

UCSD Sociologist David P. Phillips finds hidden suicides in death statistics

December 20, 1993

Media Contact: Dolores Davies or Winifred Cox, (619) 534-3120 UCSD RESEARCHER FINDS HIDDEN SUICIDES IN DEATH STATISTICS

A new study of death statistics by University of California, San Diego Sociologist David P. Phillips has found that many suicides, including numerous deaths involving drug overdoses and traffic accidents, may in fact be misclassified as accidental deaths, and that because of this, suicides could be underreported, particularly among blacks and females.

The study, based on an examination of all California death certificates from 1966 to 1990, was published this month in the winter issue of *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, the journal of the American Association of Suicidology. Phillips' research, documented in the article *Adequacy of Official Suicide Statistics for Scientific Research and Public Policy*, which he co-authored with UCSD student Todd E. Ruth, builds on previously published findings by Phillips on the occurrence of suicides at symbolic ages.

"In our research," said Phillips, "we make use of the fact that suicides peak at symbolic ages, most notably those ending in 0, such as 30, 40, 50 60 and so on. We have found that this mortality peak also occurs in several causes of death, some of which have traditionally been suspected of containing hidden suicides, like barbiturate poisoning, and also causes of death which have not ever seriously been considered as containing closet suicides, such as pedestrian deaths.

Phillips' findings indicate that while rates of underreporting may vary widely, suicides are most likely to be underreported among blacks and females, both groups with low official suicide rates.

In the study, mortality rates were found to peak in symbolic ages in certain causes of death most always classified as accidental, including accidental poisoning or drug overdose, single-car crashes, and pedestrian deaths. Other causes of death which were examined, including deaths by natural causes and multiple-car crashes did not demonstrate a peak in mortality in symbolic ages.

"Many persons reaching symbolic ages reflect on whether they have achieved the goals they set for themselves earlier in their life," Phillips explained. "Taking stock on these occasions is likely to make certain people feel that they have failed themselves and their families, eliciting feelings of hopelessness and depression, psychological states frequently associated with suicide."

Phillips' believes that suicides could be reported as accidental deaths, and thus could be underreported by as much as 15 percent among the black population. Among females, he suspects that suicides could be underreported by approximately 6 percent.

"The official suicide rate has historically been lower for blacks than for whites," Phillips said. "This has always seemed anomalous because, by almost any conceivable measure, blacks suffer more distress than whites do in our society. These findings suggest a partial explanation for this anomaly: black suicides seem to be hidden much more often than white suicides."

Phillips, a renowned authority on mortality and suicide trends, said that his findings indicate that it may be inadvisable to use official suicide data to test scientific theories about suicide, unless the effects of underreporting are taken into consideration. He also suggested that if the underreporting of suicides for blacks and females is indeed much larger than for other groups in society, "it may be necessary to modify our understanding of the factors protecting against and predisposing toward suicide."

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