

Drop in number of suicide cases, but...

More elderly are taking their own lives; loneliness, ill health could be reasons

By JESSICA JAGANATHAN

LOWER rates of unemployment and a booming economy could well be reasons for a drop in suicide cases here.

The total number of suicides dropped from 419 in 2006 to 374 last year – Singapore's first decrease in four years.

Experts say the strong economy has the most impact on working people aged between 25 and 64.

"Unemployment figures are known to have cause and effect on suicide figures," said Ms Christine Wong, executive director of suicide prevention group Samaritans of Singapore (SOS).

She pointed out that increased awareness of suicide in the community and more resources being extended to help Singaporeans cope could have also contributed to lower suicide rates.

But what remains disturbing is the rising

number of suicides for one group: the elderly.

Among those aged 65 years and above, suicides increased from 69 in 2006 to 87 last year.

Last year, Singapore's suicide rate per 100,000 residents – an indicator in population statistics – was at its lowest in eight years: 9.15 per 100,000 residents, compared with 10.3 in 2006.

Kuwait and Iran have the lowest suicide rate in the world at two per 100,000 residents, while Lithuania has the highest rate at 42.

Calls received by SOS are broadly classified into relationship, social and psychological issues. Currently, the majority of calls received are related to relationship problems.

Social issues that troubled adults included difficulties at work and lack of support from loved ones, while students felt overwhelmed by stress at school. Calls classified under psychological

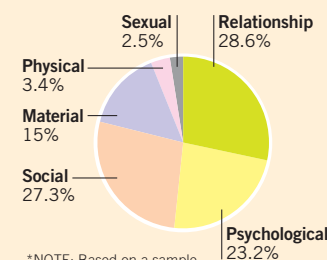
» NUMBER DROPS

Suicide statistics in Singapore

Year	Total	Male	Female
2007	374	215	159
2006	419	260	159
2005	405	263	142
2004	381	227	154
2003	346	214	132
2002	361	211	150
2001	357	214	143
2000	348	225	123

SOURCE: Registry of Births and Deaths, Singapore Immigration and Registration

Types of SOS calls*



*NOTE: Based on a sample size of 44,718 calls

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cal issues included those from people suffering from depression.

The majority of calls from the elderly were related to psychological or social issues.

The elderly often said they thought of suicide because they could not bear the loneliness of living alone, said Ms Wong. They were also troubled by language barriers between them and social workers, as well as their poor health.

So far, SOS, which handles the majority of suicide calls, has noted a decrease in the number of calls from those contemplating sui-

cide between April last year and March this year.

It received 45,050 calls in that 12-month span, down from 49,025 over the same period between 2006 and last year.

Even so, counsellors feel there is a need to remain vigilant, especially in the face of a worldwide economic slowdown and rising inflation.

Mr Jonathan Siew, 38, a senior counsellor at Care Corner Counselling Centre, said: "Once things get more gloomy, the rates could start going up again."

Professor Kua Ee Heok, head

Number of suicides among the young

THE majority of SOS calls last year from those below 19 were for relationship problems, social and psychological issues.

Suicide rates of those aged between 10 and 19:

- » **2007:** 14 (seven girls and seven boys)
- » **2006:** 10 (one girl and nine boys)
- » **2005:** 13 (six girls and seven boys)
- » **2004:** 12 (eight girls and four boys)

of psychological medicine at the National University of Singapore, said increased suicides among those aged above 65 corresponded with the growing number of elderly here.

The psychological medicine specialist, who has been studying elderly issues since 1984, said more can be done to ensure this group is not driven to the brink of suicide.

General practitioners (GPs), whom the elderly often consult for pain treatment, should look

more into the needs of geriatric patients because they are their first point of contact, he added.

Currently, not enough is being done, Prof Kua pointed out, because "GPs are often busy and might not have time to detect depression among the elderly".

He added that people manning suicide helplines could also be trained to better handle calls from potentially suicidal older folk.

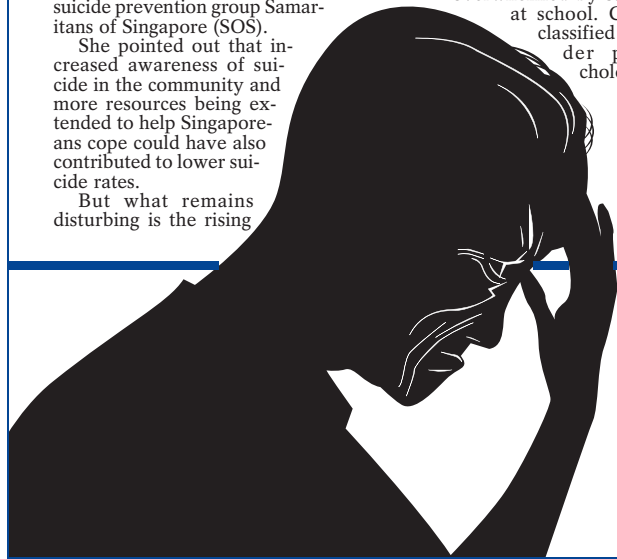
When suicide rates among this group peaked in the mid-1990s, programmes targeted at them were introduced, including new day-care centres, hotlines and home-help services for older folk. Rates for elderly suicides decreased in 2002 to 17.3 before slowly rising again the following year.

Now, with the rates creeping up again, SOS is currently in talks with the Singapore Action Group of Elders, as well as a few other centres that deal with the elderly, to come up with a way to reach out to those who feel down.

Although Ms Wong declined to reveal more details, she said the training of counsellors was one aspect they would look at, while exploring how to help the elderly by reaching out to their caregivers and conveying their message to the elderly.

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BUSY DOCTORS MAY FAIL TO SPOT PROBLEM

"GPs are often busy and might not have time to detect depression among the elderly."

PROFESSOR KUA EE HEOK, head of psychological medicine at the National University of Singapore

Helplines

- » Samaritans of Singapore (SOS): 1800-221-4444
- » Family Service Centre: 1800-838-0100
- » Singapore Association for Mental Health: 1800-283-7019
- » Seniors Helpline: 1800-555-5555
- » Care Corner Mandarin Counselling Centre: 1800-353-5800
- » Touchline (Touch Youth Service): 1800-377-2252
- » Tinkle Friend: Children can call 1800-274-4788 on weekdays