

## **A Literature Review of Contemporary Suicide Trends in Sri Lanka (2017–2022)**

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### **Introduction**

Modern Sri Lanka faces numerous economic, social, cultural, and political challenges, leading to increased societal disillusionment and a rise in acts of anarchy. Durkheim (1897) argues that social disintegration can drive individuals towards violent acts, including suicide, which is considered both a criminal and a significant social issue (Durkheim, 1897). The WHO (2014) estimates that around 800,000 to 1,000,000 people die by suicide globally each year. In Sri Lanka, suicide rates were lower in 2017 and 2018 compared to previous years, with rates of 16 per 100,000 in 2016 and 14.6 per 100,000 in 2017, ranking the country 29th among 150 countries (Pangngasekara, 2019). However, resurgence in suicide rates was observed in 2021 and 2022, exceeding those of 2018.

Previous literature highlights the significant impact of domestic issues on suicide rates in Sri Lanka, noting that women often attempt suicide due to male partners' substance abuse (Knipe et al., 2018). Despite higher rates of suicide among men, further investigation is needed to understand these dynamics. This research paper addresses the contemporary patterns of suicides and the reasons behind them through recorded statistics and existing literature.

Additionally, Karunarathne et al. (2019) examined the impact of pesticide use on suicide rates, finding that restrictions on pesticides have led to a decline in suicides, while deaths by strangulation have increased, which is a focus of the present study. Rajapakse et al. (2023) analyzed the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on self-poisoning and suicide, revealing no direct correlation between movement restrictions and rising suicide rates during this period (Karunarathne et al., 2019; Rajapakse et al., 2023).

Sri Lanka's suicide rate remains relatively high compared to other South Asian countries, posing a challenge for a society striving for high human

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development. Investigating the causes of suicide in a country with notable per capita income, high literacy rates, and strong cultural values is essential, particularly how these factors vary by age, gender, and education.

This research aims to examine suicide trends in Sri Lanka by analyzing both historical and contemporary patterns while investigating the underlying causes and influencing factors. It focuses on identifying vulnerable populations and the methods used in suicide, with particular attention to societal and psychological drivers.

## Methodology

This study drew on suicide statistics from Sri Lanka's Police Department, covering the period from 2017 to 2022. The dataset includes yearly totals of suicides broken down by gender, age, education level, occupation, nationality, and religion. Additionally, it recorded the reasons behind the suicides and the methods used. A descriptive approach was applied to analyze the quantitative data, with trends presented through tables and graphs. Moreover, correlation analysis was performed, examining relationships between various matched variables from the collected data.

## Results and Discussions

The total number of suicides in Sri Lanka fluctuated over the years, increasing from 3,281 in 2018 to 3,406 in 2022, with 2022 marking the highest figure. This raises significant concerns about mental health and related societal issues. The data underscores the need for increased awareness and intervention strategies to address these pressing challenges.

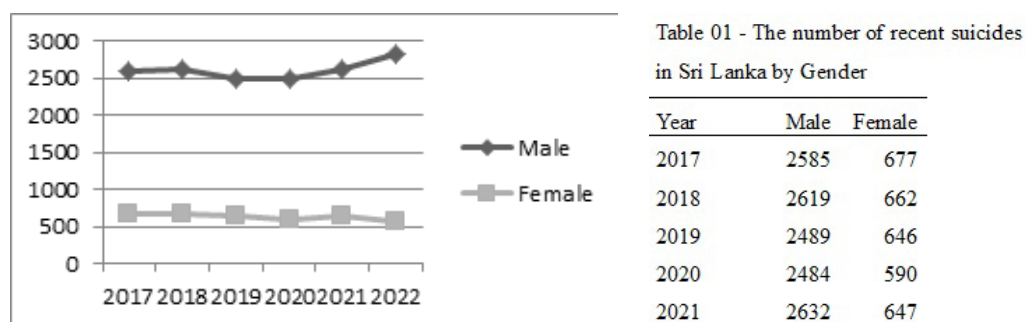


Figure 01 - The number of recent suicides in Sri Lanka

by population

Sources - Police Report 2017-2023

Table 01 shows that male suicide rates consistently exceed those of females across all observed years. In 2022, male suicides rose significantly to 2,832, female suicides decreased to 574, indicating a worrying trend in male mental health. Figure 01, a bar graph, visually highlights this gender disparity, suggesting that societal issues disproportionately impact males.

The age groups 21-25 and 26-30 exhibit elevated suicide rates, indicating a particular vulnerability among young adults. Additionally, the age group over 71 has experienced a significant increase in suicide rates over the years, highlighting a growing concern among elderly populations.

Table 02 - The number of suicides in Sri Lanka by Method

<b>Method</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
Drinking insecticides & Killer	706	674	600	478
Strangling	1917	1908	2190	2480
Jumping into the water	105	116	124	116
Using firearms	27	22	20	13
Using hand bombs or any other explosives	00	00	00	00
Using sharp weapons	3	08	01	04
Setting fire to oneself	97	99	95	71
Jumping on to the moving trains or vehicles	123	83	74	121
Drinking the acids	30	20	32	26
Drinking fuel	08	01	04	05
Drinking the western drugs	26	20	31	30
Eating the natural poisons	52	58	63	71
Jumping from the high points	10	13	07	14
Injecting oneself the narcotic drugs	01	04	02	00
other means	30	48	36	67

Sources - Police Report 2017-2023

The most common method of suicide in Sri Lanka is strangling, with instances rising from 1,917 in 2019 to 2,480 in 2022, as shown in Table 2. Conversely, suicides by insecticides have seen a significant decline during the same period. This reduction may be linked to policy changes or public health initiatives aimed at reducing access to harmful substances.

Table 03 - Factors affecting suicide in Sri Lanka

<b>Motive for Suicide</b>	<b>2019</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2021</b>	<b>2022</b>
Economic Problems(Poverty, indebtedness)	180	202	172	192
Employment Problems	28	46	32	30
Problems caused with theelders(Teachers/Parents)	112	75	87	59
Harassment by the husband & family disputes	650	591	614	593
Using disappointment frustration caused through love affairs	291	302	344	319
Subjection to sexual harassment/rape	02	04	02	05
Addiction to narocotic drugs	141	130	192	275
Aggrieved over the deth parents, relations	61	34	52	59
Loss of property	07	03	17	05
Failure at the examination	02	03	01	05
Ill treatment by the children	13	14	14	18
Sexual incapacity	04	7	05	04
Mental disorders	272	354	312	310
Chronic diseases & physical disabilities	400	367	430	389
Other reasons	972	942	1005	1043

#### Sources - Police Report 2017-2023

Economic issues and family disputes are the most common factors contributing to suicides in Sri Lanka. Notably, suicides linked to drug addiction have seen a significant rise, increasing from 141 in 2019 to 275 in 2022. According to Table 3, unemployed individuals recorded a peak of 1,266 suicides in 2022, highlighting the vulnerability of this group. Student suicides remain a pressing concern, influenced by academic pressures, particularly among those aged 17-20, where the total reached 210 in 2022. Additionally, married individuals also show notable suicide rates, rising from 2,374 in 2019 to 2,492 in 2022.

Individuals with General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) qualifications have the highest suicide rates, while those with university degrees tend to have lower rates, suggesting a link between education and coping strategies. The majority of suicides occur within the Sinhala population, with slight decrease in Tamil community. Buddhism is associated with the highest suicide figures, reaching 2,599 in 2022, whereas Hindu suicides initially rose but then fell, and Muslim rates remained stable. These statistics highlight the urgent need for targeted mental health initiatives, particularly for vulnerable groups such as young adults and the elderly.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the rising suicide rates in Sri Lanka are significantly influenced by economic instability, familial conflicts, and substance addiction, highlighting the urgent need for targeted socio-economic interventions. While public health campaigns have successfully reduced suicides by certain methods such as insecticides, more focus is required on prevalent methods like strangulation. A comprehensive approach is essential to effectively lower suicide rates, including enhancing mental health services through

**Keywords:** Biological Influences, Method, Prevention, Social Factors, Suicide

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