center: “befriending”. Befriending means “listening to the feelings of those who wish to die, being there for them as a friend, and relieving their suffering as much as possible” (OSPC, 2014). According to the current chairman (a man in his 30s), the difference between OSPC and *Kansai Inochi no Denwa* is that the OSPC first confirms if callers have a clear intention to commit suicide. Around 60–70 percent of the callers at OSPC had a clear intention to commit suicide while only 20% of callers at *Kansai Inochi no Denwa* did. OSPC specializes in suicide counseling while *Kansai Inochi no Denwa* deals with a wide range of issues, including suicide. Like psychotherapists and social workers, OSPC's volunteer counselors review, check, monitor, and modify the relationship between the callers and themselves through supervision after each call. As expected, the calls that come into the center are “hard to take alone”. Thus, about three

experienced counselors are appointed as supervisors and the other counselors can talk to the supervisors and their colleagues at the end of each shift. OSPC's telephone counseling service is available every Friday from 1 pm to Sunday from 10 pm for 57hrs. Currently, there are approximately 40 counselors on duty, working in shifts. They work three times a month for 5 hours per shift, with one of the three shifts taking place late at night.

Effectiveness of Suicide Prevention Hotlines in Japan

Support systems and networks play a crucial role in preventing suicides by fostering collective responsibility (World Health Organization/WHO, 2019). The Japanese government, along with various organizations and communities, has taken proactive measures to establish support systems and networks that assist individuals at risk. In Japan, suicide prevention hotlines have emerged as a crucial tool in combating the country's high suicide rates (Kawashima, Iwasa, Ueda, & Hirayasu, 2018). With a comprehensive approach that emphasizes collective responsibility, Japan has successfully integrated hotlines into its suicide prevention strategies (Umeda, 2016). These helplines provide a lifeline for individuals in crisis, offering immediate support and intervention. The structure of suicide prevention hotlines in Japan is designed to ensure accessibility and effectiveness. Trained volunteers, often equipped with mental health backgrounds, staff these helplines, lending a compassionate ear to those in need. The country has established a robust network of hotlines, making it easier for individuals to find assistance regardless of their location. Japan's suicide prevention hotlines have proven to be highly impactful (Ishikawa, 2022). By providing a confidential and non-judgmental space for individuals to share their struggles, these helplines act as a critical support system (Umeda, 2016). Trained volunteers offer empathetic listening, provide emotional support, and help callers explore potential solutions to their problems. The success of Japan's suicide prevention hotlines can be attributed to the collaborative efforts between various stakeholders. Mental health professionals work closely with volunteers to ensure quality support and intervention. Additionally, the government plays a crucial role in facilitating the operation of these helplines and promoting awareness about their availability. These helplines provide immediate support, offer a non-

judgmental space, and encourage collective responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has investigated the success of Japan in building a culture of collective responsibility for suicide prevention and has highlighted the importance of unity. Suicide prevention in Japan is both innovative and successful. The nation has successfully decreased suicide rates by putting a strong emphasis on community involvement and shared responsibility. This accomplishment has been greatly aided by the establishment of numerous initiatives and programs, including gatekeeper education, mental health awareness campaigns, and community support networks. Societies can build a safety net that supports and shields weak people by promoting solidarity and encouraging community involvement.

REFERENCES

- 2015 White Paper on Suicide Prevention in Japan—
Digest Version.
<http://warp.da.ndl.go.jp/info:ndljp/pid/9929094/www8.cao.go.jp/jisatsutaisaku/white-paper/en/w-2015/summary.html>
- Cabinet Office, Government of Japan. (2017). Japan's Voluntary National Review on the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
<https://www.unic.or.jp/library/2020/07/Japan-VNR-2017.pdf>
- Di Marco, F. (2016). *Suicide in twentieth-century Japan*. Routledge.
- Durkheim, É. (2005). *Suicide, A study in sociology*. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (Trans.), George Simpson (Ed., Intro). Routledge.
- Hecht, J.M. (2013). *Stay a history of suicide and the philosophies against it*. Yale University Press
- Joiner, T.E. (2007). *Why people die by suicide*. Harvard University Press.
- Kawashima, Y., Iwasa, H., Ueda, M. & Hirayasu, Y. (2018). Gatekeeper training for suicide prevention: A systematic review of randomized controlled trials. *The International Journal of Social Psychiatry*, 64(4), 366-375.
- Keisatsucho. (2022). The Number of Suicides by Month in 2021: Preliminary Figures at the End of December.
<https://www.npa.go.jp/safetylife/scianki/jisatsu/R03/202112sokuhouti.pdf>

- Koseirodoshō . (2021). *Jisatsu Taisaku Hakusho* (White Paper on Suicide Prevention): Reiwa, 3rd Ed. Tokyo: Nikkei Insatsu.
- Koseirodoshō. (2022). Suicide statistics: provisional for 2021. https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/hukushi_kaigo/seikatsuhogo_jisatsu/jisatsu_year.html
- Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare. (2020) White Paper on Suicide Prevention. https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/hukushi_kaigo/seikatsuhogo/jisatsujisatsuhakusyo2020.html
- Moriyama, K. (2021). "Changes in Japan's social suicide prevention." *Japanese Journal of Psychiatric Treatment* 36(8), 945–50.
- Nippon (2022). Number of Suicides in Japan Rises in 2022. https://www.nippon.com/en/japan_data/h01624/
- Osaka Suicide Prevention Center (OSPC) (2014). *Shitteimasuka? Jisatsu · jisatsu boshi to shien* (Do You Know? Suicide, Suicide Prevention and Support). Osaka: Kaiho Shuppansha.
- Sugimoto, Y (2010). *An introduction to Japanese society*. 3rd Ed. Cambridge University Press.
- TOMOE ISHIKAWA (2022). Suicides increase for the first time in two years to 21,584 in 2022. <https://www.asahi.com/ajw/articles/14819601>
- Umeda, S. (2016) Japan: Basic Act on Suicide Prevention Amended. <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2016-06-07/japan-basic-act-on-suicide-prevention-amended/>.
- Van Orden, K.A., Witte, T.K., Cukrowicz, K.C., Braithwaite, S.R., Selby, E.A. & Joiner, T.E. (2010). The interpersonal theory of suicide. *Psychological Review*, 117(2), 575–600
- World Health Organization (WHO) (2017). Preventing Suicide: a resource for media professionals.
- World Health Organization (WHO) (2019). Suicide in the world: Global Health Estimates. <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/326948/WHO-MSD-MER-19.3-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- World Health Organization (WHO). (2017). Preventing Suicide A Resource for Media Professionals. https://www.who.int/mental_health/prevention/suicide/resource_medi.pdf