

A Deadly Model: Suicide Contagion

We know that suicide contagion is a real phenomenon in society, and thus, a key concern about assisted suicide proposals.¹

In Oregon, government reports show a **positive statistical correlation between the legalization of assisted suicide and an increase in other suicides**:²

- Oregon legalized assisted suicide in late 1997.³
- After decreasing in the 1990s, Oregon suicide rates have been increasing significantly since 2000.⁴
- By 2007, Oregon's suicide rate was 35% above the national average.⁵
- By 2010, Oregon's suicide rate was 41% above the national average.⁶

Is this link a coincidence? People who have struggled with suicidal feelings for many years say otherwise. Individuals with this disability often point out that, for them, legalizing assisted suicide is tantamount to society encouraging suicide. For example, Ellen of Lincoln, California (who did not wish to provide her full name) wrote a letter to her state's Senators when an assisted suicide bill was under their consideration. Her letter stated,

I've lived with my mental illness for 25 years. During this time I've dealt with my own suicidality, off and on throughout the years. I almost committed suicide before.

My life has touched so many others' lives since I survived being suicidal. I've learned my life matters to others and to myself despite having a mental illness. But with bipolar and anxiety disorders, there are no guarantees for stability. I could once again be facing my own suicide battle.

If assisted suicide became law, society would be sending a message that suicide is all right. It would give a green light that it's OK to commit suicide. ... So in opposing this bill, the life I could save is my own.⁷

This subjective experience, heard over and over again, offers what may be a telling explanation of the Oregon suicide statistics.

¹ David P. Phillips, "The Influence of Suggestion on Suicide: Substantive and Theoretical Implications of the Werther Effect," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (1974), p. 340.

² Margaret Dore, Memorandum to the California Senate Appropriations Committee: "Vote "NO" on SB 128: The financial impact is potentially "enormous," <https://choiceisanillusion.files.wordpress.com/2015/05/sb-128-senate-appropriations-memo-updated.pdf>.

³ *Oregon's Death with Dignity Act: The First Year's Experience*, Department of Human Resources, Oregon Health Division, February 18, 1999, <https://public.health.oregon.gov/ProviderPartnerResources/EvaluationResearch/DeathwithDignityAct/Documents/year1.pdf> (accessed July 5, 2015).

⁴ "After decreasing in the 1990s, suicide rates have been increasing significantly since 2000, according to a new report, 'Suicides in Oregon: Trends and Risk Factors,' from Oregon Public Health." Oregon Health Authority News Release, September 9, 2010, *Rising suicide rate in Oregon reaches higher than national average*, <http://www.mentalhealthportland.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/2010-0909a2.pdf> (accessed May 23, 2016).

⁵ "In 2007, the age-adjusted suicide rate among Oregonians of 15.2 per 100,000 was 35 percent higher than the national average." *Suicides in Oregon, Trends and Risk Factors*, Oregon Department of Human Services, Public Health Division, September 2010.

⁶ "In 2010, the age-adjusted suicide rate among Oregonians of 17.1 per 100,000 was 41 percent higher than the national average." *Suicides in Oregon: Trends and Risk Factors—2012 Report*, Oregon Health Authority, Public Health Division, November 2012, p. 1, <https://choiceisanillusion.files.wordpress.com/2014/02/oregon-suicide-report-2012-through-2010-pdf.pdf> or https://www.deschutes.org/sites/default/files/fileattachments/health_services/page/589/suicides_in_oregon_trends_and_risk_factors2012.pdf (accessed May 23, 2016).

⁷ Ellen of Lincoln, California, *SB 128 Would Trigger More Suicides*, Letter from Ellen, who has struggled with suicidal issues for many years, to California senators.