

Operations

Greater intervention needed to battle shipping's tragic rates of suicide



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Seafaring remains a profession that suffers from a far higher rate of suicide than most other careers, and yet there remains no official statistics on how serious a crisis this is for the shipping industry despite many bodies calling for greater transparency on the issue.

David Hammond, CEO of the NGO Human Rights at Sea, told *Splash* that such tragedies could be avoidable with better intervention and increased awareness.

“Suicide significantly impacts everyone living, working and transiting at sea. The issue is one which needs constant attention due to long-lasting ramifications for immediate dependents and co-workers,” Hammond said.

Historically, there hasn't been a single agreed international framework for recording suicides at sea, which has led many to believe that suicides remain underreported.

Suicide is poorly understood by the industry and by seafarers

Steven Jones, founder of the Seafarers Happiness Index, alluded to various studies that place the figures on seafarer suicide at anything between 5-12% of deaths at sea.

"Whatever the real figures, there are strong indications that the rate outstrips comparable populations ashore," Jones said.

Jones suggested there was a lack of honesty over the issue, one of shipping's darkest secrets, driven in part by fear, but also the patchy and unreliable data.

"Are seafarers willing or able to truly open up about suicidal thoughts or the phases and stages of stress, depression or substance dependence that could lead to suicide? My feeling is that there is an understandable hesitancy or unwillingness to engage openly, based on fear of stigma, of losing work or never being able to return to sea," Jones posited.

A 30-page report from the UK government last year investigating the issue stated: "There is a sense that suicide is probably under-reported for several reasons."

Primarily, this is driven by the difficulty in knowing for certain if a death is suicide and, on a related note, a desire to protect surviving family, both emotionally and financially, the report pointed out.

Perceptions of how insurance does – or doesn't – work around suicide leads seafarers to do what they can to ensure families receive pay-outs.

"Suicide is poorly understood by the industry and by seafarers," the report noted, describing a "deep reticence" to discuss the issue.

This reticence was, according to participants surveyed for the UK report, not only a consequence of the general “macho” culture that is believed to pervade the workforce and onboard working environment.

“It is further exacerbated by distinct cultural misgivings around conceptions of suicide specifically. Participants freely described how culturally problematic suicide can be for certain nationalities – they particularly highlighted perceptions that there were problems engaging seafarers with the issue, with those from Philippines and China being highlighted as especially difficult to engage. There was a sense that this could, in turn, result in shipowners being reluctant to raise the issue themselves,” the report stated.

Research by Yale University commissioned in 2020 by the ITF Seafarers’ Trust found 20% of seafarers surveyed had suicidal ideation.

“While comparative data is limited, this analysis suggests that seafarers have higher rates of depression than other working populations, emphasising the need for appropriate mental health policies and management strategies in this isolated, vulnerable, and globally essential workforce,” the study stated.

There are also cultural issues to consider. In some nations, suicide is criminalised. The charity Lifeline International is currently leading a global campaign to decriminalise suicide worldwide.

Almost a quarter of all nations either have laws to prosecute suicide attempts or have an unclear legal status, according to data from Lifeline International.

“We have to understand the nuances of what we are talking about in a multicultural context. Assuming Western views is dangerous, toxic and likely to only worsen the situation,” concluded Jones from the Seafarers Happiness Index.

#Seafarers