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Suicide claimed more Japanese lives in October than 10 months of COVID

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5-6 minutes

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The mental health toll of COVID-19

[The mental health toll of COVID-19 07:39](#)

Tokyo — Far more Japanese people are dying of suicide, likely exacerbated by the economic and social repercussions of the pandemic, than of the COVID-19 disease itself. While Japan has managed its coronavirus epidemic far better than many nations, keeping deaths below 2,000 nationwide, provisional statistics from

the National Police Agency show suicides surged to 2,153 in October alone, marking the fourth straight month of increase.

To date, more than 17,000 people have taken their own lives this year in Japan. October self-inflicted deaths were up 600 year on year, with female suicides, about a third of the total, surging over 80%.

Women, who have primary responsibility for childcare, have borne the brunt of pandemic-induced job losses and insecurity. They're also at greater risk of domestic violence, which help centers say has worsened here this year, [as it has around the world](#).



Japanese commuters make their way through Shinagawa station in Tokyo, Japan, November 13, 2020, amid the coronavirus pandemic. KIM KYUNG-HOON/REUTERS

Child suicides, while a much smaller portion of the total, are also higher.

"We need to seriously confront reality," chief government spokesman Katsunobu Kato said this week, announcing bolstered efforts to counsel potential victims via suicide hotlines and social media.

Yokohama-based psychiatrist Chiyoko Ueda, in an interview published this week on a local news site, said the mental health distress caused by COVID was evident in her clinic. Among the things she said patients have told her: "My self-esteem is low because I'm worried about money; The stay-home situation has disrupted my life; My kids and I don't get along."

Japan has [grappled with high suicide rates](#) for a long time and for complex reasons, but the overall numbers had been on a downward trend this year, until they reversed course in July — possibly as the initial "we're all in this together" pandemic positivity waned, and the buffering impact of public subsidies disappeared.

[Death from overworking 03:45](#)

That month Japan added an additional \$10 million for suicide prevention, after \$24 million was budgeted last spring.

Until this year, Japan had been making steady progress to reduce suicides, which surpassed 34,000 in 2003. Improved counseling and efforts to combat *karoshi*, or being worked to death, helped bring down suicides to around 20,000 last year — the lowest number since record-keeping began in 1978.

While Japan still has the highest suicide rate among the world's wealthy G-7 nations, at 16 per 100,000, it had hoped to continue making progress, with a goal of lowering it to 13 per 100,000 by 2026, a level comparable to other developed countries.

The U.S. suicide rate, meanwhile, has been on the rise, passing [14 per 100,000](#) in 2018.

"A mental health epidemic"

Deteriorating mental health in Japan - which reports suicide data far more quickly than most countries - could prove to be a worrying harbinger of the pandemic's insidious impact elsewhere.

Earlier this year, U.S. researchers warned that the pandemic [could trigger 75,000 "deaths of despair,"](#) stemming from unemployment, lack of social contact and other mental health stressors.

[How students can manage their mental health 05:06](#)

"We're in the [midst of a mental health epidemic right now](#), and I think it's only gonna get worse," Dr. Vivian Pender, president-elect of the [American Psychiatric Association](#), told CBS "Sunday Morning" recently.

"You don't think the worst is over?" correspondent Susan Spencer asked her.

"No, not at all. No, I think in a way the worst is yet to come, in terms of mental health. There's gonna be tremendous grief and mourning for all the lost people, and the lost opportunities, and the lost dreams and hopes that people had."

[More than half \(53%\) of American adults](#) said in a recent survey that their mental health had suffered because of the pandemic. [Prescriptions for antidepressants shot up 14%](#) after the initial outbreak.