

Suicide figures in Co. Wexford are much higher than rest of country

ALTHOUGH A slight downward trend can be noted in the rates of suicide over the past 15 years both nationally and in Wexford, there is no denying that there has been an upward trajectory in the rates over the last 65 years. Almost 7,000 people have taken their own lives in Ireland since 2000.

Additionally, there is no disputing the figures which show that the rate of suicide in Wexford is at a critical level and is significantly higher than the rest of the country.

There are many local and voluntary groups doing exceptional work both assisting people suffering from depression and preventing people from taking their own lives once they have reached a crisis point. As worthy as these interventions are, it is critical now that Ireland examines the factors that may be contributing to the high levels of depression, anxiety and stress in contemporary Ireland so that we may address these issues and prevent people ending up feeling so hopeless and despairing that they feel suicide is the only option open to them.

Or, as Wexford-based author, Tony Walsh puts it, "we're running around on the cliff-top trying to save people, we need to be examining what is driving people to the top of the cliff in the first place."

Tony and Lucy Costigan published a book last year entitled, 'Understanding Suicide: Exposing the World of Pain within the Suicide Box'. The book analyses the social factors which enable and facilitate suicide,

such as education, religion, the media, politics and the law. The authors re-situate suicide as a product of society's structures.

This book is not the first to suggest, that from their very earliest years, children are being moulded in an education system that is geared towards producing workers for an industrialised system, rather than a human way of life.

"Young people are being guided by the notion of being successful rather than by making choices that make them happy," says Tony. "I was providing counselling to a mother and daughter some years ago, the daughter really wanted to undertake a performance course but had the points for medicine, this was causing difficulty between the pair, I eventually had to intervene and say to the mother, would you prefer to have a happy actress as a daughter or a suicidal doctor?"

Former TD, Senator, long-time campaigner for suicide prevention and President of the Irish Association of Suicidology, Dan Neville also told The Echo that too much pressure is currently placed on young people, "if you don't go to college now, you're nearly a failure," he said. Dan suggests that the pace of life has become too pressurised and frantic and is contributing to the increased stress experienced by people.

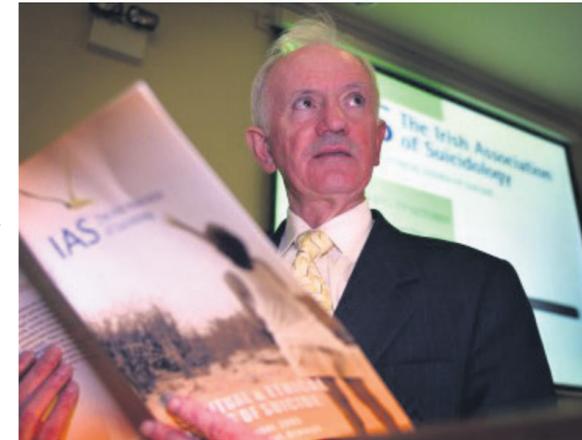
Tony Walshe also cites the hierarchical medical system as one which does not facilitate the recovery of an individual suffering

with mental health difficulties. The Recovery Model is one which should be embraced by the medical community here he says. The concept is based on the idea of strengthening and empowering the individual by giving them greater control and choice in their treatment, and by including families and communities in the recovery programme where possible.

The book suggests that Catholicism also served in the past to cut people off from their own sense of spirituality, something that makes us uniquely human and can provide people with a sense of meaning.

However, there were still some benefits to be derived from church rituals while people were still practising in the country. Dan Neville suggests that, "the act of confession could be therapeutic for church-goers and the sense of coming together for a common purpose often provided a sense of cohesion for small rural communities. "The guy who lives ten miles out the road had a reason to come in and have a chat with others at least once a week," he told The Echo.

Additionally, the decline in the authority of the church has lessened the stigma attached to suicide, in a population once so inculcated by its teachings, suicide became an absolute taboo. The Church considers the act to be a mortal sin, suicide victims in the past were not



Dan Neville, President of the Irish Association of Suicidology says that increased life pressures, alcohol abuse and changing family structures have all contributed to Ireland's suicide rates.

allowed to be buried in consecrated grounds and their property forfeited to the church.

Now, however, with falling numbers in those attending church as well as a declining belief in its teaching, the taboo has been lifted.

The additional stigma of suicide being

a criminal act up until 1993 may also have contributed to the maintenance of the taboo. Dan was instrumental in bringing about decriminalisation, Ireland being the last European country to do so. However, he says that government failed to implement suicide prevention policies after decriminalisation,

Dan also cites research which suggests that the change in contemporary family structures along with marriage breakdown creates an instability in contemporary societies, impacting on personal wellbeing and therefore on suicide statistics.

40% of children in Ireland are now born outside of marriage, while the rate of divorce increased by 800% in the fifteen years to 2011.

Ireland's continuing dysfunctional relationship with alcohol is also contributing to the suicide statistics according to Dan, "look at the way the young people are binge drinking nowadays, it's a big part of it," he says. According to Alcohol Ireland, alcohol is a factor in over half of recorded suicides in Ireland.

Dan argues that the first step in addressing these issues is removing the stigma from mental health. This process which has gained great momentum in Ireland in recent years through the work of both state and voluntary organisations and through the bravery of many public figures who have come forward to share their stories of overcoming difficulties with their mental health.

Research suggests that up to 80% of people who take their own lives are suffering from a serious mental illness at the time (as opposed to depression). As many articles in The Echo have pointed out, our mental health service is failing to

respond to those who find themselves 'at the top of the cliff' and has a long way to go to implement the promises set out in its mental health document, 'A Vision for Change' published in 2006. The document promises to allocate 8.5% of the overall health budget to mental health, ten years on however, just 6% is allocated to this much-needed area.

Scotland currently allocates 18% of its budget to mental health, while the U.K. commits 12%.

On a broader level, Tony Costigan argues that real change requires a seismic attitudinal shift at institutional, community and individual levels in order to change society's accepted status quo with all its inequalities.

Our educational system needs to become less focused on narrow intellectual intelligence and embrace the fact that we are all creative, social, cultural and emotional beings who have much deeper and wider needs than those currently being met by the industrial/economic-driven model.

Tony suggests that we have a choice. If we remain as we are, then we must learn to live with suicide as a feature of our society. If, however, we accept and change the often deadly, socially determined journey that carries some of our citizens to suicide, we can bring notable change to those suffering with overwhelming pain.

Positing a new understanding

Mary Raftery
JOURNALISM FUND

by Anthony E. Walsh and Lucy Costigan

WORLD SUICIDE Day on September 10th, is upon us yet again, but are we any closer to understanding why people take their own lives?

The fact remains that one-million people approximately take their lives worldwide every year. In Ireland, recorded suicides between 2000 and 2011 totalled 5,979.

Suicide is a mystery to many and there is little understanding as to why a person takes his or her own life.

Almost invariably we hear the comments after each sad death by suicide that "she was the life and soul of the party," or "he was the last person I thought would do it." It's as though we are drawn to see suicide

as something mystical that triggers the event to occur in somebody's head.

Other explanations for suicide include biological, psychological and genetic ones. Even a genetic predisposition towards depression may never surface if environmental triggers are not present.

These narrow explanations protect us as a society from having to look at bigger picture explanations that may question our society's structure or even our own questionable behaviours, beliefs and attitudes.

It is far easier to say that 'he was suffering from depression - rather than questioning the factors that led him to be depressed in his life. It is as if we are happy to believe that society is some sort of a natural development and anyone who is

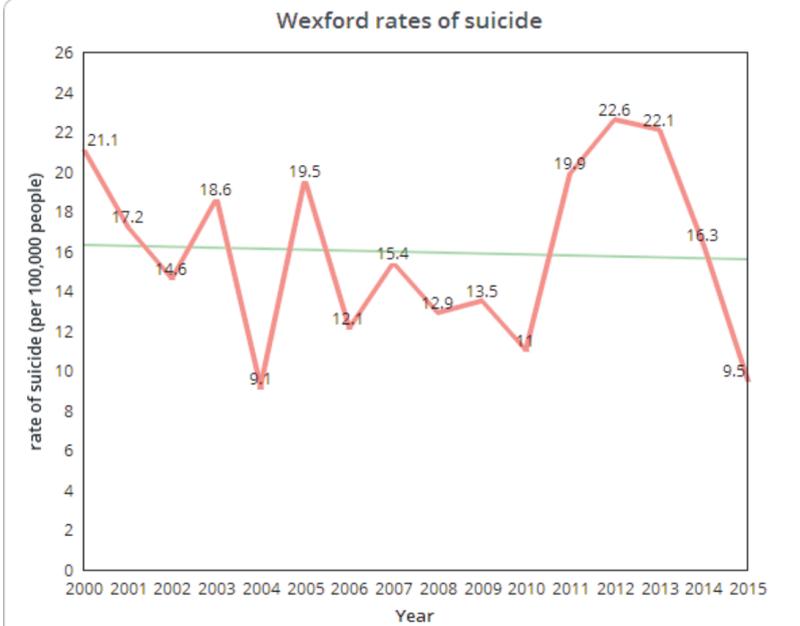
unable to hack life within it is flawed in some way.

Geography linked to suicide

The RTE investigations unit 2016 recently stated that "where a person lives appears to have an enormous impact on the rate of suicide." The people of County Wexford, Limerick City, Cork City and County Kerry are particularly aware of this truth. In County Wexford, although we know in our hearts that there is something in our midst that is causing suicide, it's a case of the elephant in the room - we just don't want to admit that there is something in the very fabric of our society that is causing suicide.

Model County riddled with disadvantage

A series of recent reports



The red line shows the rate of suicides (number per 100,000 people) in Wexford for the past 15 years. Although the rate fluctuates greatly each year, the green line on the graph shows that there is a slight downward trend in the number of people taking their own life in Wexford over the past fifteen years.

Downward trend in figures

by Geni Murphy

ALTHOUGH THE suicide figures both nationally and for County Wexford are stark, an analysis of the figures shows a slight downward trend over the past fifteen years.

The rate (provisional) of just 9.5 per 100,000 people in Wexford last year is less than half of those who died by suicide in the county in 2012 and is lower than the average national rate for the first time since 2004.

This is the third year in a row that

the figures have been in decline and is good news for Wexford which has suffered a number of devastating losses to suicide over the past number of months.

The downward trend is reflected in the national rates, which are in decline for the fourth year running.

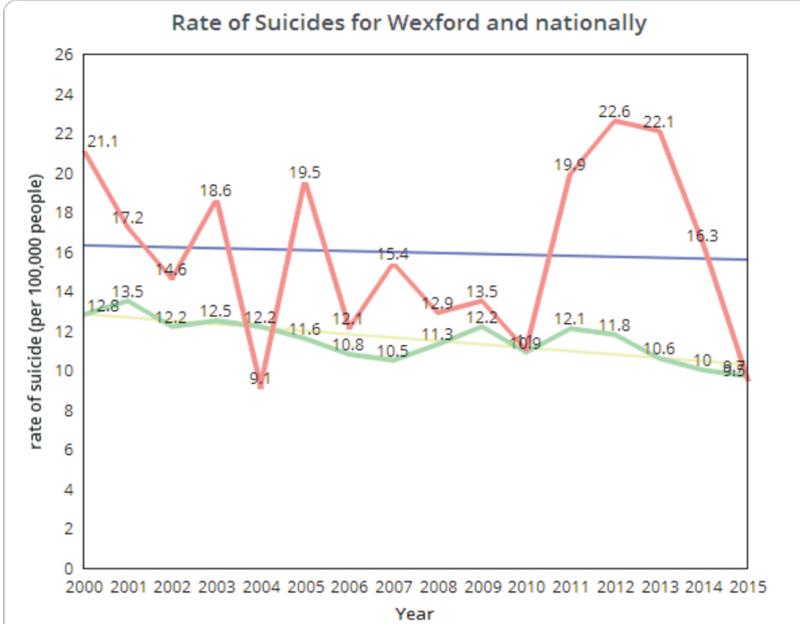
Although suicide rates are difficult to analyse due to the inconsistencies in reporting and recording by county coroners, the downward trend is clear.

The drop in unemployment rates has been attributed in some part to

the declining suicide rate, with many studies showing a direct link between the two.

Unemployment in Ireland is currently at 8.6%, while at the height of the recession it was nearly twice that at 15%. This figures correlate to the rate of suicides both in Wexford and nationally, at rates of 22.6 and 11.8 respectively.

If you are affected by any of the issues raised in this report, you can contact the Samaritans at phone 116 123.



However the figures show that Wexford (red line) has a significantly higher rate of suicide than the average rate in the country (green line). Again, a downward trend can be noted in both sets of numbers.