

Suicides top 30,000 for 14th straight year

2011 figure lowest since annual tally hit mark in 1998

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2011 appears to be the 14th straight year for the annual suicide count to exceed 30,000, according to tentative statistics recently released by the National Police Agency.

The latest 2011 figure — 30,513 — however, was the lowest number since the annual suicide count topped the 30,000 mark in 1998, declining from 31,690 in 2010. Males accounted for 20,867 of the 2011 suicides, or 68 percent, the data show.

By prefecture, Tokyo had the most suicides, at 3,100, followed by Osaka with 1,899 and Kanagawa with 1,824.

An NPA official said a further statistical breakdown, including ages, occupations and other details of the victims, will be released sometime later this year.

"Although the total number declined, it is still a very serious situation to have over 30,000 people a year committing suicide," Yasuyuki Shimizu, director of the Tokyo-based nonprofit suicide prevention group Lifelink, told The Japan Times Wednesday.

The statistics show declines in annual suicide counts in Miyagi, Iwate and Fukushima prefectures, which were devastated in the March 11 disasters. But Shimizu said optimism about the results may be short-lived, because suicides tend to increase in devastated areas after a year or so, as was the case in the wake of the Great Hanshin Earthquake of 1995.

As reality sets in, people are forced to confront their losses, and some may suffer greatly to the extent that they commit suicide, Shimizu said.

According to a different survey by the Cabinet Office, as of November 49 people in the three prefectures committed suicide for reasons related to the March 11 disaster. Considering past studies,

continuous support is crucial, Shimizu stressed.

The data also show that unlike the past three years in which the highest monthly suicide count was marked in March — which is the end of the business year for many corporations — last year saw the level peak in May.

Shimizu, who analyzed the unusual spike in May, said the jump may be related to the media's sensationalized reporting on the May 12 suicide of TV celebrity Miyu Uehara. Daily suicide tallies increased sharply for 10 days starting May 13, Shimizu said.

"Those who committed suicide in this period were mostly women in their 20s and 30s. . . . The media's excessive reporting may have triggered" this phenomenon, Shimizu said.

To prevent suicides, Shimizu said consultations to help people meet multiple needs, including debts and employment, are necessary.

"From our survey, we know that, on average, there are four reasons why people commit suicide," he said. "So by providing consultations to meet such multiple needs, I believe (we can) help people who feel cornered choose a path to live."

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