

# Bullying-Related Suicides among Japanese Elementary, Middle, and High School Students Using Newspaper Databases

Tohru Takizawa\*

\*Department of Social Welfare, Faculty of Health Science, Aomori University of Health and Welfare  
50-1 Mase Hamadate Aomori, Aomori 030-8505 Japan  
t\_takizawa@ms.auhw.ac.jp

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**Background:** In Japan, suicide due to bullying has been a matter of strong public concern for half a century. However, there is almost no quantitative understanding of the actual situation. Japanese newspaper coverage of bullying suicides is polite and firm. The newspapers publish the main contents of the report by third-party committee together with the actual event.

**Objective:** This study quantitatively analyzes the statistics on suicide resulting from bullying as compiled from reporting in newspapers.

**Methods:** The data for this study comprise online newspaper reports over 10 years, 2012–2021. The term “bullying-related suicide” in these newspaper articles refers to cases in which a third-party committee had identified the occurrence of bullying. The subjects of analysis are Japanese elementary, junior high, and high school students. Statistics are tabulated on students’ gender and grade and the month and day of the week when the bullying-related suicide took place. Chi-square tests were conducted to analyze the presence or absence of bullying vis-à-vis the sexes/grades of the students.

**Results:** The results for the 98 identified cases of suicide due to bullying are as follows. In junior high and high school, male students outnumbered female students. And the grade with the highest number of bullying-related suicides was eighth grade. In terms of month, the most cases, 12, occurred in July, and the majority of cases, 19, occurred on Mondays and Wednesdays. The chi-square test results indicated significant differences in bullying-related suicides across junior high school grades ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Conclusion:** This study provides explicit findings from a concrete analysis of the reality of suicides resulting from bullying. These findings can contribute to suicide prevention efforts for Japanese youth.

**Keywords:** school bullying, quantitative analysis, suicide prevention, third-party investigation committee

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## I. Introduction

Approximately ten Japanese schoolchildren (6–18 years) commit suicide each year due to bullying. The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) publishes the number of schoolchildren suicides in Japan each year (April 1–March 31). In FY2023, the most common causes and motivations of suicides were as follows (multiple answers allowed): family discord (65), mental illness (61), parents’ scolding (42), and problems with academic/

career path (38). The causes/motives were unknown in 186 cases. The total number of child suicides in this year was 397, and seven were known to be bullying related<sup>1)</sup>. From a school health perspective, suicides from all of these causes and motivations should be prevented. Among these, suicides resulting from a lack of safety at school are bullying-related suicides. Bullying is the behavior that receives the most attention in classroom management. There were 732,568 incidents of bullying during the year, of which 2,473 were reported to the police by the school<sup>1)</sup>.

Although bullying-related suicides are rather rare in Japan—or perhaps because they are rare—they attract a great deal of public interest. A bullying-related suicide of an eighth-grade male student in February 1986 at Nakano Fujimi Junior High School attracted much attention as a major social problem<sup>2,3</sup>). A different suicide, of an eighth-grade male student at Otsu City Junior High School in October 2011, led to the 2013 enactment of the Act for the Promotion of Measures to Prevent Bullying (Bullying Act)<sup>4</sup>). The law mandates a fact-finding investigation into cases such as bullying-related suicides and truancy (Article 28). The investigating third-party committee is composed mainly of lawyers, psychologists, and university professors. In the case of what appears to be a bullying-related suicide, the committee examines whether bullying was involved and considers the causal link between bullying and the incident.

This committee, which acts in an advisory capacity, reports its findings to the chairperson of the local school board. In most cases, the newspapers publish the main contents of the report together with the actual event for the following three reasons: 1. Newspapers have always vigorously worked to find out the truth about bullying-related suicides; 2. the Board of Education notifies newspapers in advance of the time and date of press conferences; and 3. the relevant department will give a press briefing to the newspapers. The second and third information were provided by several newspapers. In extremely rare cases, the media will refrain from publishing the contents of the report at the insistence of the family of the deceased.

In other words, in Japan, it is possible to obtain a summary of a bullying-related suicide from newspapers without obtaining the full report of the third-party investigation committee. It is also possible to make a quantitative analysis of the cases collected. Although these are not included in the MEXT suicide statistics, newspaper reports contain information on the gender and grade of the student.

Research on bullying-related suicide in Japan has been very poor. In terms of in-depth investigation of a particular incident, newspaper publications (books) are better than research papers<sup>5,6</sup>). In addition, there have been very few quantitative studies of bullying suicides. Yamazaki collected 36 cases of suicide linked to bullying from newspaper articles over a three-year period between 1994 and 1997<sup>7,8</sup>). However, the author included failed suicide attempts and did not provide a highly accurate analysis. Takeda collected 71 cases between 1986 and 2003; however, many cases had remained concealed or

had not been investigated before the passage of the 2013 Bullying Act<sup>9</sup>). Over an eight-year period, from 2012 to 2019, Takizawa collected 72 cases from newspaper articles in which a third-party committee had identified the occurrence of bullying<sup>10</sup>); however, the discovery of nine new cases of bullying-related suicide prompted him to reevaluate his analysis. In the present study, these nine cases and a new two-year period (2020–2021) were added to the original 72 cases, and the relationship between gender and grade with bullying suicides was analyzed using the same methods as in that study<sup>10</sup>). The aim of this study was to examine differences in gender and grade by school type in order to capture the characteristics of bullying-related suicides using newspaper reports.

## II. Methods

### 1. Participants

The targets of the study were the bullying-related suicides among elementary, junior high, and high school students during the ten years from April 2012 to March 2022. The term “bullying-related suicide” in this study refers to cases in which the bullies were students and the third-party investigation committee or the establisher of the school (mayor, board of education, chief trustee, etc.) officially recognized the occurrence of bullying. Furthermore, the causal relationship between bullying and suicide is divers.

### 2. Procedure

The study used as research material newspaper articles that had reported that a third-party investigation committee had recognized bullying. The author collected them from newspapers’ article databases, mainly those of *Yomiuri Shimbun* (Yomidas History Museum) and *Asahi Shimbun* (Asahi Shimbun Cross-Search)<sup>11,12</sup>); as supplementary sources, the author searched the databases of *Mainichi Shimbun* (MAISAKU) and *Nikkei Shimbun* (Nikkei Telecom)<sup>13,14</sup>). The study searched the terms *bullying-related suicide* and *third-party committee* and extracted articles from newspapers published up to December 31, 2024 that had recognized a bullying incident.

### 3. Data analysis

First, the number of bullying suicides extracted from newspaper articles through this study was compared with

the MEXT suicide statistics on “the problem of bullying.” Next, the bullying suicide cases were aggregated by gender, grade, month, and day of the week. In terms of grades, the targets were students in the fourth to 12th (13th) grades (i.e., from the fourth grade of elementary school to the third [fourth] grade of high school); the study identified no cases of suicide among first- to third-graders during the study period of interest. So-called 13th-graders are students in evening high school or taking high school correspondence courses. The study excluded one case from the gender-specific total of suicides among junior high school students as the newspaper article did not identify the student’s gender, and excluded one case from the grade-specific total of suicides among high school students as the newspaper article did not identify the student’s grade.

To compare suicide incidents by gender and grade, the study compared the ratios of boys to girls and the proportions of the different grades between non-bullying and bullying-related suicides using the totals over the ten-year target period. The MEXT suicide statistics were used to obtain the total number of suicides by gender and grade over these ten years and subtracted the total number of bullying-related suicides identified in this study to calculate the number of non-bullying-related suicides.

For the first step of the statistical analysis, chi-square tests were conducted for the relevance of gender and grade for non-bullying versus bullying-related suicides and residual analysis using adjusted residuals (AR) if there was a statistically significant association. Fisher’s exact test was also performed for elementary school students, as they had cells with an expected value of less than 5. Furthermore, a two-tailed test was conducted and set significance to <5% for both categories. The statistical software used were IBM SPSS Statistics 28 and EZR statistical software.

#### 4. Ethical considerations

This study did not raise any ethical issues as it used publicly available national statistics and newspaper articles and did not use the names of any individuals or schools for the study analyses, even those mentioned in newspaper reports. This study complied with the ethical code of the Japanese Association of School Health.

### III. Results

#### 1. Number of suicides where bullying was officially recognized

##### (1) Number of suicides by type of school

As far as this study was able to confirm, the total number of suicides during the ten years of the period analyzed in which third-party committees recognized the occurrence of bullying was 98 (9 committed by elementary school students, 61 by junior high school students, and 28 by high school students). The breakdown of all suicides during this period irrespective of cause or motive was as follows: 55 by elementary school students, 778 by junior high school students, and 1,976 by high school students. Thus, bullying suicides accounted for 16.4% of all suicides in elementary school, 7.8% in junior high school, and 1.4% in high school.

**Table 1** shows a comparison of the number of bullying-related suicides between those in this study and the MEXT suicide statistics by academic year and school type. The number of bullying-related suicide deaths in this study matched or exceeded those in the MEXT suicide statistics in all academic years except for high school students in 2015, 2020, and 2021 and for junior high school students in 2019.

##### (2) Official recognition of bullying

There were 94 suicides in which a third-party committee had recognized the occurrence of bullying. Of the remaining four cases, three involving junior high school students and a one high school student, school boards, investigation committees from private junior high schools, and mayors recognized the bullying in the three junior high school cases; a school investigation committee recognized the bullying in the case involving the high school student. In this study, these four cases bullying-related suicides.

The number of recognitions per case ranged from 1 to 62, following bullying behaviors were observed in some of the main cases with the following bullying behavior observed in some of the major cases: 27 cases of cyberbullying, 13 cases of violence (hitting, kicking), 12 cases of being ignored and/or ostracized, 11 cases of abusive language (being told to die or commit suicide), 6 cases of being treated like germs, 5 cases of pulling down pants, 5 cases of horrible nickname, and 4 cases of extorting money or goods; of the 98 cases, 4 were referred to prosecutors. These are only a count of newspaper descriptions and do not show the true total

**Table 1** Bullying-Related Suicides by Academic Year and School Type

Academic year	This study			MEXT suicide statistics					
	Bullying-related suicides			Situation of the student who committed suicide (bullying problem)			Total number of suicides		
	Elementary	Junior high	High school	Elementary	Junior high	High school	Elementary	Junior high	High school
2012	0	5	1	0	5	1	6	49	140
2013	1	7	4	0	7	2	4	63	173
2014	0	4	3	0	3	2	7	54	171
2015	1	6	2	1	5	3	4	56	155
2016	0	8	4	0	8	2	4	69	172
2017	2	8	3	2	6	2	6	84	160
2018	2	6	6	0	3	6	5	100	227
2019	2	5	1	2	7	1	4	91	222
2020	1	8	3	1	5	6	7	103	305
2021	0	4	1	0	4	2	8	109	251
Total	9	61	28	6	53	27	55	778	1976

Reference: The MEXT Suicide Statistics: 2012–2021 Survey on Problematic Behavior, Chronic School Absences and Other Issues Relating to Student Guidance(table 7-2,7-4)

values.

The average time from the occurrence of the suicide to the completion of a report recognizing the presence of bullying was 24.4, 20.7, and 23.9 months for elementary, junior high, and high school students, respectively.

2. Quantitative understanding of bullying-related suicides

(1) Breakdowns by gender and grade

By gender, the breakdown by school type was as follows: elementary schools: boys = 2 (22.2%), girls = 7 (77.8%); junior high schools: boys = 32 (53.3%), girls = 28 (46.7%); high schools: boys = 18 (64.3%), girls = 10 (35.7%). The breakdown by grade was as follows: fourth grade = 1 (11.1%), fifth grade = 2 (22.2%), sixth grade = 6 (66.7%; elementary school); seventh grade = 20 (32.8%), eighth grade = 26 (42.6%), ninth grade = 15 (24.6%; junior high school); tenth grade = 8 (29.6%), eleventh grade = 13 (48.2%), twelfth grade = 6 (22.2%), thirteenth grade = 0 (0.0%; high school).

(2) Suicides by month and day of the week

The analysis by month showed that July had the most suicides at 12, followed by November (11) and March

(10); conversely, October had the fewest suicides at 4. By day of the week, there were the most suicides on Monday and Wednesday at 18 each, followed by Friday at 15. Conversely, there were only five on a Saturday, the fewest. In 10 cases, the date of suicide was not disclosed, so the day of the week was unknown.

3. Gender and class characteristics: Comparison by bullying suicide recognition status

(1) Relevance of gender/school type

A chi-square tests was conducted for the two types of suicide (Yes/No) to examine gender differences in bullying-related suicides. The analysis revealed no statistical differences between boys and girls in either elementary, junior high, or high school students (Table 2).

(2) Relevance of grade/school type

A chi-square test was conducted for the two types of suicide to examine the differences between grades in bullying-related suicides (Table 3) and found statistically significant differences in the suicide cases of junior high school students (chi-square test:  $p < 0.001$ ): seventh

graders, 20 out of 153 (13.1%), eighth graders, 26 out of 242 (10.7%), ninth graders (15 out of 383 (3.9%). A residual analysis showed significant differences between seventh, eighth and ninth graders: seventh graders,  $AR = 2.69$  ( $p < 0.01$ ); eighth graders,  $AR = 2.02$  ( $p < 0.05$ ); ninth graders,  $AR = -4.01$  ( $p < 0.001$ ). There were no differences between the elementary and high school grades.

#### IV. Discussion

With the exception of Takizawa<sup>10)</sup>, There have been no studies of bullying-related suicides in Japan using quantitative analysis with statistics. As shown in **Table 1**, the number of suicides obtained in this study from newspaper articles and the MEXT suicide statistics were in almost perfect agreement. Therefore, it seemed reasonable to study bullying-related suicides using newspapers. This study has two notable points: first, it aggregated and analyzed the cases of suicides in which third-party committees recognized the occurrence of bullying, and second, it clarified the characteristics of bullying-related suicides according to the students' gender and grade. Compared to Takizawa's study in 2022<sup>10)</sup>, the period was extended by two years and the number of cases was increased from 72 to 98, improving

the accuracy of the quantitative analysis. The findings from this study should contribute to preventing bullying-related suicides in Japan.

#### 1. Characteristics of bullying-related suicides (gender and grade)

In this study, 98 cases of bullying-related suicides were statistically analyzed after a simple aggregation by gender and grade. The result of the simple aggregate showed that male students in junior high and high school outnumbered female students, and that suicide by gender differences was more common among in high school and that the male: female ratio was about 2:1. However, **Table 2** shows that there were no gender differences between bullying-related suicides and suicides as a whole. In other words, bullying-related suicides are more common among male students in high schools because more male than female students commit suicide in the first place. This trend can also be observed among junior high school boys and elementary school girls. In addition, the number of student suicides has skyrocketed in recent years<sup>1)</sup>. In particular, the number of suicides among girls has increased. Compared with previous studies<sup>10)</sup>, the gender gap among junior high school students has narrowed.

**Table 2** Relationships between Gender and Suicide (with/without the recognition of the occurrence of bullying) by School Type

School type	Official recognition of bullying Y/N	Male		Female		Total		$\chi^2$ value	<i>p</i>
		n	(%)	n	(%)	n	(%)		
Elementary									
	Y	2	(8.0)	7	(23.3)	9	(16.4)	2.343	0.160 <sup>*3</sup>
	N	23	(92.0)	23	(76.7)	46	(83.6)		
	Total <sup>*1</sup>	25	(100.0)	30	(100.0)	55	(100.0)		
Junior high									
	Y	32	(7.3)	28	(8.2)	60	<sup>*2</sup> (7.7)	0.212	0.686
	N	405	(92.7)	313	(91.8)	718	(92.3)		
	Total <sup>*1</sup>	437	(100.0)	341	(100.0)	778	(100.0)		
High school									
	Y	18	(1.4)	10	(1.4)	28	(1.4)	<0.001	1.000
	N	1251	(98.6)	697	(98.6)	1948	(98.6)		
	Total <sup>*1</sup>	1269	(100.0)	707	(100.0)	1976	(100.0)		

<sup>\*1</sup> The number of gender-specific suicide deaths in the total column are the total in the MEXT suicide statistics for 2012–2021

<sup>\*2</sup> Excluding one person whose gender was unknown

<sup>\*3</sup> Fisher's exact test



**Table 3** Relationship between School Year and Suicides (with/without the recognition of bullying) by School Type

School type	Official recognition of bullying Y/N	grade			grade			grade			grade		Total		$\chi^2$ value	p
		n	(%)	AR	n	(%)	AR	n	(%)	AR	n	(%)	n	(%)		
Elementary		3 <sup>rd</sup> grade			4 <sup>th</sup> grade			5 <sup>th</sup> grade			6 <sup>th</sup> grade					
	Y	0	(0.0)		1	(25.0)		2	(15.4)		6	(16.2)	9	(16.4)	0.423	0.874*5
	N	1	(100.0)		3	(75.0)		11	(84.6)		31	(83.8)	46	(83.6)		
	Total*1	1	(100.0)		4	(100.0)		13	(100.0)		37	(100.0)	55	(100.0)		
Junior high		7 <sup>th</sup> grade			8 <sup>th</sup> grade			9 <sup>th</sup> grade								
	Y	20	(13.1)	2.69	26	(10.7)	2.02	15	(3.9)	−4.01			61	(7.8)	16.779	0.001
	N	133	(86.9)	−2.69	216	(89.3)	−2.02	368	(96.1)	4.01			717	(92.2)		
	Total*1	153	(100.0)		242	(100.0)		383	(100.0)				778	(100.0)		
High school		10 <sup>th</sup> grade			11 <sup>th</sup> grade			12 <sup>th</sup> grade			13 <sup>th</sup> grade *2					
	Y	8	(1.5)		13	(2.0)		6	(0.8)		0	(0.0)* 3	27	*4 (1.4)	4.872	0.181
	N	518	(98.5)		627	(98.0)		731	(99.2)		73	(100.0)	1949	(98.6)		
	Total*1	526	(100.0)		640	(100.0)		737	(100.0)		73	(100.0)	1976	(100.0)		

AR: adjusted residual value

<sup>\*1</sup> The number of gender-specific suicide deaths in the total column are the total in the MEXT suicide statistics for 2012–2021

<sup>\*2</sup> Evening high school students or those in high school correspondence courses that take three years or more to finish

<sup>\*3</sup> The minimum expected frequency was 1.00. The category with expected value less than 5 was 12.5%

<sup>\*4</sup> Excluding one person whose grade was unknown

<sup>\*5</sup> Fisher's exact test by EZR statistical software

Prior research has shown that one of the most significant risk factors in suicide among victims of bullying was being male<sup>15)</sup>; however, the sex ratio of all youth suicides should be kept in mind. Furthermore, **Table 3** shows that the original grade difference was not reflected in the bullying suicides committed by junior high school students. This also suggests the need for targeted efforts to prevent bullying suicides among seventh and eighth graders in Japan.

**2. Characteristics of the day of the week compared to all suicides**

Bullying-related suicides were most common on Mondays and on Wednesday and least common on Saturdays. Next, the study compared the most common days of the week for suicide between all suicides, including adults, and these school bullying suicides. In Japan, suicides are generally more common on Mondays: 15.8% of the 228,853 suicides in the ten-year period 2012–2021 occurred on Mondays. The number of suicides decreased as the days of the week progressed, with the fewest on Saturdays, 12.1%<sup>16)</sup>. The high number of bullying-related suicides on Monday and the low number of bullying-related suicides on Saturday were

consistent with the total number of suicides. However, a gradual decline could not be observed, and victims of bullying were more frequent on Wednesday and Friday. The results of this study, as well as the grade differences, should contribute to preventing bullying-related suicides for schoolchildren.

**3. Cyberbullying**

In November 2020, a sixth-grade girl committed suicide after being bullied on the Internet. The perpetrator sent the victim chats saying “annoying,” “disgusting,” and “please die” on a tablet that was available on loan to all children at the school<sup>17)</sup>. Starting in December 2019, a year before this incident, MEXT equipped every child and student in the country with one computer and a high-speed network under the GIGA (Global and Innovation Gateway for All) School Initiative<sup>18)</sup>. In response to this incident, the MEXT took measures to provide password guidance.

Cyberbullying in 27 cases in this study had three major trends: verbal abuse, harassment and ostracism. Verbal abuse included messages such as “die,” “annoying,” and “prepare the rescue team”; harassment was edited images uploaded on social networking sites (of these, 2 cases of

sexual photos of the individual); and ostracism included being removed from friend groups or excluded from the all-class instant messenger group.

In March 2024, the Children and Families Agency released the *Survey on the Internet Use Environment of Youth*<sup>19)</sup>. According to this survey, as of November 2024, 42.9% of elementary school students, 78.7% of junior high school students, and 97.4% of high school students were using smartphones. Teachers and parents will be required to take further measures to prevent cyberbullying. Terao, Kaneko, and Higuchi have revealed that placing school counselors and clarifying *Yogo* teachers' roles could support *Yogo* teachers in providing counseling to students for cyberbullying<sup>20)</sup>.

#### 4. Implications for school health and practice

This study found that bullying suicides are most common in July, on Mondays and Wednesdays, and in the seventh and eighth grade. This quantitative information can generate formal knowledge, such as graphs, as explicit knowledge. It is hoped that stakeholders can use this information to prepare countermeasures against bullying-related suicides. Today, the method of suicide prevention in Japanese schools is "don't miss the signs," and it relies on the empirical and tacit knowledge of teachers. This places a psychological burden on teachers. However, explicit knowledge allows teachers to work on suicide prevention for their students, along with specific plans.

#### 5. Limitations of this study

The first limitation of this study is that newspapers do not report all third-party investigation reports; in addition, some investigations were still ongoing during the period of analysis. Both of these issues mean that the study's findings are incomplete. Second, this study only analyzed bullying-related suicides in which the occurrence of bullying had been officially recognized. These include cases in which the causal link between bullying and suicide was clear, in which bullying was one of many factors, in which the causal link between bullying and suicide was unknown (8), and in which bullying was not causally linked to the suicide (4). The fact that I did not differentiate the causal relationships between bullying and suicide leaves an issue for future researchers to investigate. As more cases are collected, analysis may need to exclude cases with unknown and no causal relationships. Third, the institutional features

of Japanese schools and school climate are also factors in bullying in Japan<sup>21)</sup>, and it cannot be said that the results of this Japanese study are generalizable to other countries.

#### V. Conclusions

The number of bullying-related suicides obtained from the newspapers was approximately the same as the number of suicides reported in the MEXT suicide statistics. Therefore, it was possible to conduct a quantitative study of bullying-related suicides from press reports in Japan. The study found that cases of bullying-related suicides were common among male students in junior high and high schools, which was partly because that the suicide is higher among boys than girls. However, there were differences between grades: Among junior high school students, the study showed statistically higher of bullying-related suicides among seventh and eighth graders; although showed statistically lower of bullying-related suicides among ninth graders.

The analysis by month and day of the week showed that bullying-related suicides occurred most often on Mondays and on Wednesdays and in July. These quantitative analyses should contribute to the prevention of bullying-related suicides in Japan.

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The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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**Name:**  
Tohru Takizawa

**Affiliation:**  
Department of Social Welfare, Faculty of Health Science, Aomori University of Health and Welfare

**Address:**  
50-1 Mase Hamadate Aomori, Aomori 030-8505 Japan

**Brief Biography:**

- 2019-Professor, Department of Social Welfare, Faculty of Health Science, Aomori University of Health and Welfare
- 2011-Professor, Department of Human Health Science, Hachinohe Gakuin University

**Main Works:**

- Tohru Takizawa: Basic quantitative evaluation of bullying-related suicide among students by using newspaper reports—Working toward the prevention of suicide through explicit knowledge—. *Japanese Journal of School Health* 64:111-120, 2022 (in Japanese)

**Membership in Learned Societies:**

- Japanese Society of Public Health
- Japanese Association of School Health
- Japanese Society for the Study of School Social Work