On May 27th, 1937, 80 years ago tomorrow, the Golden Gate Bridge opened and it quickly became an iconic symbol of San Francisco and American engineering. But in the past 80 years it also became iconic for a darker reason: suicide.

That has caused psychologists like Professor Craig Jackson at Birmingham City University [1] to wonder how we can stop it from being a hotspot for people who want to kill themselves.

When it opened, The Golden Gate Bridge was the largest single-span suspension bridge in the world. It was such an achievement in science and technology that over 1,000,000 people walked across it on opening day. President Franklin Roosevelt pressed a telegraph key in the White House and every fire siren, foghorn, church bell and ship’s whistle in the San Francisco bay area sounded in unison.

Most amazing to a modern audience: it was a government project completed ahead of schedule and under budget. No $400 toilet seats needed. Yet most are surprised to learn it also became a focal point for suicide jumpers. The Golden Gate Bridge has the largest number of suicidal deaths for a single location in the Western world. And those are the ones we know about. It was common in the past to mask suicides to reduce the potential for "copycat" behavior but still it retains the top spot outside a famous forest in Japan (where suicide is an accepted aspect of culture.)

Would higher barriers help? Suicide is just a four-foot wall away right now. That is not easy. But it will be definitive. The water is so cold that hypothermia is likely, meaning that even if you survive a 90 MPH entry from 220 feet above you are still likely to die. Four percent do somehow survive.

It's more than a barrier not being high enough. We can't blame a bridge for what people do but
psychologists report that the lost, lonely, desperate and suicidal are drawn to it, and that even those who seem okay are spurred to spontaneous suicides, even if they did not go there with any known suicidal intent. There is no magic bullet for society, no easy fix when it comes to equality in education or income or emotions that would cause suicides to stop.

**Why are older white men at so much more risk?**

The Psychiatric Foundation of Northern California have coronal court evidence from 213 suicidal deaths occurring at the Golden Gate Bridge from 1995 – 2005 which show that only 40 percent of the suicidal fatalities involved people who were suffering mental health problems at the time of their deaths. That's a single site study but it does align with other epidemiological larger-scale studies showing that suicide is more than an extreme response to stress or depression. For the Golden Gate specifically, three quarters of suicidal fatalities at the bridge were males; with 82 percent of male suicidents being white, followed by Asians (12 percent); Blacks (4 percent); and Latinos (2 percent). For female suicidents, 85 percent were white and just under 4 percent were from each of the Asian, Black, Latino and other groups.

This corroborates with other studies from around the globe which consistently suggest suicide is a major risk for older white males.

**Physical prevention or safety nets?**

The Bay Bridge Authority is soon due to begin the installation of a new Suicide Deterrent System. After considering 8 feet tall clear plexi-glass barriers, horizontal railings, vertical railings and even winglets at the top of the railings, like those seen in prison perimeter fences, to prevent people scaling the barrier. What they decided on was a safety net, which is intended to protrude approximately 20 feet outwards from the bridge, and will run the entire 1.7 miles of the bridge on both sides. This net will be positioned 20 feet below the ledge that jumpers launch themselves from, and if not deterring those from jumping, the net may merely serve to delay or impede their intended progress towards the waters below.

This safety net has been costed at $200 million and will be completed in 2020.

Psychologists wonder about that too. Is a safety net that is easy to jump into from the bridge walkway acting like a behavioural nudge – a show-off magnet - and encouraging some people to jump into the net?

Most importantly, will a safety net really change a suicident’s mind if they have decided to die?

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