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Special Feature Article

Suicide Prevention Programs in Yokohama City during the Covid-19 Pandemic

Norihito SHIRAKAWA

Yokohama City Mental Health and Welfare Centre

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Abstract

Yokohama City has continued to implement suicide countermeasures since 2007. However, the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 has caused various obstacles to operations, especially face-to-face projects. For example, meetings were cancelled or changed to written formats, and training and lectures were withdrawn or used teaching materials instead of invited lecturers. Yokohama City lit up buildings in green, the color of suicide prevention, to show continuous support for suicide prevention; however, it had to temporarily suspend a gathering of suicide-bereaved families as it was considered crowded and a risk for transmission of the virus. Later, the gathering was reopened and continued with some infection prevention measures. Herein, we share our experiences in effectively altering operations in suicide countermeasure projects as the COVID-19 pandemic continued.

Keywords: implement suicide countermeasures, COVID-19 pandemic, meetings of suicide-bereaved families

Introduction

Following the enforcement of the revised Basic Act on Suicide Prevention

in 2016, Yokohama City formulated a suicide prevention plan and promoted comprehensive suicide prevention measures. However, the pandemic began in February 2020 and significantly impacted Yokohama City's suicide countermeasures. Initially, face-to-face group activities, including lectures aimed at raising awareness, basic training for gatekeepers, and "Soyokaze," a sharing session for suicide-bereaved families, had to be canceled.⁵⁾ To counteract this, various suicide countermeasures were implemented with ingenuity as the pandemic continued. The details of these measures are described below based on the Yokohama City Suicide Prevention Plan.

I. Overview of the Yokohama City Suicide Prevention Plan

The revised Basic Act on Suicide Prevention, effective April 1, 2016, requires prefectures and municipalities to formulate suicide prevention plans to promote more effective suicide prevention measures. In response, Yokohama City developed the Yokohama City Suicide Prevention Plan (hereinafter referred to as "the Plan") to promote comprehensive and effective suicide prevention measures and to create a society where no one is driven to suicide. The plan adopted the slogan, "Live, Connect, Support Each Other,

Yokohama," and, considering that the national "Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Policy" is generally reviewed every five years, the plan covered a five-year period from fiscal 2019 to 2023. The plan sets forth the following four basic principles: (i) most suicides result from being driven to the brink of death, (ii) most suicides are preventable through social efforts, (iii) people contemplating suicide often exhibit warning signs, and (iv) although the annual suicide rate is trending downward, the situation remains critical. Additionally, the Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Policy establishes the goal of reducing the suicide mortality rate by 30% or more by 2026 compared to 2015. Yokohama City aims to achieve a 30% reduction in the suicide mortality rate over the 10-year period from 2015 to 2026. Based on these goals, the targets for the five-year period (2019–2023) of this plan are to reduce the suicide mortality rate to 11.7 or lower per 100,000 people by 2023 (Target 1) and to increase the number of gatekeepers, who play a key role in suicide prevention, by 18,000 over five years (Target 2).

The plan consists of five basic measures based on the Basic Act on Suicide Prevention and the Comprehensive Suicide Prevention Guidelines. It also includes three

priority measures based on Yokohama City's previous efforts and the characteristics of suicide in Yokohama City. The basic measures were: "Basic Measure 1: Strengthening Regional Networks," "Basic Measure 2: Training gatekeepers to support suicide prevention," "Basic Measure 3: Promoting awareness," "Basic Measure 4: Promoting support for those left behind," and "Basic Measure 5: Strengthening consultation support for those facing various challenges." These priority measures were built on previous efforts in awareness-raising and human resource development. They also identified the characteristics of suicide victims in Yokohama City and clarified the target population. The first characteristic was that over 40% of suicide victims were in their 40s and 50s, leading to "Priority Measure 1: Enhancing measures tailored to the age groups and living conditions of suicide victims." The second characteristic was that over 20% of suicide victims had a history of suicide attempts. This led to the establishment of "Priority Measure 2: Strengthening support for those who have attempted suicide." The third characteristic was that the suicide rate among those under 30 did not decrease, leading to the establishment of "Priority Measure 3: Promoting measures for young people."

II. Trends in the Number of Suicides in Yokohama City

According to demographic statistics, the number of suicides in Yokohama City increased sharply from around 500 in 1997 to just under 800 in 1998 and has remained at approximately 700 per year since then. Most recently, the number has continued to decline since peaking in 2010, dropping to 490 in 2019. However, with the onset of the 2020 pandemic, the number of suicides rose sharply to 550, with a significant increase among women (Figure 1). According to 2020 police statistics, there were 498 suicides in Yokohama, an increase of 81 (19.4%) compared to 2019. The number of male suicides increased by 19 (a 6.6% increase) compared to the previous year, while the number of female suicides increased significantly, by 62 (a 47.7% increase). Notably, the number of female suicides was higher in July and August than in the same months of the previous year. Although it remained similar to the previous year in September, it surged to 2.6 times the previous year's level in October and 2.5 times in December.

III. Implementation of Suicide Countermeasures During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The following is a description of the basic and priority measures outlined in the plan:

Basic Measure 1: Strengthening regional networks

Strengthen community networks involved in suicide prevention by sharing information on the current state of suicide and promoting measures throughout the community. Hold meetings with social welfare commissioners, bar associations, Yokohama Life Line, and other organizations and departments within the city government engaged in suicide prevention. The plan calls for strengthening and continuing the Yokohama Suicide Prevention Network Council (launched in fiscal year 2014) and the Yokohama City Government Suicide Prevention Liaison Meeting (launched in fiscal year 2007). However, due to the pandemic, both meetings were held on a limited basis in 2020, and with the increase in infections in 2021, meetings were held in writing. In order to hold such meetings, opinions were carefully collected from all members, and the status of efforts in each field based on the current plan was shared.

Basic Measure 2: Training gatekeepers to support suicide prevention

The plan calls for promoting training to develop "gatekeepers," who will serve as local supporters. These gatekeepers can be city officials or social welfare

committee members who act as guardians in their communities. Based on the 3,411 people who participated in training in 2017, the plan aims to increase the total number of participants to 18,000 over five years, as outlined in Plan Target 2. Basic suicide prevention training, also known as gatekeeper training, plays a key role in this effort. It was held every summer, but in fiscal year 2020, it was canceled due to infection prevention measures. Therefore, to conduct the training remotely, the content of the annual training was summarized and distributed on a DVD containing:

- 1) A PowerPoint presentation with narration on gatekeeper training
- 2) A recording of a lecture by Setsuko Nanbu, a member of a suicide-bereaved family, with her own commentary
- 3) A PowerPoint presentation with narration to help understand the current situation of suicide-bereaved families. The DVD was distributed through e-learning and made available for self-study through lending. As a result, the number of participants increased from approximately 270 to 1,360.

Basic Measure 3: Promoting awareness-raising

The plan aims to raise awareness of suicide and its associated factors, such

as mental health issues. To this end, awareness and education campaigns are conducted during Suicide Prevention Month (March and September) and through the Koho Yokohama (Yokohama Public Relations) newsletter. During Suicide Prevention Month (September), various awareness and education campaigns are conducted every year in the nine prefectures and cities near Tokyo with the participation of relevant organizations within the city.

In particular, on September 10, World Suicide Prevention Day, station managers from the six railway companies serving Yokohama Station held an event in the central concourse of Yokohama Station. However, since 2020, the distribution of suicide prevention leaflets and goods, which involved many participants, has been suspended. Instead, posters promoting suicide prevention are displayed for one week, leaflets are distributed, and announcements are made throughout the station, centered around Yokohama Station. Since 2020, Kanagawa Prefecture has collaborated with Yokohama to illuminate the three towers of Yokohama (the Kanagawa Prefectural Government Building, the Yokohama Customs House, and the Yokohama Port Opening Memorial Hall), the Cosmo Clock 21 observation wheel in the Minato Mirai district, and the Tsurumi Tsubasa Bridge on the

expressway in green, Kanagawa Prefecture's suicide-prevention theme color, for one week starting on September 10 to raise awareness of Suicide Prevention Week. In collaboration with the city's Cultural Tourism Bureau, a special website entitled "Your Wishes Become Light: The Tower of Wishes, Yokohama Marine Tower," was launched as part of a joint project with the "Tower of Wishes" at Yokohama Marine Tower. The website collected wishes from citizens aiming for a society where no one is driven to suicide. The lighting display changed in response to the number of wishes submitted, creating an interactive light-up event.⁴⁾ The results of the website submissions showed that, although most submissions were from women, nearly the same number were from men. By age group, nearly the same number of submissions came from those in their 20s to 40s, making up 77% of the total. The age range was broad, from under 9 to over 60 years old. By region, submissions from Yokohama residents were the most common (60%), followed by Tokyo and other regions outside the Kanto area. Approximately 20% of the comments mentioned "listening" as something that can be done immediately, indicating that the role of gatekeepers is well understood (Figure 2). In 2021, Yokohama's new city hall was also illuminated, transforming the event

from a participatory awareness activity into a visual appeal for continued suicide prevention efforts.

Basic Measure 4: Promoting support for those left behind

The plan includes promoting meetings of suicide-bereaved families and a hotline for suicide-bereaved families. These measures support suicide-bereaved families by providing opportunities to share feelings with others who have lost loved ones to suicide and offering telephone counseling with professional counselors. The main projects are the Suicide Bereaved Families Hotline, operating twice a month since August 2007, and the Suicide Bereaved Families Gathering "Soyokaze," held once a month since September 2007. This gathering is a place for suicide-bereaved families to share their feelings. The hotline is staffed by multiple counselors in one room; however, the room is well-ventilated, enabling activities to continue during the pandemic. However, the "Soyokaze" gathering for suicide-bereaved families was temporarily suspended because it was open to anyone, regardless of their municipality of residence, and did not require advance registration. Participants sat in a circle in a room and spoke using a talking stick placed in the center, creating a high-risk environment for

infection due to contact with others. From February to May 2020, when the extent of the actual state of the infection was not yet fully understood, the gatherings had to be canceled. Starting in June, tables were rearranged to maintain social distancing, the number of participants was limited to eight, and reservations were required for participation. These changes allowed post-event measures to be taken in case a participant tested positive for the virus after the gathering. Fortunately, there have been no infections to date, and "Soyokaze" has been able to continue. Participants have expressed appreciation for the ongoing gatherings organized by the local government, which provide a sense of security for attendees.

Basic Measure 5: Strengthening consultation support for those facing various challenges

The plan includes measures to enhance support systems for consultation at ward offices and mental health centers for individuals with mental health conditions such as depression, alcohol dependence, and schizophrenia, which are high-risk factors for suicide. The plan also aims to strengthen support to help people facing challenges, such as financial difficulties and multiple debts, to smoothly connect with consultation services.

Telephone counseling services continued while taking precautions to avoid close contact between counselors and callers. In response to the increase in female suicides in 2020, an awareness-raising leaflet entitled "Could It Be Because of Stress?" and a list of suicide prevention resources were distributed to approximately 300 medical institutions offering breast and uterine cancer screenings in collaboration with mental health projects. Furthermore, recognizing that increased drinking at home may elevate the risk of suicide due to alcohol dependence, the center created a leaflet on the topic of addiction during the pandemic and posted it on its website to inform citizens.

Next, we will describe the implementation of priority measures.

Priority Measure 1: Enhancing measures tailored to the age groups and living conditions of suicide victims

Due to the fact that individuals in their 40s and 50s account for over 40% of suicides in Yokohama, the Health Promotion Division of the Health and Welfare Bureau collaborated with the Health Management Promotion Project. Together, they published articles on sleep disorders in an online newsletter for small and medium-sized enterprises. This supports health management and promotes mental health measures.

Priority Measure 2: Strengthening support for those who have attempted suicide

In collaboration with Yokohama City's psychiatric emergency services, 331 cases of self-harm were addressed in fiscal year 2020. The "Primary Care Physician Training Program to Enhance Response to Depression and Related Conditions," which aimed to improve general practitioners' ability to respond to depression and encourage early psychiatric consultation, was canceled in fiscal year 2020 but resumed in fiscal year 2021 at a larger venue to avoid the "three Cs" (closed spaces, crowded places, and close-contact settings). Since 2010, the support program for suicide attempters at the Yokohama City University Medical Center has provided case management for individuals transported to tertiary emergency care centers after attempting suicide. The program aims to prevent recurrence. The program was not significantly affected by the pandemic, responding to 105 people in fiscal year 2020, comparable to previous years.

Priority Measure 3: Promoting measures for young people

In response to the persistently high suicide rate among individuals under 30, an online counseling service for young

people was launched in fiscal year 2019. The service expanded in fiscal year 2020 to accommodate the increase in consultations due to the pandemic. In fiscal year 2020, there were 394 consultations, with individuals in their teens through their 30s accounting for 80% of the total. This program became the mainstay of measures for young people during the pandemic.

IV. Discussion

Given the unclear transmission route of the virus, suspending face-to-face suicide prevention measures was unavoidable. New strains of the virus continued to emerge with varying levels of infectivity. It is important to resume and implement projects while monitoring changes in viral infectivity. Internet-based counseling services and visually appealing projects, such as illuminating buildings, are meaningful ways to increase consultations and inform citizens that counseling services and suicide prevention measures are ongoing.

Conclusion:

Due to the pandemic, suicide countermeasures were subject to various restrictions regarding face-to-face activities. However, through wisdom and ingenuity, it was possible to continue activities without face-to-face contact. When implementing projects,

we considered the methods and continued with projects based on the assumption that the pandemic would eventually end. Further improving knowledge of project implementation methods gained from the pandemic and enhancing suicide countermeasures is necessary. At the time of writing, Japan was in the midst of the seventh wave of the pandemic and hoped for an early end to it.

Editor's note:

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- 5) Ibid. 19; 25
- 6) Ibid. 19; 26

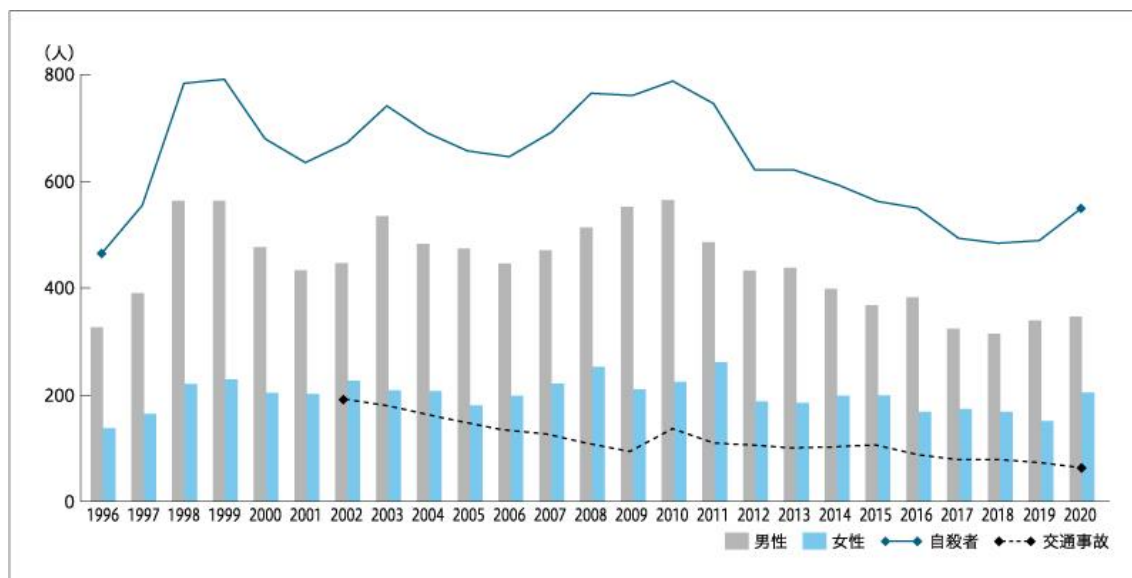


図1 横浜市の自殺者数の推移（人口動態統計）
 年間 700 人前後で推移していたが、2014 年に 600 人を切った。
 2020 年（確定値）：550 人（男性 346 人，女性 204 人）
 （横浜市こころの健康相談センター作成）

Figure 1: Changes in the Number of Suicides in Yokohama City (Demographic Statistics)

The number of suicides remained at around 700 per year but fell below 600 in 2014. In 2020, the final figure was 550 (346 males and 204 females).
 (Compiled by the Yokohama City Mental Health Consultation Center).

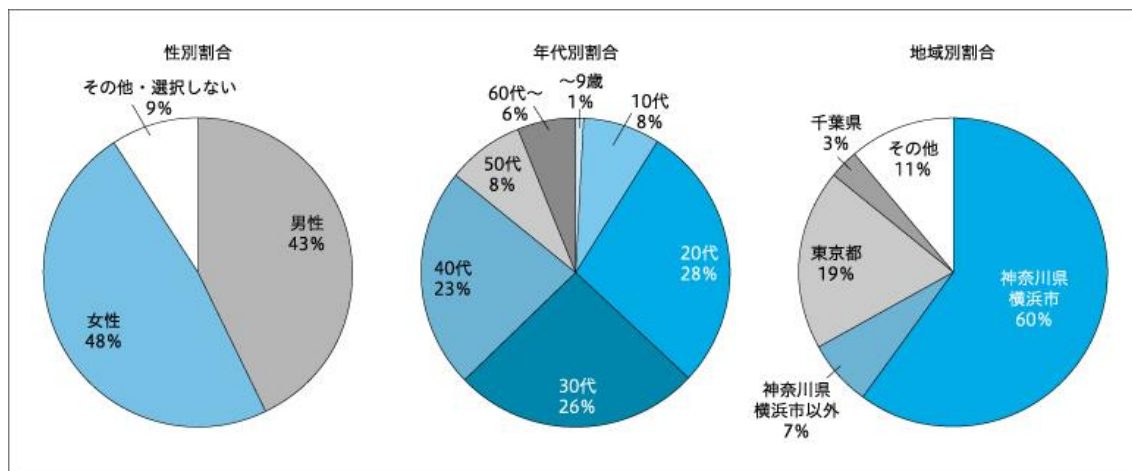


図2 願いの塔ライトアップ企画投稿結果と属性

投稿総数：104件

(横浜市こころの健康相談センター作成)

Figure 2: Results of the "Tower of Wishes" Light-Up Project and Attributes

Total number of submissions: 104

(Compiled by the Yokohama City Mental Health Consultation Center)