



# The Extent, Contributing Factors and Responses to Depression and Suicidal Ideation in Modern South Korea

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## Abstract

The Republic of Korea (Korea) has seen a high rate of economic development in the post-WWII era and is currently the country with the 11th highest GDP worldwide (International Monetary Fund).<sup>1</sup> At the same time, Korea is beset by a mental health crisis more severe than similar countries in the world. Korea has the highest rate of suicide both in the South-East Asian region and in the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), at 26.6 people per capita as of 2018 (compared to the regional average of 10.8 people per capita in 2015 and the OECD average of 11.4 in 2017).<sup>2-5</sup> Other mental health problems, including depression, alcohol dependence and mood disorders, correlate to suicidal ideation; as a result, the prevalence of these disorders exacerbate the core issue of suicidal ideation. This literary review evaluates the extent of these mental health issues in Korea, identifies correlatory factors relating to mental health, and presents current policies and approaches addressing mental health in part or in whole. In addition, it focuses on the population in general but also through four specific lenses: students, full-time employees, the elderly, and celebrities. The significance of this research mainly focuses on improving the quality of life for people in South Korea by identifying factors associated with mental health and proposing solutions that reduce the frequency and severity of mental health disorders.

## Research Questions

1. To what extent is South Korea experiencing a mental health crisis?
2. What factors contribute to a mental health crisis in South Korea?
3. What solution/policies have been proposed or implemented to address a mental health crisis?

## Extent

In Korea, suicide, denoted also as 'intentional self-harm', was the number one cause of death for age groups 10-19, 20-29 and 30-39, the second highest cause of death for ages 40-49 and 50-59 and the fourth highest cause of death for ages 60-69. On the other hand, the death rate for these populations is lowest in age group 10-19 (4.7 people per capita) and progressively higher as the age group increases, the highest in 50-59 (30.8), followed by 60-69.<sup>6</sup> For the whole population, suicide is the fourth highest cause of death for males and the sixth highest cause of death for females - the fifth leading cause of death overall.<sup>7</sup> With this information in mind, suicide and suicidal ideation in Korea is a universal issue that severely affects a large portion of the population.

Apart from suicide, other mental disorders also affect the Korean population. To start, depression, according to one study, affects approximately 3.6% of the population.<sup>8</sup> More problematically, only 2.2% of those with MDD visited a doctor for reasons relating to depression, although those with MDD were twice as likely to visit a doctor in the past 12 months (31.9%).<sup>9</sup> In addition, around 21% of Korean men and 7% of Korean women have alcohol use disorders, about 14% of the total population with drinkers consuming an average of 16 liters a year per capita.<sup>9</sup> As the second most compensated disease by the South Korean Industrial Accident Compensation Insurance, mood disorders also have a high prevalence.<sup>10</sup> All of these diseases have various degrees of positive correlation to suicide. With the high prevalence of both mental disorders and suicide, Korea faces a severe mental health crisis.

Relative to the world, Korea's rate of mental health disorders compared to its suicide rate per capita is terribly unproportionate, even more so when considering that countries with comparable rates of suicide tend to be far more economically barren than Korea. According to data collected by the WHO, Korea's suicide rate far outstrips the global average of 10.6 deaths per capita or the regional average of 10.2 deaths per capita. In fact, this same data ranks Korea as the country with the 4th highest suicide rate in the world at 26.6 people per capita.

## Correlative Factors of Mental Health for Specific Populations

### General

Alcohol use to depression<sup>11</sup>  
Of suicide attempts in past year...  
50% of males had experienced alcohol usage disorders<sup>12</sup>  
50% of females had experienced mood disorders (including depression)<sup>12</sup>  
High alcohol consumption to suicide per capita<sup>13</sup>  
Lack of treatment of mental health with suicide<sup>14</sup>  
Mental illness with suicidal ideation<sup>14</sup>

### Students

Increased screen time (TV, computer games, etc.) to depression<sup>15</sup>  
Decreased hours of sleep to depression<sup>16</sup>  
Youth in counseling suffered from:<sup>17</sup>  
Interpersonal relationships  
Education and career advancement  
Mental health problems  
Mobility rate and dropout rate correlated to depression<sup>18</sup>

### Full Time Employees

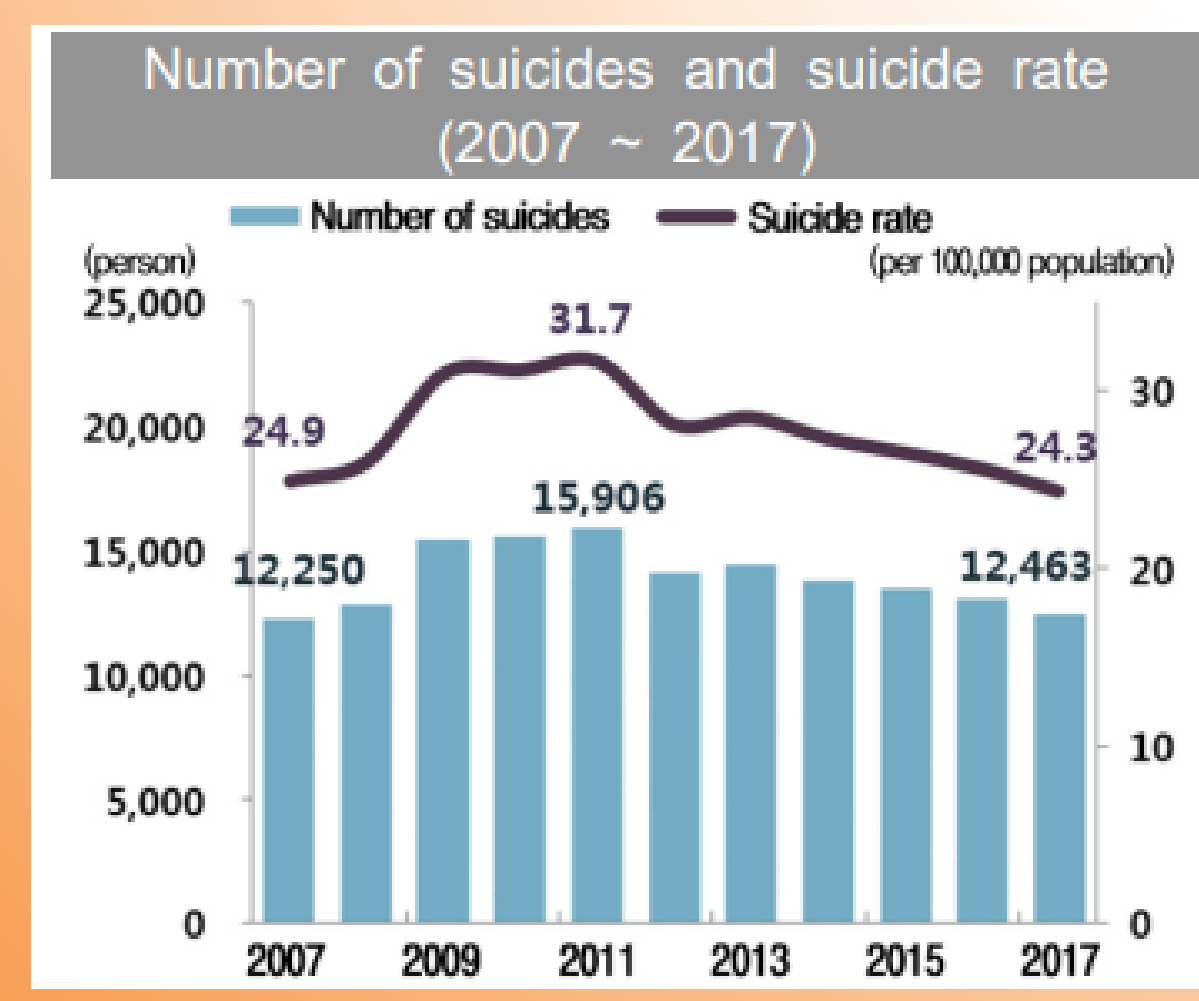
Long working hours with depressive symptoms<sup>10</sup>  
Average of 45.9 hours/week  
49.5% of Korean workers work more than 48 hours/week  
Female correlates to depressive symptoms  
Precarious employment (non-permanent jobs) correlate with depressive symptoms<sup>10</sup>

### Celebrities

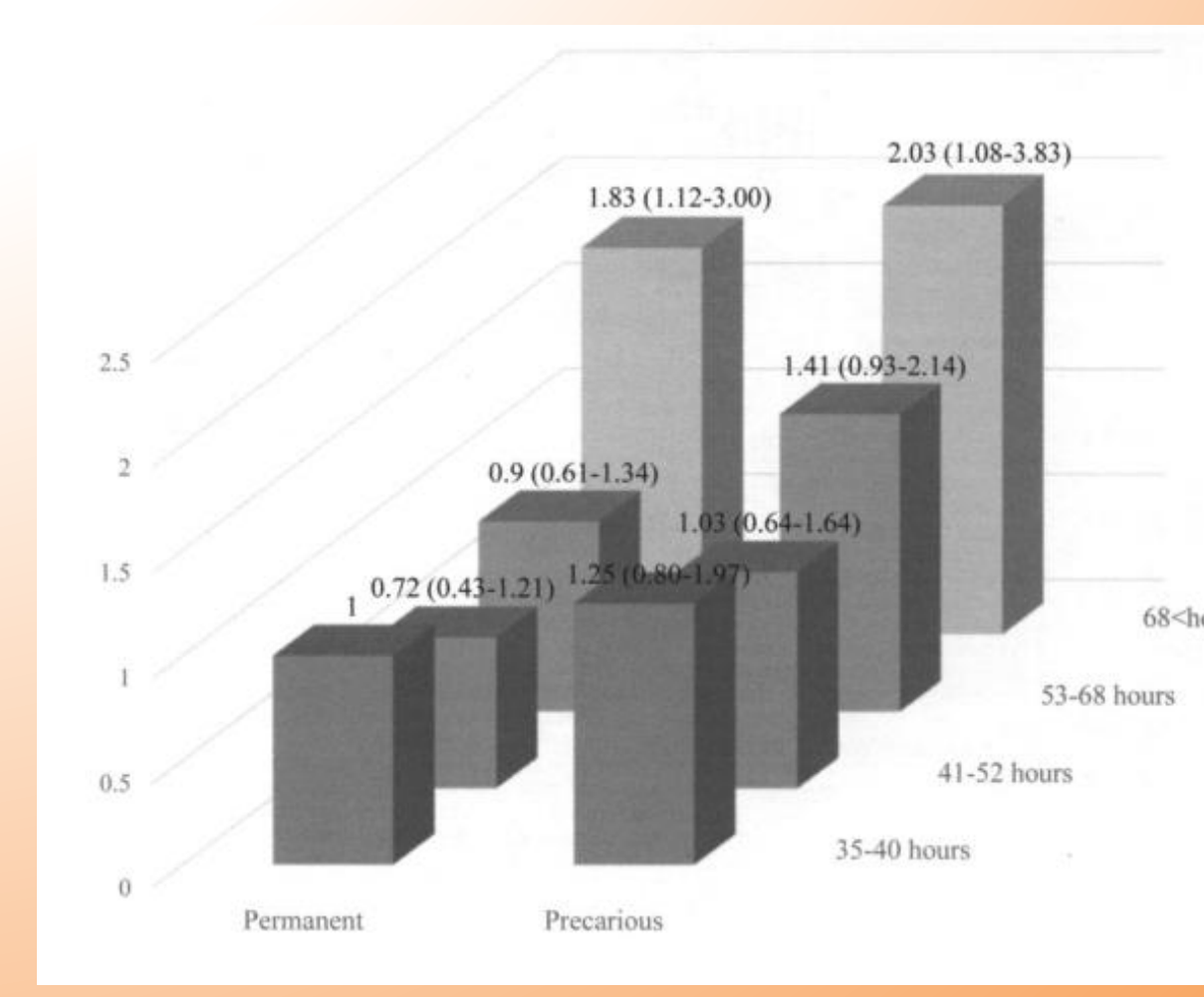
Sexism and standards on women with suicide<sup>19</sup>  
Harassment (online) with suicide<sup>19</sup>  
Celebrity suicides correlates to increased copycat suicides (Werther effect)<sup>20-21</sup>  
High levels of scrutiny in public sphere<sup>22</sup>

### Elderly

Limited and restrictive social networks with depression and mental health<sup>23</sup>  
Problem drinking with a lower quality of life<sup>24</sup>



Left - Figure 1



Right-Figure 2

## Factors

### Students

Korean youth are under significant pressure to succeed academically. Time use patterns reflect this pattern well: on average, Korean youth spend about 8 1/2 hours daily studying, including time at public or private school, independent study, and Korean hagwon (학관), a common form of after-school tutoring. Interestingly, at an individual level studying supported academic development and so was a net positive; however, overall Korean students were found to study longer and experience more negative feelings than American students.<sup>27-28</sup> In addition, poor relationships between students and their parents strongly correlates to suicidal ideation.<sup>29</sup> Essentially, the high academic standards of Korea and the constant pressure to succeed at a social and familial level create an environment that contributes to deteriorated mental health and increased risk of suicidal behavior.

### Celebrities

Celebrities in Korean's public entertainment sphere face overwhelming pressure, both from the companies they work for and from the public, that contribute to celebrity suicides. For one, high levels of scrutiny from the public at all times places a lot of pressure on celebrities to maintain their appearance with little downtime.<sup>22</sup> Cyberbullying of celebrities also has harmful effects on celebrities' mental health.<sup>22</sup> Also highlighted are elements of sexism that create strict and unhealthy beauty standards and behavioral expectations, reinforced formally by companies and informally by public backlash.<sup>19</sup> In line with this, Korean entertainment companies often underpay performers, collecting large portions of their profits as payment for training, managing and living expenses.<sup>30</sup> This system, placing celebrities under high pressure for little reward, and public pressure has been cited by experts in Korean affairs as key factors that contribute to high profile celebrity suicides.<sup>19</sup>

### Full Time Employees

Among the OECD countries, Korea has the second highest average number of hours worked per week after Mexico, at an average of 1,993 hours per worker per year.<sup>25</sup> Even those statistics do not illustrate the full extent of working hours in Korea; frequently, employees are required to work off the clock to complete tasks or achieve promotions.<sup>30</sup> As a result, workplace stress has a large overall impact on the mental health and suicidal ideation of full time employees, so much so that there is a word in Korean for death by overworking - gwarosa (과로사). Beyond hours worked, Korean companies - particularly dynamic-like monopolies, known as chaebol (재벌) - frequently nurture toxic work environments in which senior employees hold significant power over their subordinates. Practices like hweshik (회식) - mandatory company outings with coworkers - further raise the hours working in practice without increasing the numbers on paper.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Korean corporate culture plays an environmental role in mental health and by extension suicidal ideation.

### Elderly

In Korea's rapidly aging population, poverty and weak social networks plague the elderly, correlating to increased risks of suicidal ideation and mental illness. Approximately 50% of elderly Koreans live in poverty.<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, low food security, low household income, and living alone - all factors of poverty or weak social networks - correlated to increased risk of suicidal ideation.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, the social network of elderly Koreans also impacts their mental health: social networks comprised of distant or restricted friends and family correlate strongly to poor mental health and depression.<sup>23</sup> Particularly because of the how quickly Korea's elderly population is growing, improving the mental health and reducing the rate of suicide for the elderly demographic begins with addressing low socioeconomic status and insufficient social networks.

## Policy Proposals

Korea periodically collects data on mental health as a result of the 1995 Mental Health Act, including the prevalence of various mental diseases.<sup>12</sup> More recently, Korea has focused on improving access to mental health services at a community level.<sup>9</sup> While these improvements are substantial, there is still relatively high antipathy from politicians and citizens towards issues of mental health. According to one survey, urban residents and lawmakers tended to agree that suicide was caused by personal beliefs (not external factors), was usually done as a cry for help, and viewed it as a nonserious problem<sup>34</sup>, therefore, not worth addressing in the public sphere. Collecting data and performing research on the issue of mental health and suicide identifies the issues, but public or governmental support has to lead the way towards creating public policy alternatives to address the problem's various correlative factors.

For each of the factors correlating to increased risk of mental illness and suicide, there are specific policy solutions that can help reduce the severity of factors and by extension reduce the risk of suicide. A recent law implementing a shorter work week, from 68 hours maximum to 52, paved the way for future legislation that limits mental illness stemming from workplace malpractice.<sup>33</sup> Other legislative ideas in the works are laws that would criminalize "malicious online commenting", as well as a law that proposes an online identification system connecting citizens to their comments<sup>19</sup> - both laws aim to address factors leading to celebrity suicide.

A general review of policy options addressing suicide found that public education, providing accessible treatment (both pharmaceutical and therapeutic) and restricting access to the means of suicide all help reduce the risk of suicide at a public level.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the study also proposes the education of so-called 'gatekeepers' - individuals trusted and present within the community, including medical personnel, institutional personnel, and clergy - on mental health identification and intervention options.<sup>14</sup> As an extension of this idea, some researchers have also proposed targeting specific high risk populations with interventions, including elderly Koreans living in poverty and Korean students, as effective strategies for decreasing the risk of suicide or mental illness.<sup>31,36</sup>

Deciding the direction and priority of policy implementation is a challenging task, especially if politicians and citizens are reluctant to address the issue of suicide. Figure 2, a survey of Korean citizens asking them to rate the need for specific programs by priority, identifies the perceived necessity of specific social services. As a result, implementing programs based off of both public acceptance and effectiveness may be a more effective policy approach than simply implementing the most effective policy because it more immediately addresses the factors correlating to suicide and can help support a shift of attitudes on mental health in Korea.

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