

# Suicides Among Daily Wage Workers: Economic Vulnerability and Government Apathy

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The number of deaths due to suicides in India reached an all-time high in 2021, as per the latest data from the National Crime Records Bureau showed.

Last year, 1.64 lakh persons died by suicide, an increase of 7.2 percent from 2020 when 1.53 lakh persons had taken the extreme step. In 2019, this figure was around 1.39 lakh, according to the data on accidental deaths and suicides released by the NCRB on Monday.

Till now, the highest rate of suicide – 11.3 – was reported in the country in 2010. In 2021, the rate of suicide – the number of death due to suicides per one lakh population – stood at 12.

**Number of Suicides, Growth of Population and Rate of Suicides during 2017 - 2021**

Sl. No.	Year	Total Number of Suicides	Mid-Year Projected Population (in Lakh <sup>#</sup> )	Rate of Suicides (Col.3/Col.4)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
1	2017	1,29,887	13091.6 <sup>#</sup>	9.9
2	2018	1,34,516	13233.8 <sup>#</sup>	10.2
3	2019	1,39,123	13376.1 <sup>#</sup>	10.4
4	2020	1,53,052	13533.9 <sup>\$</sup>	11.3
5	2021	1,64,033	13671.8 <sup>\$</sup>	12.0

# Source: Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections (November, 2019), National Commission on Population, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare.

\$ Source: Report of the Technical Group on Population Projections (July, 2020), National Commission on Population, Ministry of Health & Family Welfare

+ One Lakh = 0.1 Million

\*\*\* Rate of Suicides = Incidence of suicides per one lakh (1, 00,000) of population.

Number of Suicides, Growth of Population and Rate of Suicides during 2017-2021

Source: Source: National Crime Records Bureau Data

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In terms of state-wise composition of suicide rates, the highest is in Maharashtra (22,207), then in Tamil Nadu (18,925), Madhya Pradesh (14965), West Bengal (13500), and Karnataka (13,056). These five states count more than 50 percent of total deaths by suicides in the country.

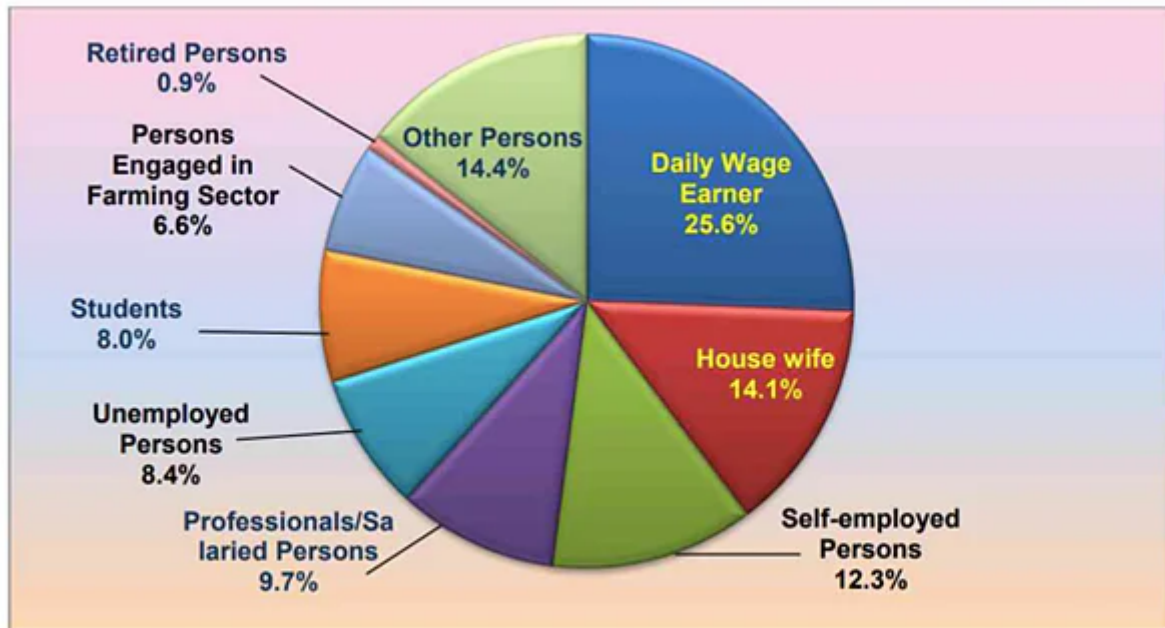


Of course these are ‘reported’ numbers in the NCRB database. The actual situation may be far worse, as the data agency itself highlights in a word of caution. There is an obvious difference between ‘reported deaths by suicide’ and ‘actual deaths by suicide’.

Still, if we take the reported numbers by their current standing, rising deaths by suicide reflect a worrying concern that have a complex set of factors explaining their rising trend, driven by sociology, economics, and politics. We look at some of the economic reasons here in context to those exacerbated by the pandemic and its restrictions.

“Domestic problems” and “illnesses” were reported as the major cause of death by suicide in the country last year. They accounted for 33.2 percent and 18.6 percent of total suicide cases respectively. But, see the chart below to understand how, in terms of profession, the most vulnerable working class, daily wage earners remained the largest group among the suicide victims for the second consecutive year.

### Percentage Distribution of Suicide Victims by Profession During 2021



Source: National Crime Records Bureau.

Percentage Distribution of Suicide Victims by Profession During 2021.

Source: National Crime Records Bureau

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At over 42,000 cases, one in four of the recorded 1,64,033 suicide victims in 2021 was a daily wage earner. In 2020, too, daily wage earners accounted for the highest share of deaths by suicide – 37,666 out of 153,052. The data is significant as thousands of daily wage earners lost their livelihoods during the two pandemic years.

## What We Observed in the Field

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In a study undertaken by our Centre for New Economics Studies, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, OP Jindal Global University, we conducted an ethnographic survey of over 200 daily wage workers through a randomised survey in 'mazdoor mandis' across the cities of Lucknow and Pune. The reasons of choosing these two cities were due to logistical ease and these cities being the main gravitating centres for low income migrant workers to travel for finding and completing daily wage work.

Our aim was to understand the extent to which reasons of economic crisis were affecting the workers' daily work prospects, how it hurt their incomes, and how little or no state support forced many to borrow extensively through informal channels to make their ends meet, leaving many highly indebted, which remains one of the key factors resulting in worker suicides (labelled under "domestic reasons").

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## Field Observations From the Study

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After traveling for long hours in search for work, most daily wage workers interviewed for the study begin their search for employment in unregulated 'mazdoor mandis'.

Most workers experienced an acute fall in employment – even after November 2020 and in much of early 2021 – with limited repair work and construction projects being undertaken by the private builders.

To understand the intra-household allocation of incomes of these workers, their spending, saving, and borrowing patterns, our team conducted around 100 interviews each in Lucknow and Pune. The average age of our respondents was around 36 in Lucknow and 35 years in Pune with their households comprising five or six members. Most were the sole breadwinner in their families.

A closer look at the household composition of most workers reveals that the number of dependents, including children and elderly in the family, exceeded the number of earning members.

Our data from Lucknow indicated that the mean monthly income from labour work has fallen by 62 percent, that is, from Rs 9,500 per month in pre-pandemic times to Rs 3,500 now per month. In Pune, the mean monthly income of an average worker fell from Rs 10,000 to Rs 4,500, a 54.5 percent decline per month.

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## Video Essay From the Field (Part I):

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Laxmi Rathod, a woman worker in her 20s from Pune's mazdoor mandi, gave an idea of what the lockdown was like:

“We did not even get a single rupee paid during the lockdown, not even a paisa for support. Whenever we went and begged for some money or support, we received police sticks and body blows. Despite that, we desperately had to beg to manage some food.”

Data from Lucknow shows how the average working days pre-COVID for most workers were around 21 days a month, which fell to nine days a month post the lockdown. In the city of Pune, the average working days in a month came down from 12 to two days.

Most respondents stated that construction projects had been halted and repair work was indefinitely postponed during the lockdown. Once the lockdown was lifted, there was not enough demand or funds for the small- and medium-scale owners to resume work at the same scale.

Furthermore, difficulties in commuting for most workers have translated into a rise in travelling expenses from Rs 56 to Rs 125 on an average per month, as per data on transport expenses for each worker from Lucknow. Hesitant on spending extra money on conveyance during times of financial distress, workers were forced to accept intermittent periods of unemployment.

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A few respondents indicated that there were also instances where daily-wagers with larger families in cities who had decided to stay back had been forced to beg because they couldn't pay for an expensive train fare to go back home.

“I have six children, how could I have travelled with all of them?” Rathod said. “I had no money to pay for train tickets and buses weren't functional.”



## Video Essay From the Field (Part II):

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Mohammed Haroon, a mason, explained: “Earlier, wages were Rs 400-Rs 500, but now it is difficult to get work to begin with. Even if we are able to find work, wages are quite low, around Rs 200-Rs 300 per day.”

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## Expenses and Borrowings

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From the survey data collected, the overall spending by workers from Lucknow and Pune rose post-lockdown by Rs 5,000 on a monthly basis. A lot of this increase, as seen from the aggregate expenditure allocation from each worker's household expenses, was attributed to debt-interest related payments, rental costs, healthcare costs, children's education, and on conveyance costs, which have substantially increased.

The average number of in school-children for each daily wage worker household in Lucknow was approximately three, implying a significantly high level of educational spending. Our team found that for workers who agreed on spending in their children's education pre-COVID, the mean educational expenditure fell from Rs 560 to Rs 430 per month. This reflected how more and more parents working as daily wage workers, with low incomes, took their kids out of school as schools shut and classes went online or couldn't educate them (in absence of a smart phone).

Despite restrictions on mobility and travel, the mean expenditure on conveyance for workers increased from Rs 890 to Rs 1,030 per month. This increase was not due to an increase in the frequency of travel, but rather due to a rise in the daily travel fare from Rs 60 to Rs 100 as reported. Respondents explained that due to public transport facilities being shut, and then to social distancing restrictions to keep seating capacity low, they had to explore more expensive, private transport networks to get to the mandis.

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Medical expenses, too, in worker households were observed to go up during the pandemic. This also explains how "illnesses" and rising anxiety from it contributed to high worker suicides.

The amount that a daily wage worker household would spend on healthcare increased due to a rise in the average spending on medicines from Rs 1900 before the pandemic to Rs 4700 per month since the pandemic and this increased spending was evident for those availing private healthcare services for maternal patients, pregnant women, or in treating non-COVID related ailments for the elderly in the household.

In a previous study, also conducted in cities of Lucknow and Pune as well, we discussed how reproductive healthcare services and private healthcare costs had gone up, negatively impacting lower income households since the pandemic.

On overall consumption patterns, we observed how average consumption increased for





most workers living in and around Lucknow, as against Pune. Explaining this, and beyond the other overheads mentioned, a major overhead for expense for most workers was on debt-related payments, or simply on interest of borrowings.

Almost every borrower, as studied, availed large sums of money through intra-community borrowings at informalised interest rates, as borrowing institutionally through banks wasn't possible due to no proper paperwork and security ownership.

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This pattern of informal lending, as reported by workers in our interactions, informed us how in most cases a lender charged 5% for every Rs 100 taken as a loan. On asking why was it necessary to borrow at such high (and exploitative interest rates), most workers especially from Lucknow cited two reasons: for increased medical expenses, and for household weddings, mostly for dowry related expenses, where marriages had been already fixed prior to the pandemic.



Patterns of what we observed in Lucknow, Pune can be broadly seen to be consistent in observations elsewhere too (even though in reported numbers UP doesn't feature in the top 5 list of states reported deaths by suicides).

## Where Is Government Aid?

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The ordinary worker during a pandemic-struck catastrophe was forced to become more and more dependent on debt-entrapping, ultra-exploitative, asset-owning class of workers and informal money lenders, which has only made their living condition worse over time.

Despite the government's efforts to ensure food-security during the months of the lockdown and thereafter, most workers were unable to avail the benefits of receiving ration packages. Poonam Sahu, a daily wage worker from Lucknow, said the State was absent:

“As far as I am concerned, the government can say whatever on paper, or in person about providing (food) aid and support. Daily wage workers have been living through a horrid period and none of the government measures announced are anywhere to be seen. It didn't affect the workers in any way.”

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Interference of bureaucratic intermediaries, need for an ID and paperwork and complex processes of handing out food packages to local communities forced many workers to fend for themselves.

Aklima, a worker staying with her two children, is one of those who did not receive the much-touted government food support.

“We didn’t get rations here,” she said. “Where and when do we get ration? Whatever we get, we need to buy it. If we work hard, we eat, otherwise we remain hungry.”

Echoing the plight of workers, those ignored by the sheer indifference from the government, Ansuiya’s statement quite tragically sums the countless stories of this essential working group: “If we ask for help, who will extend it? People send us away by saying ‘Go away! What can we do to help you if you have come to earn money’ This is what they tell us... So, help is never on offer. What we can get is ‘work’. At least that will help us manage our livelihood. Else, it is we who suffer – and die.”

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There is a clear case for the government to do more in addressing the plight of daily wage workers.

Three steps come to mind. Step one would be to acknowledge the deep-informalisation of work, its sub-contractualisation and precarity, along with economic vulnerability that underpins workers’ daily lives and livelihoods. Step two would be to create policy interventions that ‘secure’ workers and their working/living conditions that help them and their families feel safeguarded by different government back social safety nets. And,

Step three would be to directly look into (to understand) reasons for high worker suicides across states (where reported numbers are high) and address these through short-medium and long term corrective measures.

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