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Surge in Suicides Alarms Region's Koreans

By [KIRK SEMPLE](#)

They had navigated the move from [South Korea](#) and opened a nail salon on Long Island, but by last winter, Yongho and Soonhee Kim were in debt and deeply unhappy. They were fighting a lawsuit over nonpayment of rent on the Long Beach salon and were months behind on rent payments for their apartment in Oakland Gardens, Queens. The bank had repossessed their car.

At dawn on Feb. 25, the couple left a note for their 20-year-old daughter outside their apartment door, doused themselves with gasoline and set themselves on fire, the police said. The blaze killed them and destroyed their home.

"They 100 percent lost hope," said Mr. Kim's brother-in-law, Chi Kun Park.

While the [recession](#) has scattered its distress widely, without regard for nationality, many Koreans and Korean-Americans in the New York area worry that it is taking a particularly heavy toll on their community.

The number of suicides reported to the local [Korean Consulate General](#) has more than doubled this year, to 15 from 6 last year, and there were 5 in 2007. All of the dead were Korean citizens, said the consulate, which does not keep statistics on Korean-Americans. The latest suicide came on Dec. 15, when a woman in her early 30s hanged herself in her home in Flushing,

Queens, the consulate said.

The consul general, Kyungkeun Kim, said he believed that the actual total of suicides by Korean citizens might be more than twice as high. [The Korea Times](#), a Korean-language newspaper published in the United States, reported in September that at least 36 Koreans and Korean-Americans in the New York region had taken their lives this year.

Money troubles have been the leading force behind the sharp rise, say Korean civic leaders and officials, who are alarmed by the trend.

Many Koreans place an extraordinary emphasis on academic and professional achievement, said Sung Min Yoon, the assistant project director at the [Asian Outreach Clinic of the Child Center of New York](#). Failure to get into top colleges, perform well at school or climb the economic ladder can cause deep shame and embarrassment.

“We have a very inflexible mentality,” Mr. Yoon said.

Community groups have organized several suicide prevention seminars. The Korean-American director of a funeral home in Flushing that caters to Koreans sponsored two seminars, in New York City and New Jersey.

Koreans are by no means alone in their concern. An Irish-American community center in Yonkers held a series of mental health workshops in the fall after a spate of suicides among Irish immigrants.

Even so, the total number of suicides in New York City has dropped: there were 339 in the first 10 months of this year, or about 34 per month, down from 39 per month in 2008 and 39.4 in

2007, officials said. (National statistics are not yet available for the past three years, according to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).)

The rise in suicides among Koreans in New York, however, mirrors an increase in South Korea, where the suicide rate last year was 26 per 100,000 people, up from 24.8 in 2007 and 21.8 in 2006, said Dr. Myung-Soo Lee, director of the Seoul Suicide Prevention Center.

This month, the [Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development](#) reported that South Korea had the highest rate among its 30 member nations, based on 2006 statistics. A number of prominent South Koreans have killed themselves this year, including former President [Roh Moo-hyun](#), who [was implicated in a corruption investigation](#); Daul Kim, a [top South Korean model](#); and Park Yong-oh, the [former chairman of Doosan](#), South Korea's oldest business conglomerate.

Some experts trace the increase in the suicide rate, in part, to the nation's rapid transformation from an impoverished agrarian society to a booming industrial power. Traditional family support systems have fractured, age-old value systems have dissolved and materialism has flourished, they say. And those changes continue to steer the lives of recent emigrants to America.

"We are thinking that we're living in the United States, but we still keep the value of the higher expectations and higher achievements," said Mr. Yoon, of the Asian Outreach Clinic, who immigrated from South Korea a decade ago.

Among the Koreans who killed themselves this year in the New York region was Won Jo Lee, 36, a cabdriver whose body was found, shot in the head, on Sept. 6 in his apartment in Bayside, Queens, the Korean Consulate said. The Korea Times reported that Mr. Lee had been suffering

financial difficulties, and it quoted his roommate as saying he had recently been laid off.

The following day, Kyung-ho Lee, a security guard, set himself on fire at his apartment in Fresh Meadows, Queens, and died, according to the consulate. Mr. Lee, 55, had broken up with his companion and had persistent money woes, The Korea Times reported.

On Sept. 11, a Korean-American man hanged himself in the basement of his home in Demarest, N.J., the police said. Neighbors told [The Korea Daily](#), another Korean-language newspaper, that the man, Chungsik Kim, owned 10 clothing stores in New Jersey and was struggling financially. He left a wife and three children, the paper reported.

But Koreans in New York say none of the deaths have had the impact of the Kims' suicide in February.

The couple immigrated in 1990 with their infant daughter. For years they worked at a convenience store on Northern Boulevard in Queens, and in the early 1990s they opened their nail salon. But business started slow and never picked up much, said Mr. Park, Mr. Kim's brother-in-law.

About two years ago, the couple started sinking into debt. They suffered silently, however, and except for one small loan from Mr. Kim's brother, they asked for no help from family members, Mr. Park said.

"He's losing money, and he's very private," Mr. Park said. "Instead of asking for money from people, they thought the better way was to commit suicide."

In the brief note the couple left their daughter, Jieun, who was spending the night elsewhere,

Mr. Kim wrote: "I love you, my daughter. I'm very sorry to leave you alone. It would've been much better if you had a wealthier father." Along with the note, they left \$40 in cash for her, Mr. Park said.

Koreans and Korean-Americans rallied to the aid of the daughter, a graphic design student at [Queens College](#), donating \$37,400 in a communitywide appeal for help. She moved in with Mr. Park and his wife. "We accept her as a daughter," he said.

And she bid farewell to her parents, scattering their ashes in Long Island Sound under the Throgs Neck Bridge.

Ali Adeeb and Eunji Jang contributed reporting.

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