

# Religion and Suicide: A Records-Linkage Study

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SINCE THE EARLY STUDIES OF THE FRENCH SOCIOLOGIST, Emile Durkheim, suicide has interested sociologists. But suicide, by its very nature, has resisted study, and the problem of studying it has not eased over the years. The very classification of death as "suicide" is a judgment call.

Generally those concerned with suicide rates use gross data sources such as mortality and morbidity statistics. In the past, state-reported suicide data have approximated relative differences in rates between regions. Certain characteristics such as the influence of education or unemployment on suicide have been studied by looking at states with differing amounts of education or various unemployment rates. Such inferences as influence of state or regional characteristics on different dependent variables are then drawn. Durkheim, using suicide rates from representative countries, ascertained the relative rates of suicide differences among Catholics and Protestants and hypothesized that greater "social integration" lowers rates. Suicide rates have continued to be derived from "group characteristics," not from individual factors, thus making the study of suicide a sociological rather than a psychological phenomenon.

State suicide rates are still often used to study the effects of religion on suicide. For example, Utah suicide rates are given as a sort of rough approximation of suicide rates for Mormons, Massachusetts rates for Catholics and so on.

Comparison of suicide rates by state shows Utah having roughly the same suicide rate as the nation in total. However, some variations occur from year to year with Utah apparently having somewhat higher rates than the nation as a whole in recent years. As with some other social measures like divorce, Utah seems to follow about the same pattern compared with the entire United States but shows lower rates when compared to the rest of the Mountain States — perhaps a better comparison since the social and economic conditions are more similar.

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There has been a long-time interest in comparing Mormon social statistics with those of other religious groups and with those groups claiming no religious affiliation. Those with interest in such comparisons have covered a number of issues. Suicide has certainly not escaped this comparison, although studies have been limited mostly by representative state data, as mentioned above, and to some generalizations drawn from clinical data.

What is the religious influence on suicide? Does the tightly integrated social structure of the Church create lower suicide rates? In contrast, one hears about the tremendous expectations the Church puts on Mormon youth, resulting in suicide for some. Because young people cannot meet these strict standards of perfection, goes the argument, many take their own lives, feeling like failures. No quantitative data have been advanced to support this hypothesis, as far as I know. Usually, someone, attempting to find an explanation for a particular young person's suicide, generalizes from pressure perceived by one youth to include all Mormon teen suicides.

The purpose of my study is to ascertain whether existing information could be used to treat suicide more definitively. I use record linkage techniques to bring the religious difference into better focus and at the same time to begin some systematic assault on the paucity of data available for the study of suicide.

I obtained mortality data from the Utah state vital statistics records for 1980 with names excluded. The data obtained included the birth date, death date, sex, county of residence, county of death, education, and cause of death.

Using this base, including 196 suicide cases reported on the state death certificates, we searched newspapers for published obituaries, news stories of deaths, and other published items to match birth dates, death dates and place of death on the death certificates with other information.

Of the 196 suicide cases reported in the state death certificates we found obituaries for 136 and an additional eight cases where news stories reported the suicide, but where no obituary was printed. Thus, 69.4 percent of the suicides were covered with an obituary and an additional 4 percent with a story. Four of the total suicides were committed by residents from out of state who took their lives in Utah for which there would be no reason to expect an in-state obituary. Thus the total was reduced to 192. In total, we found information on 144 of the 192 suicides for residents, or 75 percent.

Study of this information is very instructive. Only two of the obituaries listed the suicides as suicide. Fourteen listed some other cause of death such as "found dead from injuries from an accident" or "died from injuries at his home." The eight news stories listed suicide as the cause of death, but no obituary was found for these eight cases. The remaining 120 cases listed no cause of death whatsoever in the obituary. Thus, only 1.09 percent of the suicides were listed as such in the obituaries. It can probably be concluded that obituaries are not a good source for the study of suicide, if used alone.

Religion of the suicide victim was given in 88 of the obituaries. Of those, 80.1 percent (seventy cases) were Mormon and 19.9 percent (eighteen cases) were from various other denominations. This ratio exceeds the representation of Mormons in the state population — about 70 percent. These data would

appear to support the notion that something causes more Mormons to commit suicide than others. But let us explore further.

In forty-eight of the obituaries, no religion was listed. The question may be raised whether these people in fact have no religious affiliation or whether the obituaries purposefully omitted religious affiliation because of embarrassment, low religious commitment, or for whatever reason.

If none of the forty-eight cases were Mormon, which is a very conservative assumption, that would leave the Mormons with 51 percent of the suicides — less than their 70 percent representation in the state population. If 70 percent of the forty-eight with no religious information were allocated to the Mormons (34 cases), their ratio would result at 72.2 percent, slightly over their representation in the total state population.

A more reliable approach to this would be to compare names on death certificates with the records of the Mormon Church, which was not done in this analysis. Although much more time consuming, it would certainly be worth doing. In addition, further research ought to take religious activity or commitment into account, inasmuch as this has proven to be so significant in other research.

Thinking back to the data concerning pressure on Mormon youth, the most obvious question raised is “How old were the individuals in the 192 cases?” The average age among the suicide cases was 43.1 years for the known Mormons and 45.0 years for the other cases where religion was specified. Computing the average age for all victims, other than Mormons, gives an average age of 44.9 years. Since Mormons have a higher proportion of young people, this would lower the youth suicide rate even more. Age-specific rates would be more precise for this type of analysis, but such a study lies in the future.

In short, the evidence here clearly *does not support* the notion that high demands made upon Mormon youth yield a higher suicide rate for them inasmuch as the age of victims is virtually the same.

The study demonstrates that better information concerning suicide can be obtained through record linkage studies. Additional information can help sort out the questions of religious activity and religious commitment for various religions. Hopefully, future studies will permit us to know more of this interesting and significant but elusive problem.