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## SILENT STATISTICS AND THE SILENT SUFFERERS

*Jerome Teelucksingh*



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### ABSTRACT

*The relatively high incidence of suicide among men is a global crisis that demands greater attention. This situation is largely due to a lack of statistics and failure of governments and non-governmental organizations to implement proper suicide prevention programs. An indifference to male suffering has created a depressing scenario that cannot help the silent sufferers among males.*

**Keywords:** alcoholism, murder, prevention, statistics, suicide

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## **INTRODUCTION**

During the past decade, I have lost eight friends due to suicide. They acted normal and did not display any signs that seemed life-threatening. Two of these friends took their lives because they were either unemployed or retrenched. Five friends became severely depressed and became alcoholics or developed drug addictions when they lost custody of their children due to a biased court system. The final friend who struggled with mental health issues, was unable to pay a bank loan and faced losing his home. Their deaths left a void in my life and a burden of guilt as I should have recognized the cries and intervened to help.

The struggles of other silent sufferers across the world have forced many into the suicide scenario. Society should be educated on the impact of suicide and the impact on coworkers, neighbours, friends and relatives. But how can we help if there are no statistics to alarm us? How can we help if every year the silent sufferers who commit suicide simply become part of the statistics?

In 2009, I met Yuri, a member of a local men's organization, who appeared normal and enthusiastic about men's issues. In one of our conversations, he mentioned his failed suicide attempts. Yuri blamed his suicide on a fatherless home and confessed that he hated his mother. Subsequent discussions were eye-opening, as he recounted that his pregnant mother wanted an abortion. However, the procedure failed and she reluctantly decided to have the baby who would be called Yuri. She never developed an attachment to her son. Later, when Yuri was ten years old, he learnt of this drastic decision by his mother to have an abortion. This was the beginning of a dark journey for Yuri as he felt unwanted, unloved and neglected. It led to the onset of depression and suicidal thoughts and as a heartbroken teenager and young adult Yuri tried to end his life in three attempts: drinking a poisoning substance, hanging and taking an overdose of pills.

## **SUICIDE —MULTIFACETED ROOTS**

The horrors of male suicide in the Caribbean were a common feature of colonialism especially among the Indigenous peoples (First Peoples), enslaved Africans and indentured labourers, many of those who were oppressed, raped, humiliated, sodomized and physically

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abused felt that suicide would be the best option to escape the pain, shame and hurt. During indentureship, the murder of a wife by a male Indian labourer who then took his own life, when he suspected or learnt of his spouse or companion being unfaithful, was a horrific ordeal (Perry). It occasionally occurred among the indentured labourers in the British West Indian colonies such as Trinidad. Two illustrations of the sensational reports were in a Trinidadian newspaper in 1895 (“Murder and Suicide”, “Another Plantation Murder”).

The horror of murder-suicides continued into the 20th century. For instance, in 1992 the Sunday Guardian (a newspaper of Trinidad and Tobago) investigated the issue of murder-suicides among husbands and wives, Dr. G. Hutchinson, of the Psychiatry Unit of the Substance Abuse Centre at Caura Hospital noted, that family murders followed by suicides points to “underlying depressive sickness” and a “pathological jealousy”. Hutchinson felt that the violence of men can be explained: “It is a cultural think, men are concerned about their esteem and sexual potency. Often when a man has several relationships with women he is acting out of deep – seated emotions of insecurity.” Our boys and men need to feel secure and understand the meaning of their role in life. They must neither have their confidence undermined nor their rights eroded.

In 2021, research revealed that suicides among young Black males in the USA were on the rise (Moyer). The suicide of tWitch, a popular personality in the USA, in 2022 was a shock to fans and followers. The sad reality is that the issue of male suicide often comes to the forefront when a prominent man commits the act but then interest wanes until another suicide occurs. Suicide affecting ordinary men has also been highlighted by the media. An illustration is India in which there is a rise in false rape cases against men that often result in suicide of these wrongfully accused men. Also, in India in 2013, there was an increase of married men who, accused of cruelty, also committed suicide (“Cases of married men committing suicide on the rise: Report”).

If there is to be progress as a society and find permanent solutions, we cannot just simply react when confronted with the sensational details of a suicide. Our men have to be proactive and address mental illness head-on and ensure that programs are implemented to deal with the

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aim of curbing suicide rates.

Twenty years ago, I briefly taught at three secondary schools. In both public and prestigious schools, I saw students with scars on their wrists following suicidal attempts. There were also reports of suicidal ideation among primary school students who were under pressure to succeed in their exams. Unfortunately, these warning signs are often ignored by teachers and parents. Frightening incidents such as this should motivate the relevant authorities to start creating an awareness programme in primary and secondary schools and tertiary institutions.

In the 21st century, mental illness continues to be stigmatized, and its prevalence is underestimated. This is obvious as governments in the Caribbean, and across the world do not provide sufficient funding and are not training enough mediators to intervene. Citizens need to demand that suicide hotlines and NGOs are easily available for the silent sufferers. They should also ensure that counsellors are accessible and relevant programs are implemented in schools. There are online groups such as the Zero Suicide Alliance that promote suicide awareness and prevention.

In Trinidad and Tobago, more attention is often placed on the annual murder toll than suicide rates. Men across the globe need to question the invisible statistics or silent statistics that could help us to better understand the prevalence of male suicides. Where are the numbers indicating the suicide rate among First Peoples in Canada or USA for the past 5 years? What is the suicide figures for suicide among European boys in 2020 and 2021? What is the percentage of young men, between 18 and 30 years who committed or attempted suicide? The absence of these silent statistics relating to suicide reflect uncaring governments and NGOs that are in the dark and unable to provide that light for dark and depressed minds of our males. Governments have tended to use terms as Gross Domestic Product or Gross National Product to determine the economic health of a nation but often neglect other criteria as suicide, poverty and unemployment among males as critical in assessing a country's progress.

Rob Whitley, of the Department of Psychiatry at McGill University in Canada, referred to male suicide as "The Silent Crisis" (Whitley). A report from the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) revealed that every year in the Americas, 65,000 people commit suicide.

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Even more worrisome is the statement that “Mortality from suicide continues to be higher in men than in women (male-female ratio of 3.8); however, women report more suicide attempts” (“Suicide Mortality”). This is true for Trinidad and Tobago, in which 20.2 per cent of women and 79.8 per cent of men committed suicide during 2019 – 2021 (Polo).

Whilst these higher figures among men might be true for other regions, the fact is that there is a lack of accurate annual global statistics reporting male suicides. Some of us have accepted male suicides as normal and part of society. Silent statistics are missing that could help save the current and future silent sufferers who are contemplating suicide.

Undoubtedly, society places tremendous pressure on men and boys to excel and to succeed. Furthermore, the goal of becoming wealthy and caring for their families is also part of the responsibility unfairly dumped on men. There is an urgent need to ensure men and boys who have attempted suicide are given another opportunity to appreciate their purpose in this life.

There are a number of determining factors including biological, psychosocial, and psychiatric which contribute to suicide. As a society we should not only depend on a therapist, psychologist or counselor to help. A father has to be aware of the warning signs and intervene. Likewise, a teacher has to be more observant and identify warning signs: if the child has become withdrawn, if he or she does not want to eat or play with friends. Every person has a responsibility to save each other, not just boys and men but everyone. September is Suicide Prevention Awareness Month but we should ensure that suicide prevention and awareness is not restricted to one month. It must be an ongoing activity, especially among our boys and men who feel lonely, abandoned and rejected.

The idea of strong or good friends is a myth that needs to be deconstructed. We have to stop identifying people as strong or role models; doing so puts pressure on people to deliberately wear a mask of perfection or create a public persona. The result is that it could lead to depression if persons feel they cannot live up to society's expectations. Boys and men need to avoid being trapped in that myth and realise that all of us have weaknesses and faults.

The crucible for shaping masculinity is often the family. It is an important institution, but in many communities, families have become side-lined and often given a secondary role in

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society. In the 21st century, (as in previous centuries) it has been difficult to maintain the cohesiveness of the family unit. In 1991, Dr. Linda Baboolal spoke at a Hindu temple in Trinidad on the topic “Effects of Drugs and Alcohol on Family Life”. She highlighted the importance of closeness between parents and children in the home that would result in “well-adjusted members of society” who could “interact positively” with others. Baboolal warned, “Alcoholism is a family disease, passed on from generation to generation...It is a disease which occurs in both men and women. The man drinks openly with the boys in the rum shop” (“Family life is under attack, says Baboolal”). Some of us would disagree with this statement but in the Caribbean (and rest of the world) it cannot be trivialized. It illustrates a distorted version of masculinity (or empty masculinity) in which alcohol is associated with becoming a man. Some in society are afraid to criticize this behaviour believing it is unchangeable.

Alcoholism and substance abuse are often linked to so-called bad forms of masculinity that often result in suicide. However, what might be considered bad is a result of not conforming to the mainstream perceptions of masculinity. But why display empty masculinity or fringe masculinity that is often self-destructive and results in suicide? These are crude attempts by boys and men to define their identity, maintain boundaries, win friends, earn respect, create fear, and create a space. Do not believe these empty masculinities should be ignored.

The media (including social media) must be proactive and realise its significant role in educating the public about warning signs and preventative measures. This would be much more useful rather than focusing on the sensational details of the suicide of a prominent personality. There is need more suicide prevention awareness campaigns that should occur throughout the year especially given the rise in cyberbullying.

Religious leaders also have a crucial role to play. They will speak about it in churches and temples but they need to go out to schools, and see how they can play a role in helping people. Although we tend to criticise or overlook religion, it has a place alongside therapy and medication to give persons a hope and a better chance of survival.

It seems as if suicide has been part of humanity’s DNA. In 2001, a medical journalist suggested that genetics was linked to suicidal behaviour (Palkhivala). Two decades later, in 2021,

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the International Suicide Genetics Consortium released its findings revealing the genetic links of persons who attempted suicide.

Male lives are as important as others in society. Men and boys must cultivate a small and trustworthy network of friends who they could tell their inner feelings without fear of it becoming gossip and without fear of being ridiculed, mocked or taunted. This network would be a safe space or an informal zone to obtain support. This is where everybody has that power to intervene and help a potential suicide victim. It sounds impossible, but we can create a world without suicides.

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## AUTHOR PROFILE



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