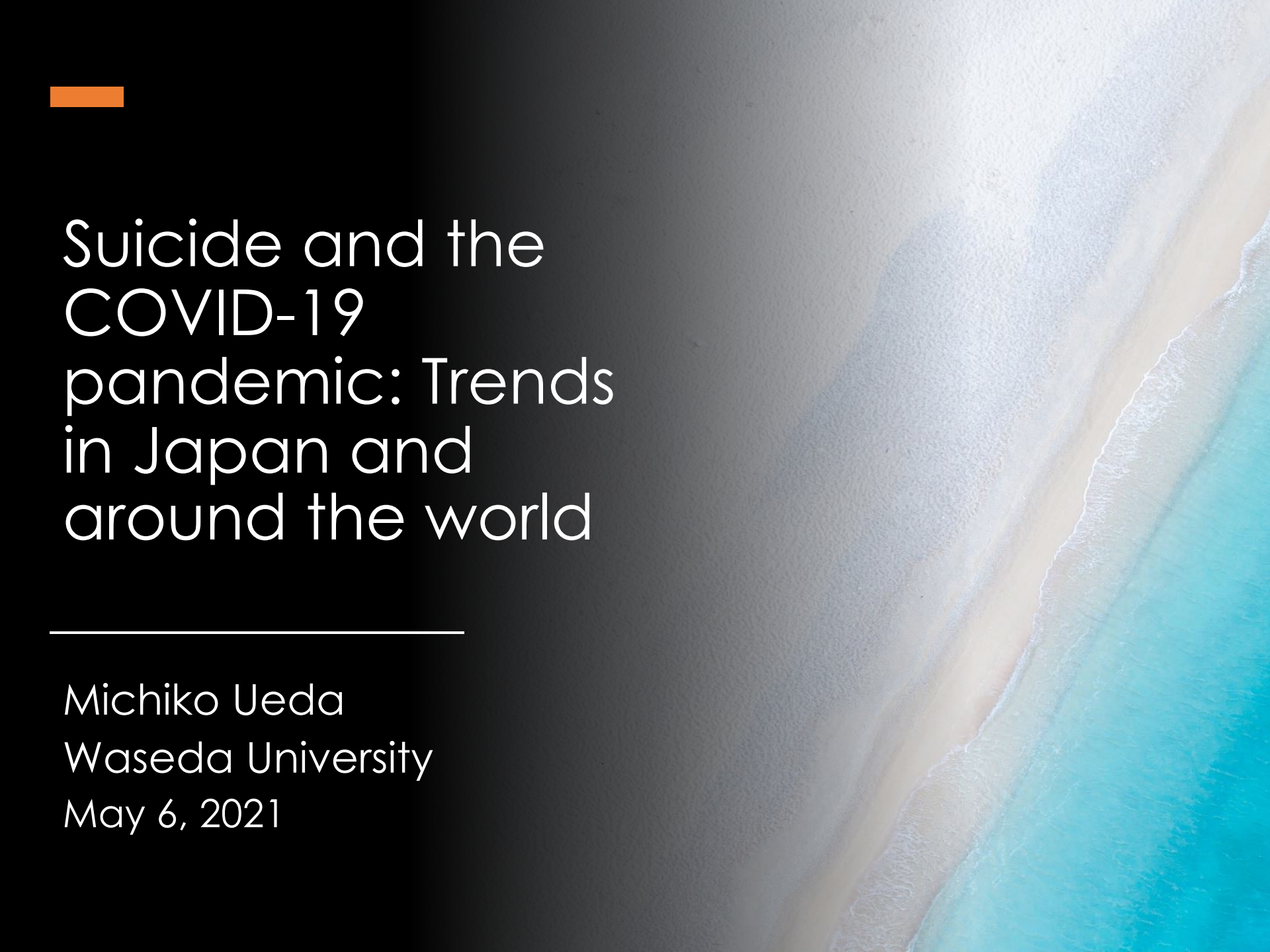




Suicide and the COVID-19 pandemic: Trends in Japan and around the world

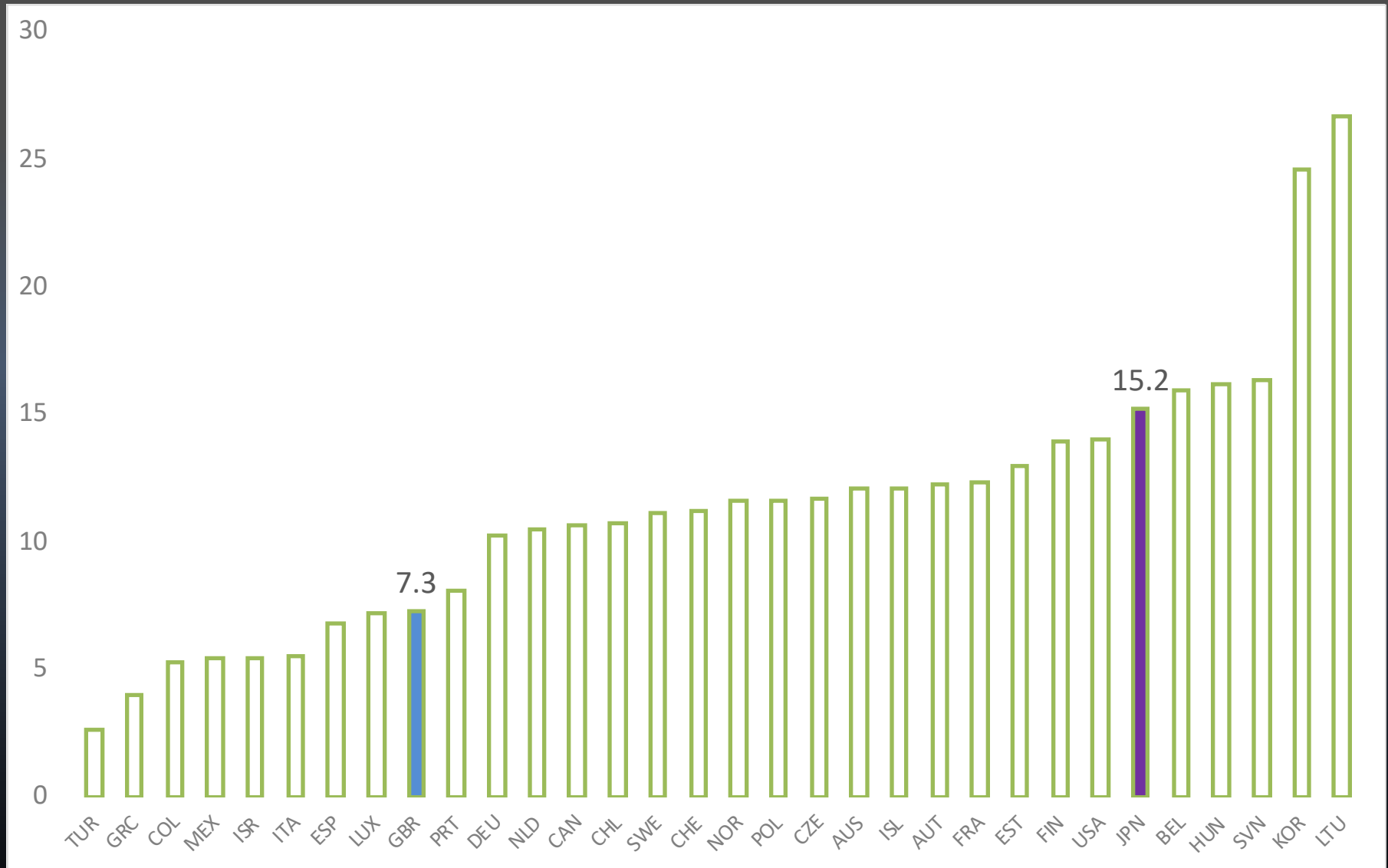
Michiko Ueda
Waseda University
May 6, 2021



Outline

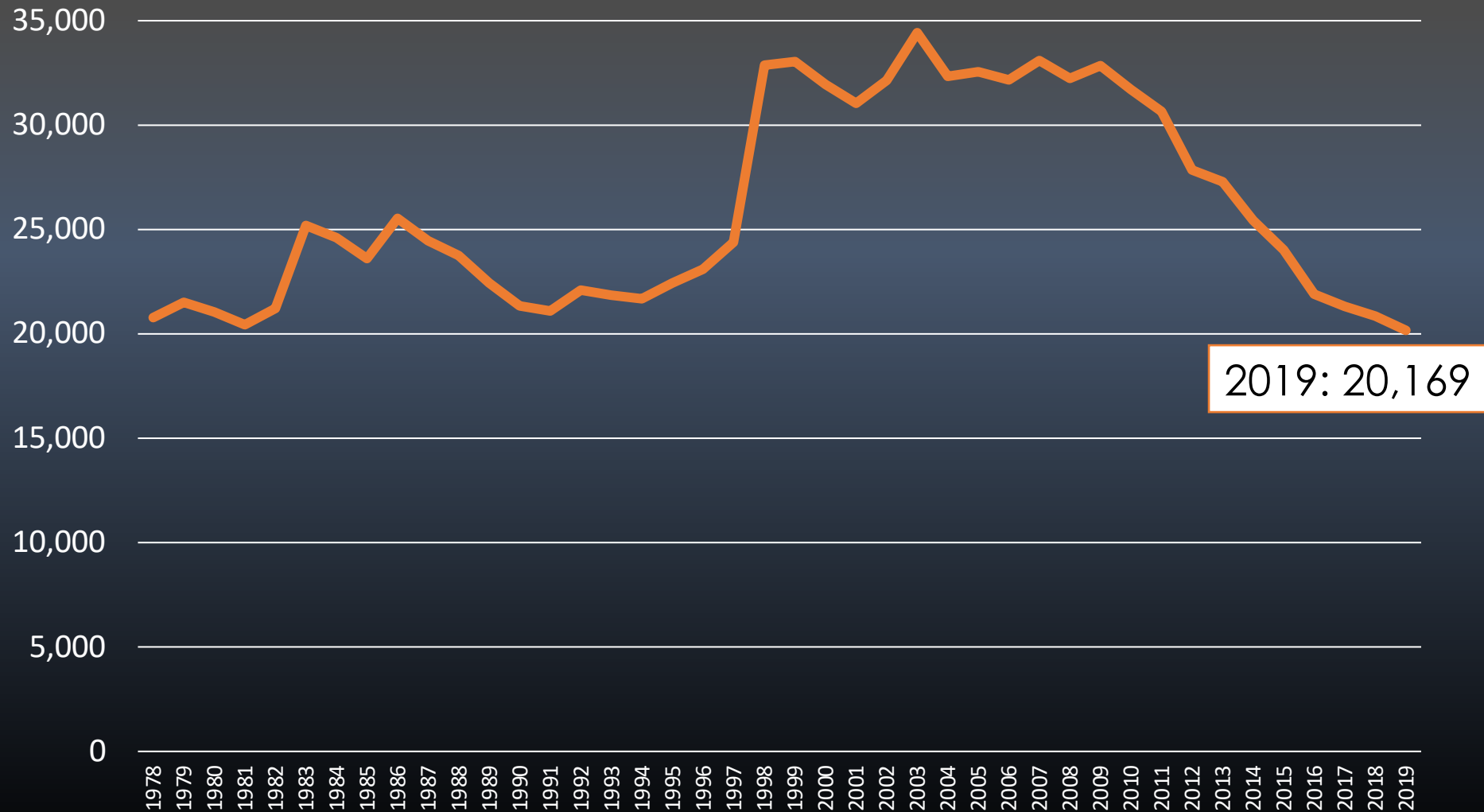
- Suicide in Japan: overview
- COVID-19 and suicide in Japan
- Potential factors behind the increase

Suicide rates (OECD, 2016)



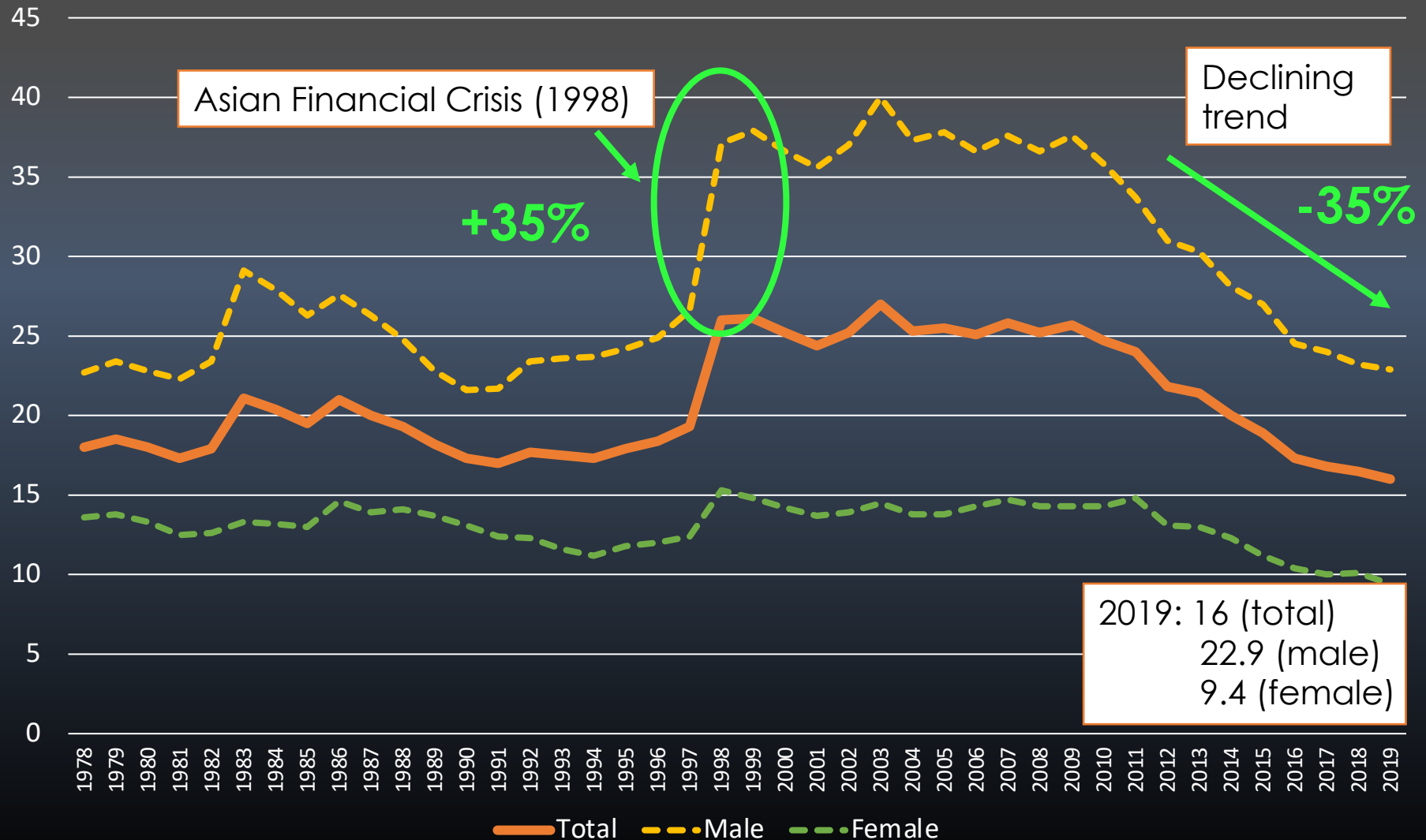
Suicide rates = suicide deaths per 100,000 persons. Source: OECD 3

Number of suicide deaths in Japan: 1978-2019



Source: National Police Agency

Suicide rate in Japan: 1978-2019



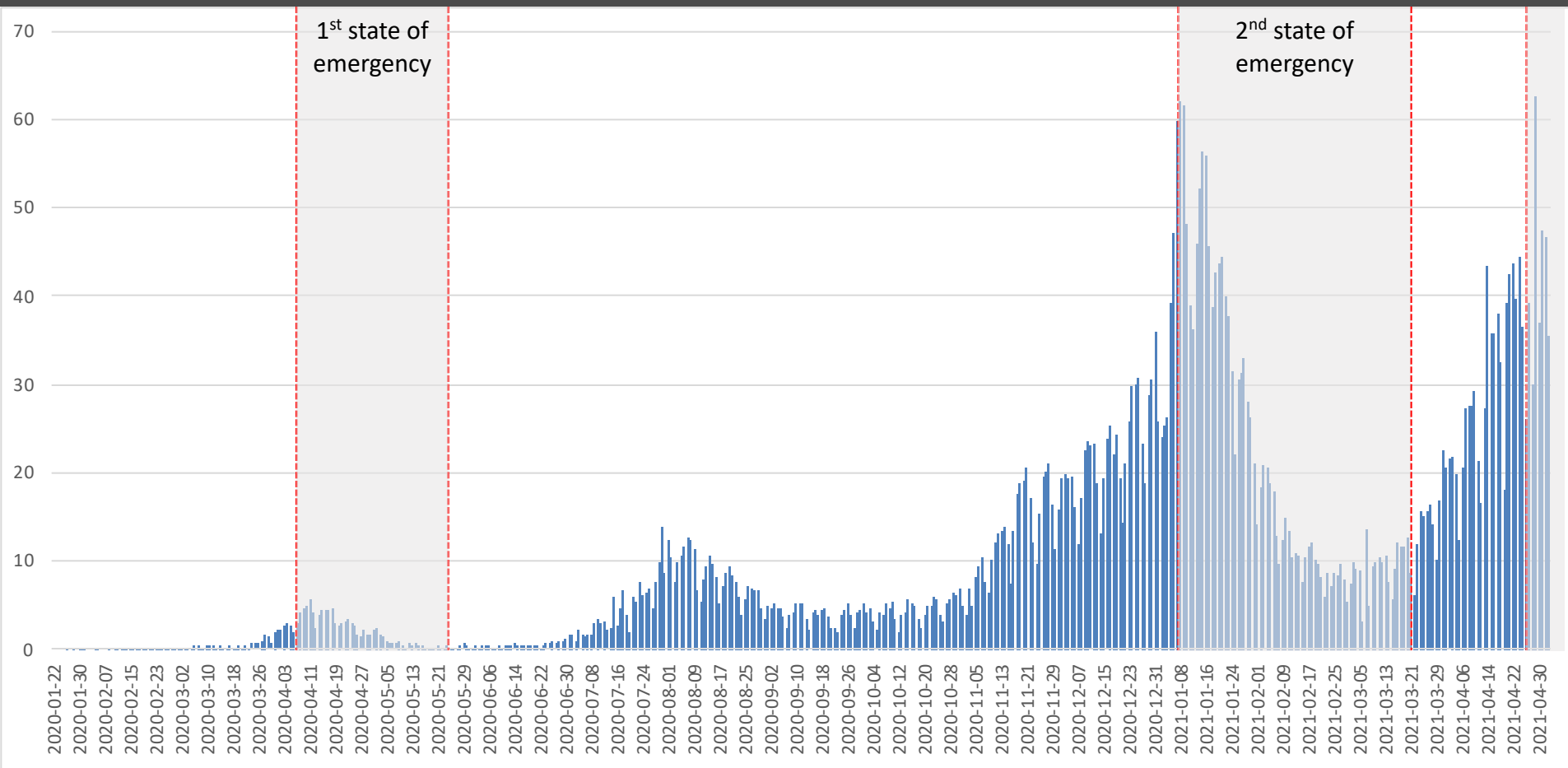
Suicide deaths
during the
COVID
pandemic in
Japan

COVID-19 in Japan

- First case: January 16th
- School closure: March 2
- 1st State of emergency: April 7- May 25
- 2nd and 3rd state of emergency in Jan-March and April-May 2021 in some metropolitan areas
 - No lockdown
 - No strict movement restrictions
 - Non-essential businesses requested to close or operate reduced hours

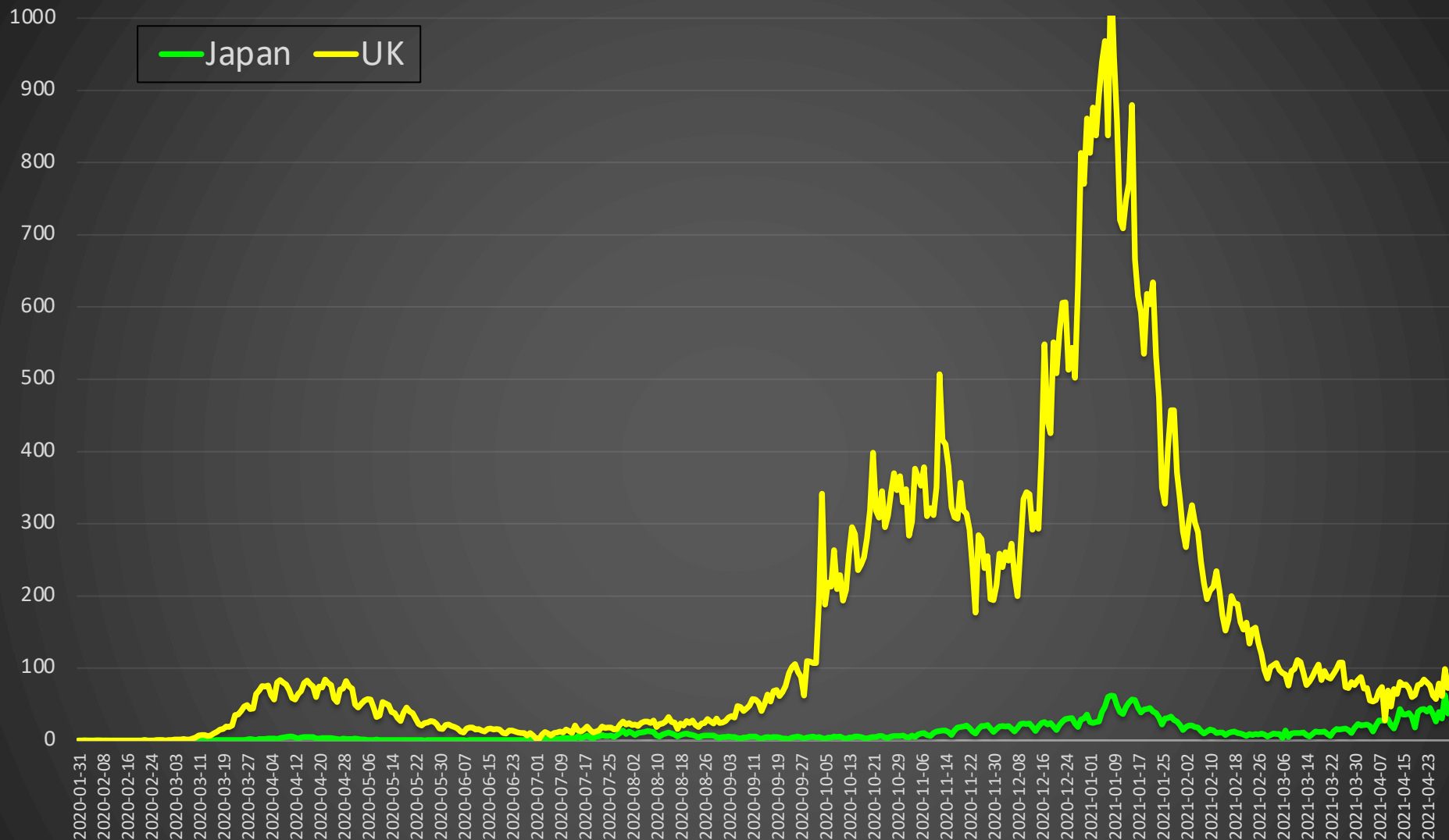
Number of new COVID cases in Japan per million

3rd state of
emergency



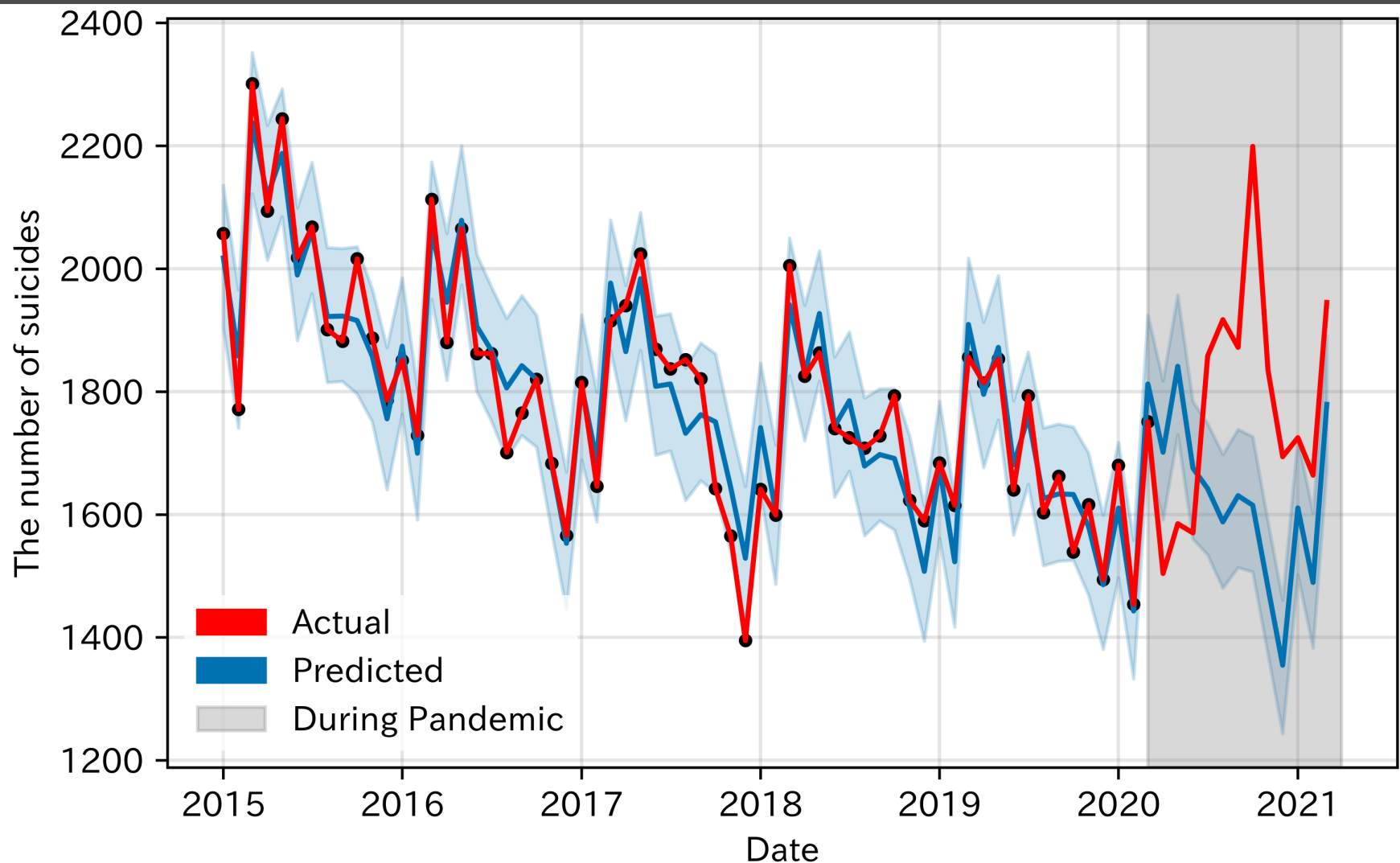
Source: Our World in Data

New cases per 1 million: Japan and United Kingdom

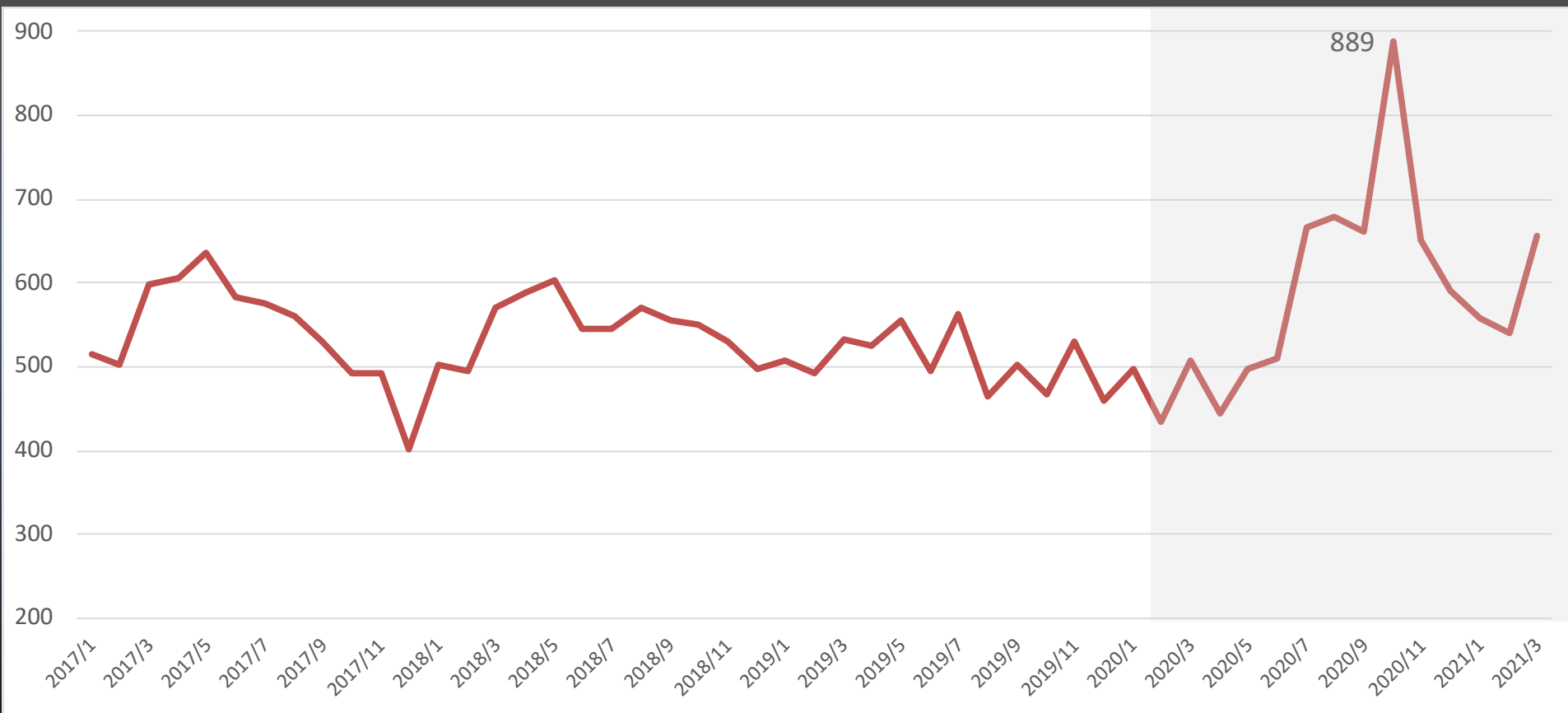


Source: Our World in Data

Predicted vs. actual monthly number of suicide deaths in Japan (2015-2020)

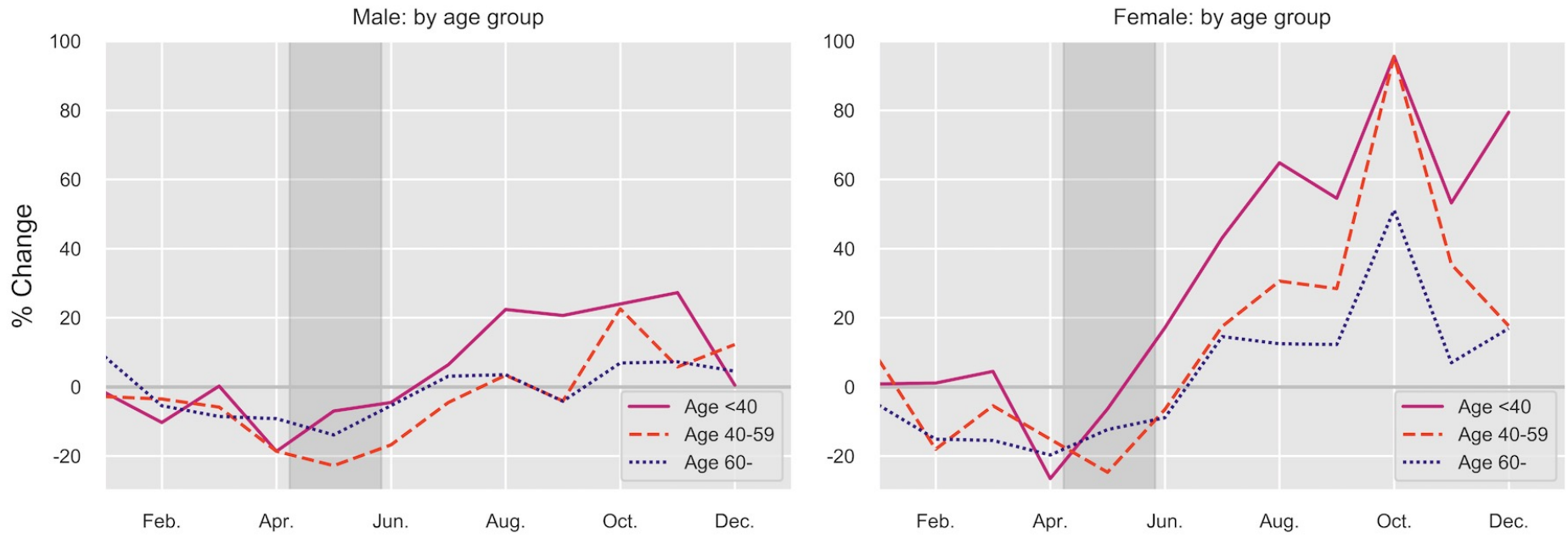


Number of suicide deaths by women in Japan (2017- Mar. 2021)



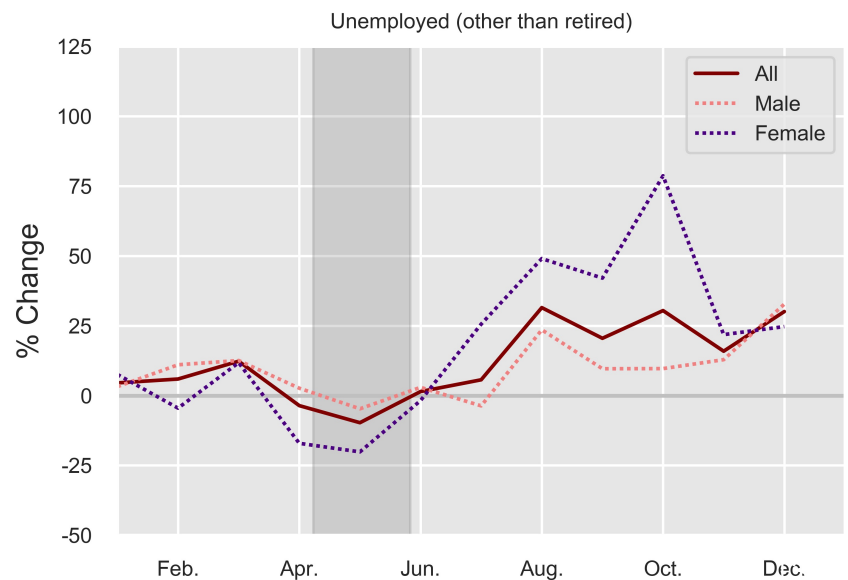
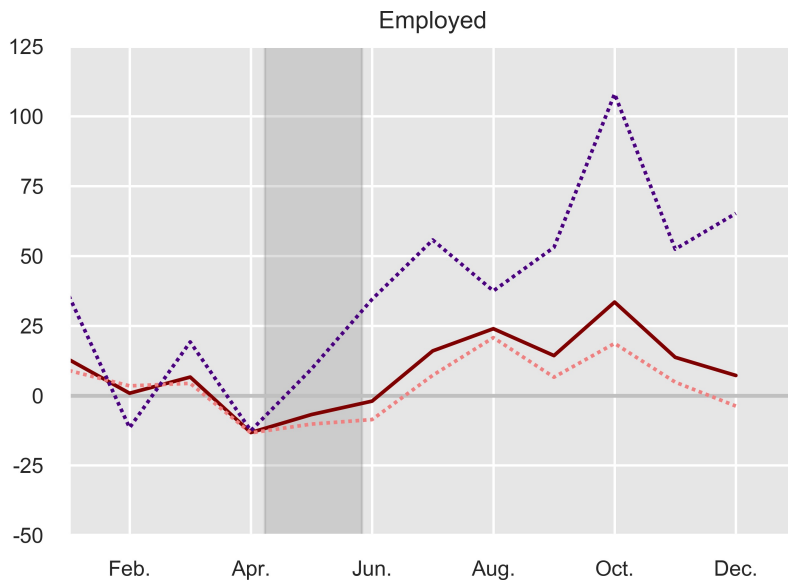
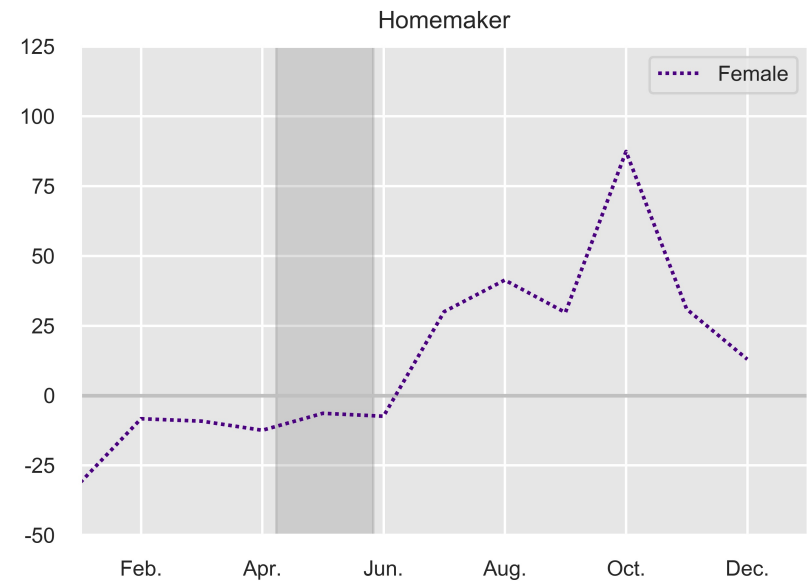
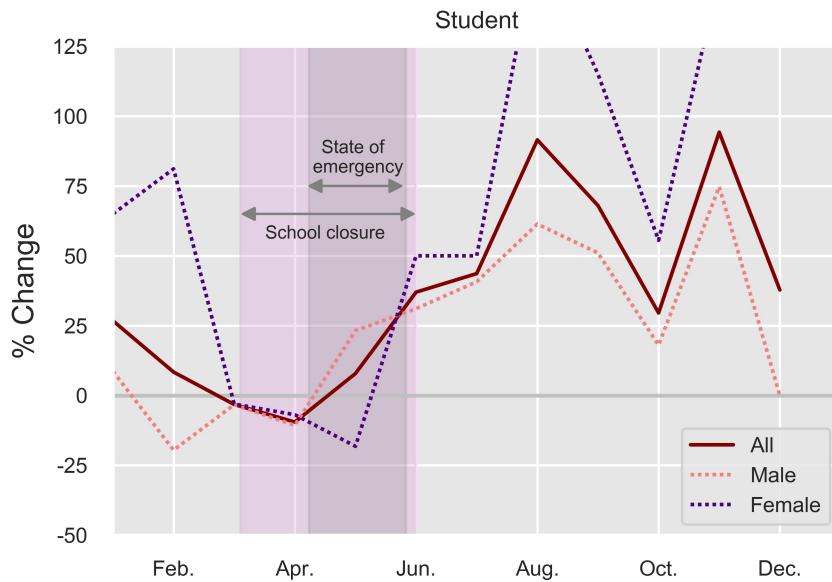
Source: National Police Agency

Changes by sex and age group: 2020 and 2017-2019 (mean)



- A notable increase in 2nd half of 2020 among relatively young women.
- Particularly large increase in October 2020 in all age groups among women; almost twice as large than the past 3 years.

By sex and occupation (% change)



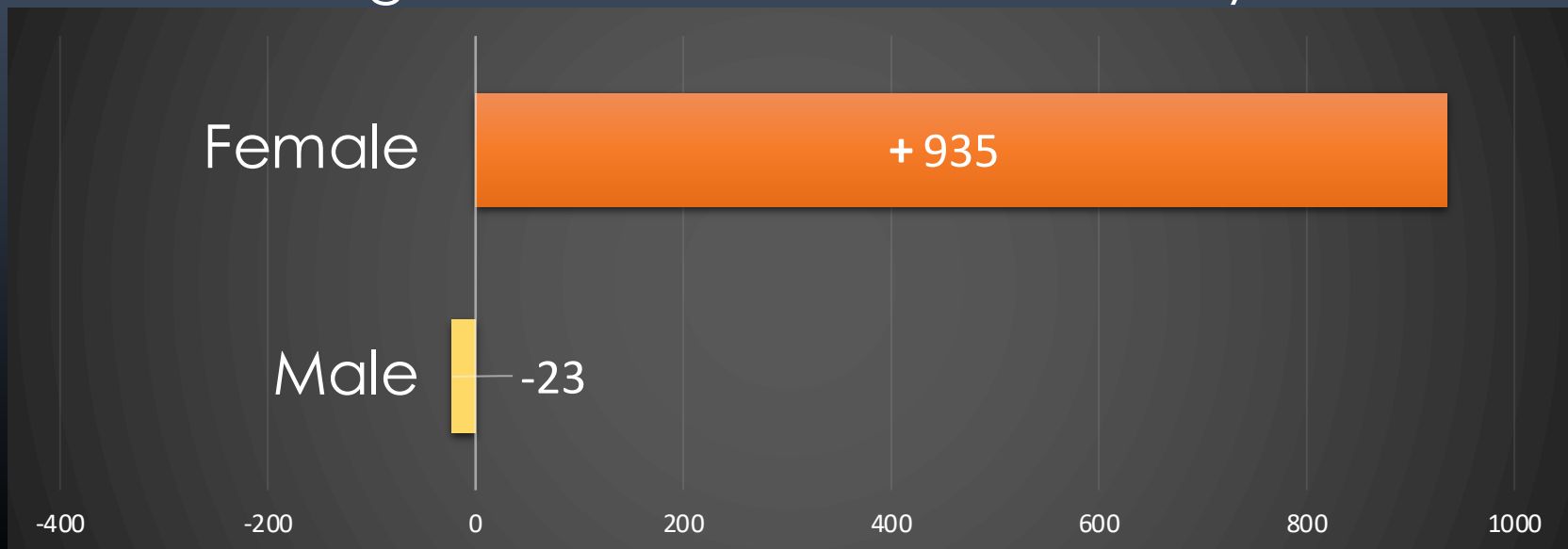
Total number of suicide deaths

20,169
(2019)

→
+ 912

21,081
(2020)

Change between 2019 and 2020 by sex





Potential Factors

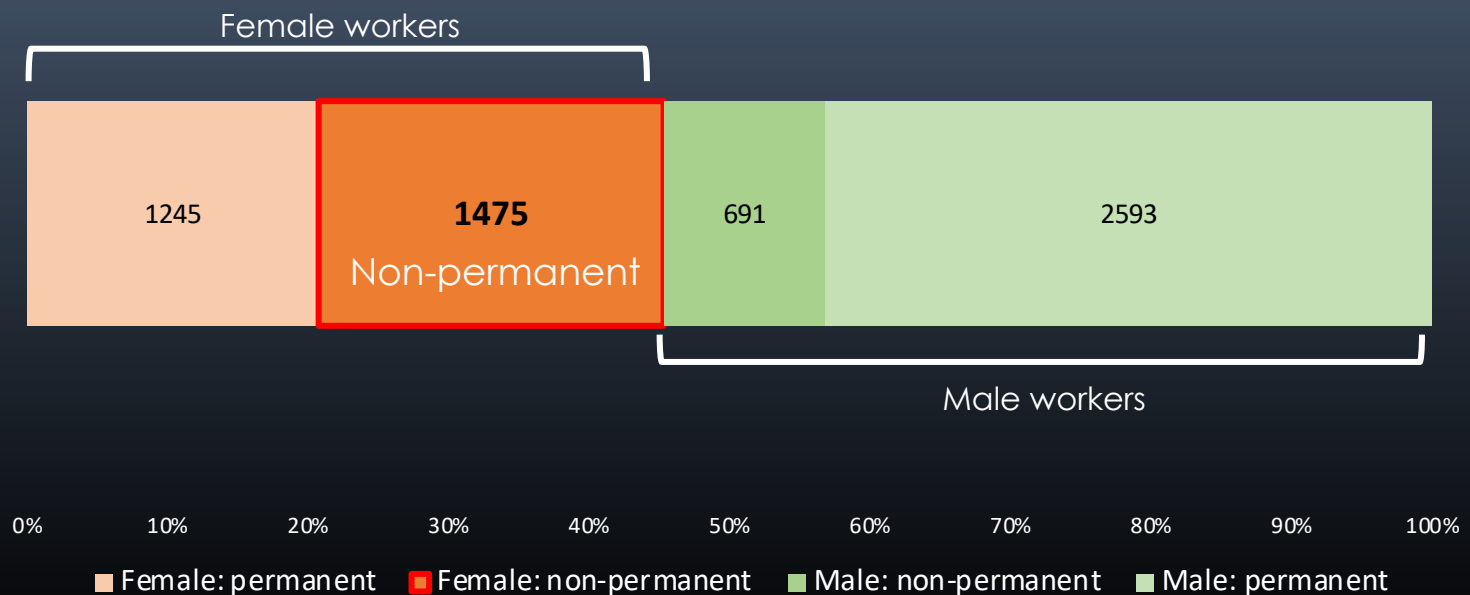
Potential Factors

Note: Data still limited; potentially multiple and complex factors

- Economic consequences of the pandemic
- Deteriorating mental health conditions
- Media reports on celebrity suicide
- School closure

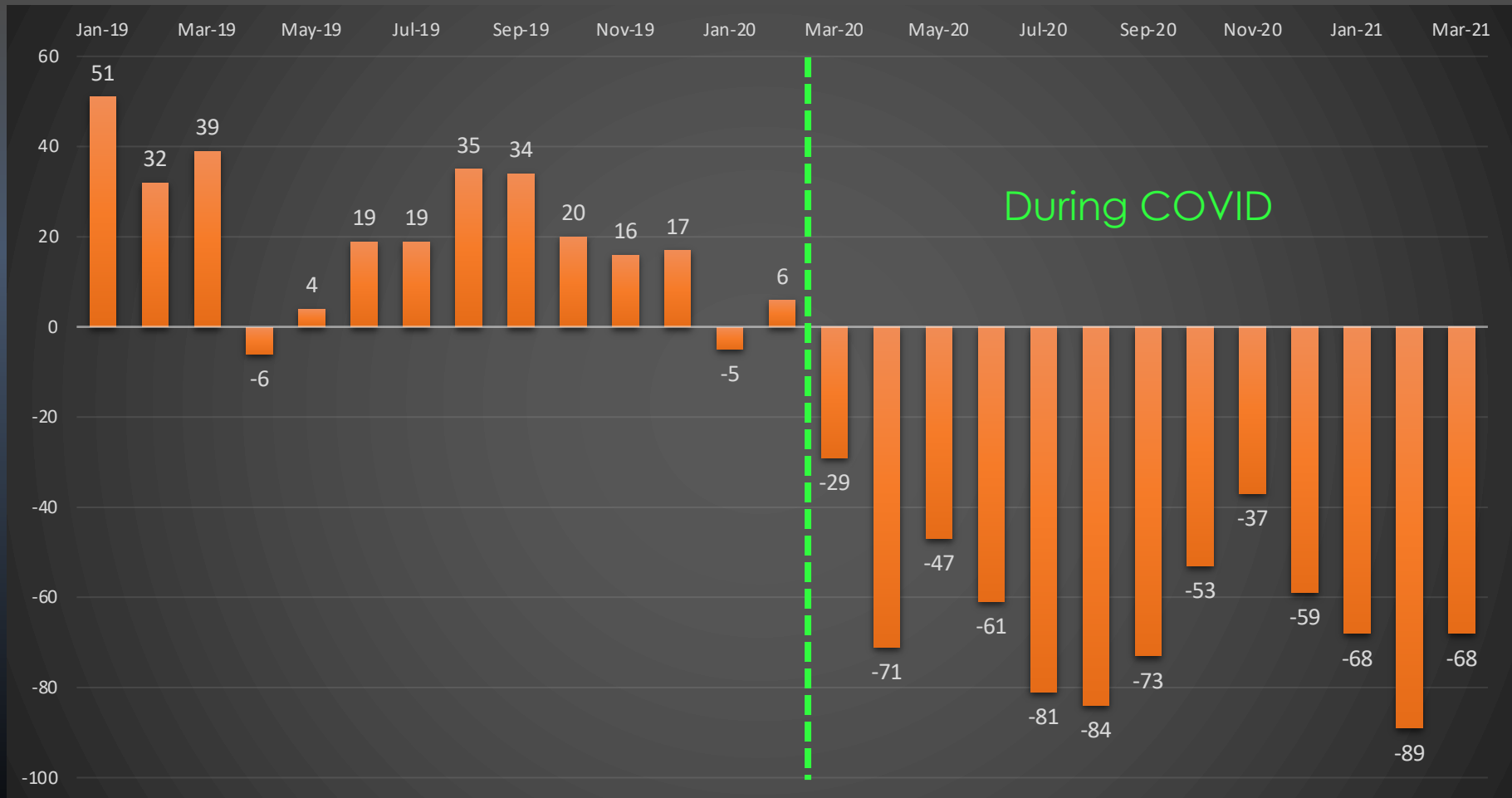
Economic consequences of the pandemic

- Industries affected most (e.g., travel, food service) tend to be served by women
- Large job losses among non-permanent workers, who tend to be women



Source: Labor statistics (as of 2019); Unit: 10,000 persons

Changes in number of non-permanent workers from the previous year: Female



Source: Labor statistics, Unit: 10,000 persons 18

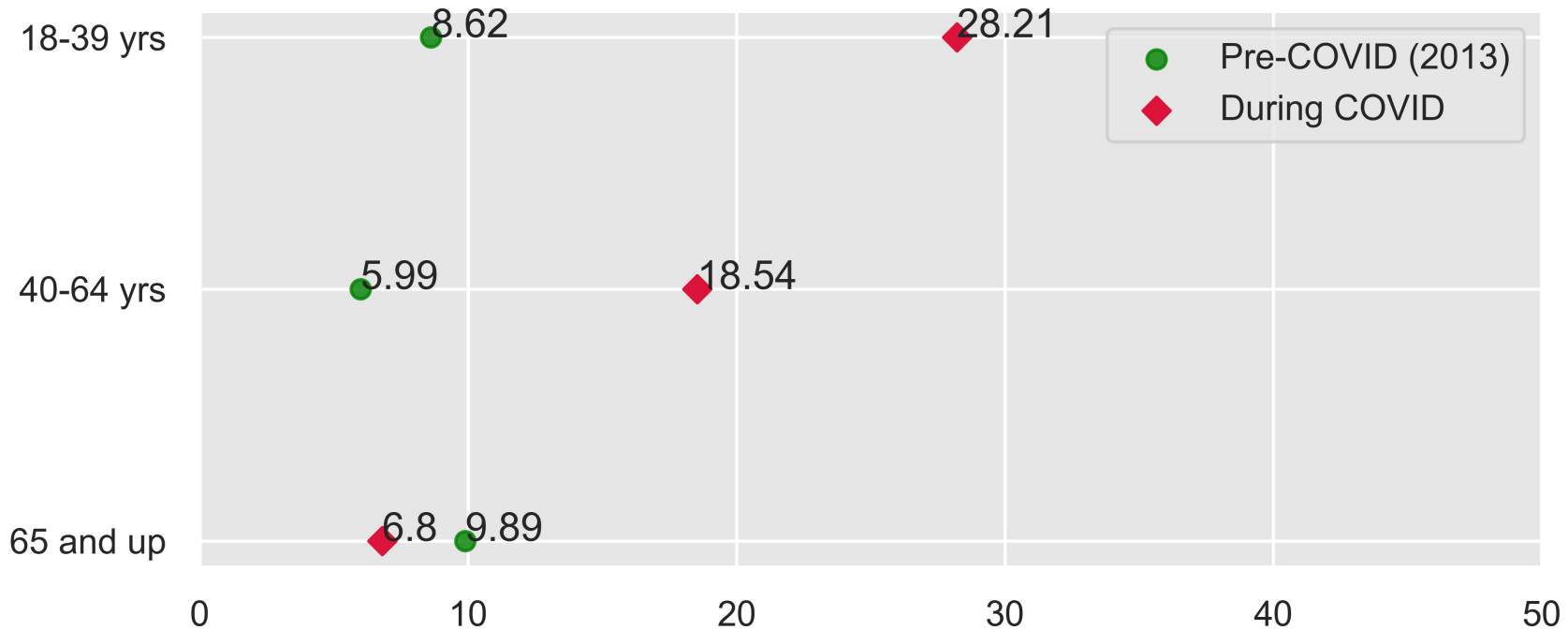
Surveys of the general public in Japan

- Monthly online survey (April 2020- Feb. 2021) of the general population in Japan
- N=1,000 each month, N=11,000 total
- Measured mental health conditions, loneliness, changes in employment status, preventive behaviors, etc.

Mental health status of the general public in Japan

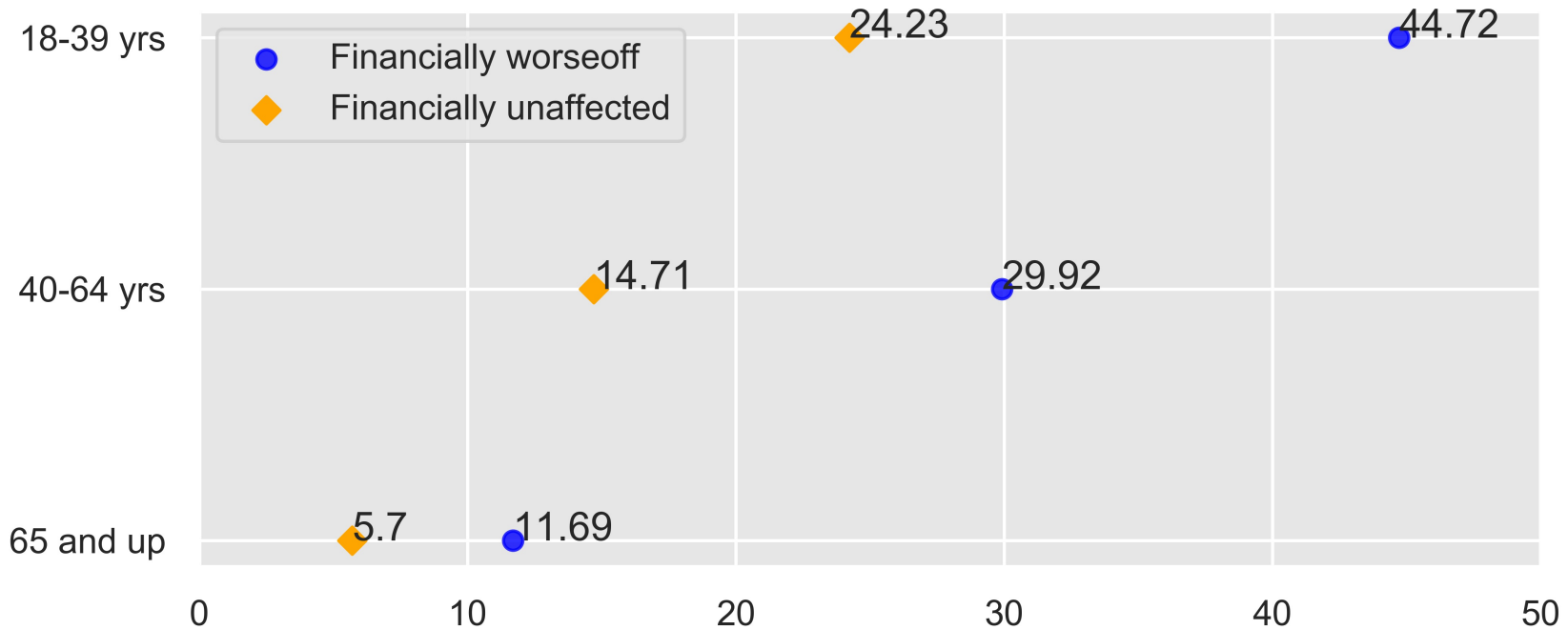
- Measures mental health conditions
 - PHQ-9 for depressive symptoms
 - 9th item – suicidal ideation (“Thoughts that you would be better off dead, or of hurting yourself in some way?”)
 - GAD-7 for anxiety disorders

Prevalence of moderate-severe depression: before and during COVID by age group



Much worse conditions compared to pre-pandemic period, esp. among relatively young

Prevalence of moderate-severe depression by financial status and age group



Individuals who are financially worse-off compared to the previous year experienced worse mental health conditions

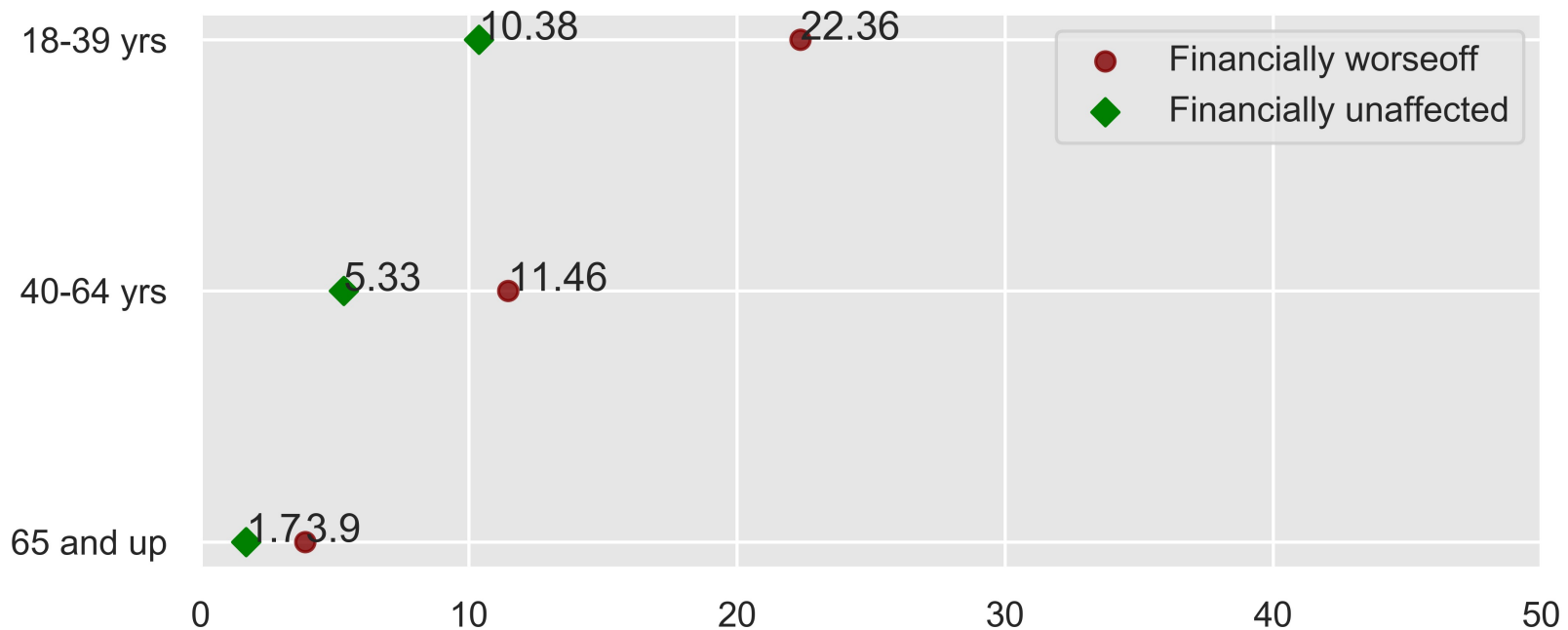
The prevalence of depressive and anxiety symptoms by employment status/occupation (Apr. – Dec. 2020)

	N	% PHQ9 ≥ 10 (depression)	% GAD7 ≥ 10 (anxiety)
Permanent employee	3368	21.14	12.20
Part-time/temporary worker	966	20.91	12.83
Self-employed	340	12.64	6.17
Unemployed, laid off, on leave	500	30.40	20.60
Not in the labor force	3630	14.27	8.18
Student	196	27.55	15.82
All	9000	18.68	10.97

Note: The data represent respondents from the five original surveys taken between April and December 2020. PHQ-9: the 9-item Patient Health Questionnaire. GAD-7: the 7-item Generalized Anxiety Disorder Scale. PHQ-9 score of 10 or higher or GAD-7 score of 10 or higher was used as a cutoff.

Source: Ueda et al. (2021)

Suicidal ideation by financial status and age group



Source: original surveys by Ueda et al. N = 11,000.

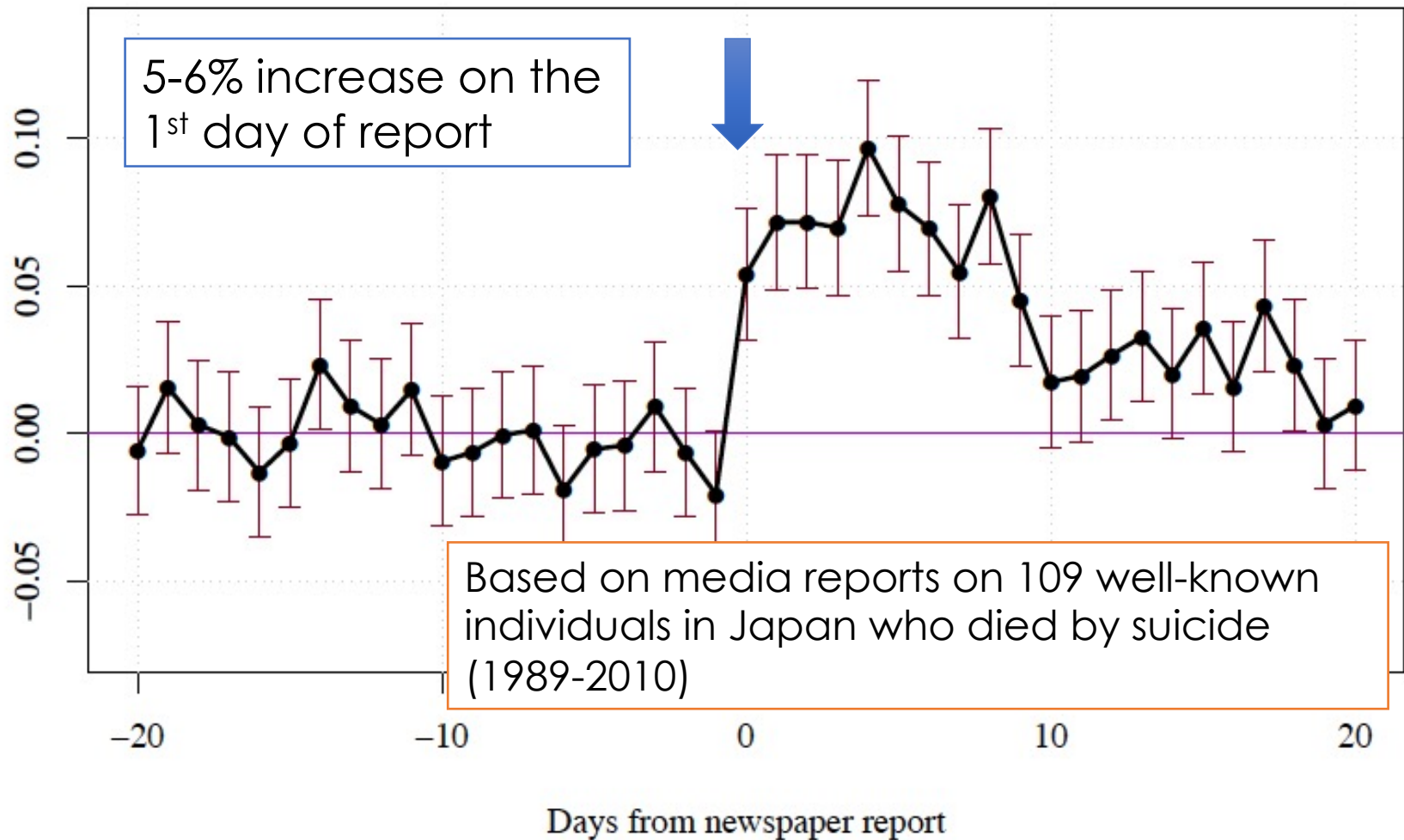
Potential impact of media reporting on prominent suicides

- Several prominent suicides by entertainers in 2020
- Two prominent cases:
 - 30-year-old actor (July 18)
 - 40-year-old actress (Sept. 27)
- At the height of their career, well-known; regarded “unexpected”

Effect of media reporting on prominent suicides

- The increase in suicide deaths among the general public immediate and last about 10 days (Ueda et al. 2014)

Increase in suicide after media reports of prominent suicides



Effect of media reporting on celebrity suicides

- Increase observed only when there was a large reaction on Twitter (Ueda et al. 2017)
- Greater increase when people found deaths shocking and unexpected (on Twitter); not necessarily when “sad” (Fahey et al. 2018)

Implications for the current case

- Celebrity suicides in July and Sep. 2020:
 - had a large element of “surprise”
 - relatively young entertainers
 - received wide attention

Reaction on online chat service

24時間365日、年齢や性別を問わず誰でも無料・匿名

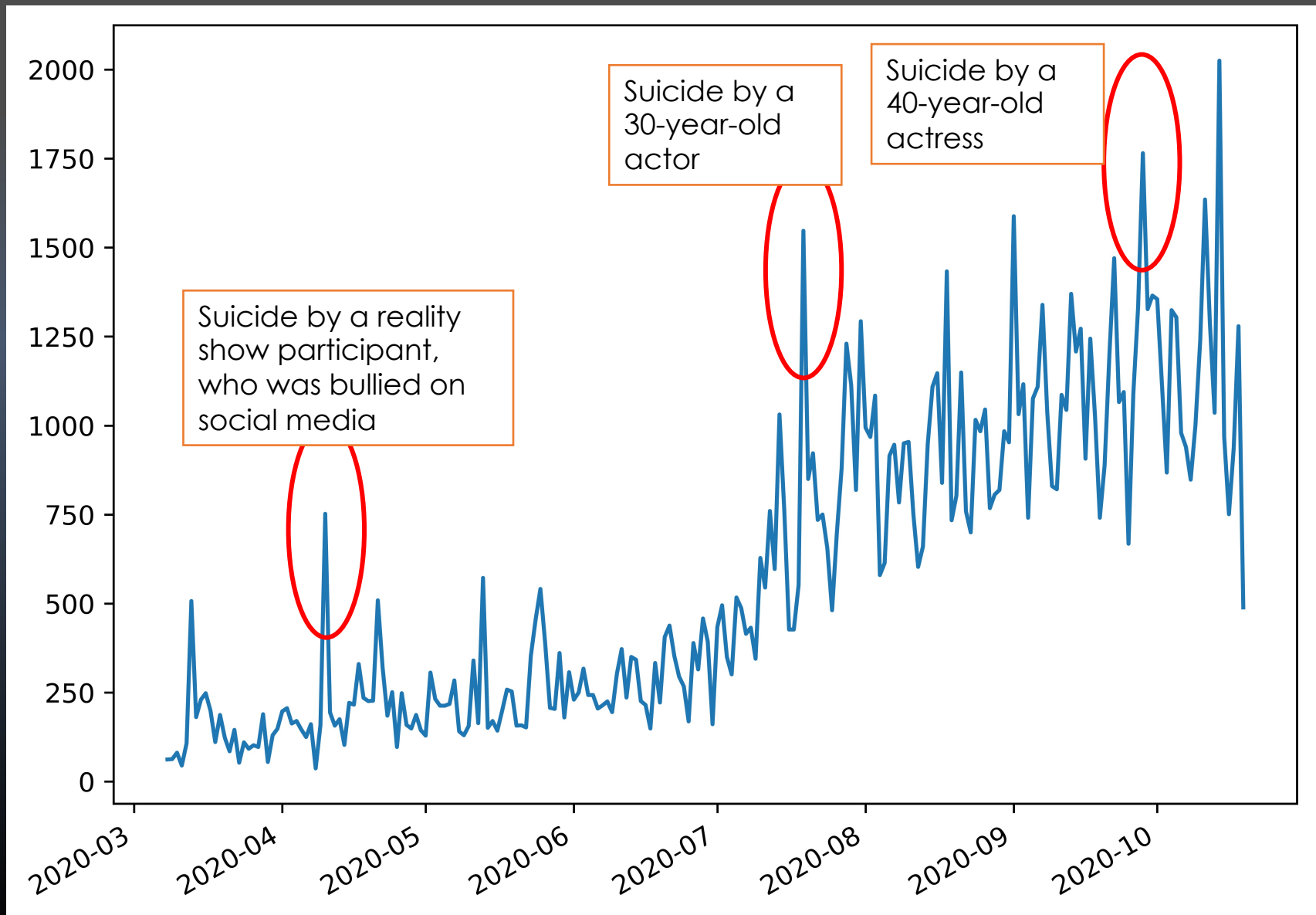
あなたのいばしょチャット相談

厚生労働省支援情報検索サイト登録窓口

いますぐ相談する →

- Free 24-hour online chat consultation service for those lonely/suicidal, offered by an NPO *Anata no Ibasho*
- Launched in March 2020
- Disclaimer: serve as a board of trustees

of posts on online helpline

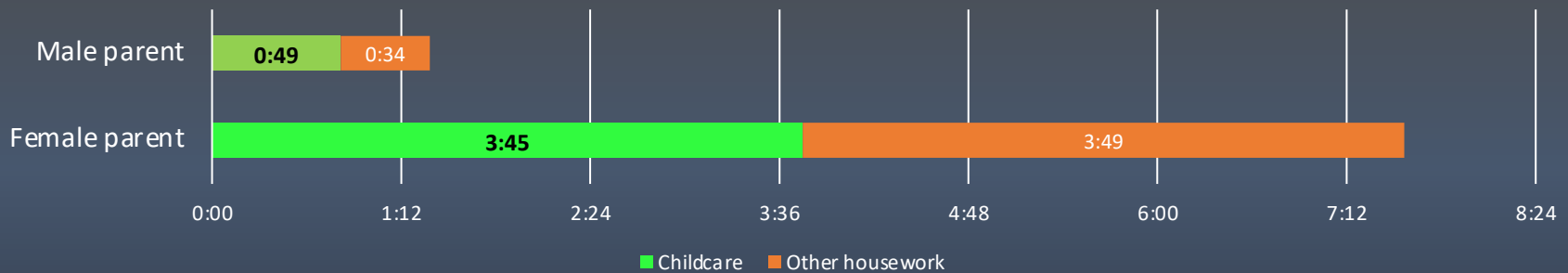


The impact of school closure

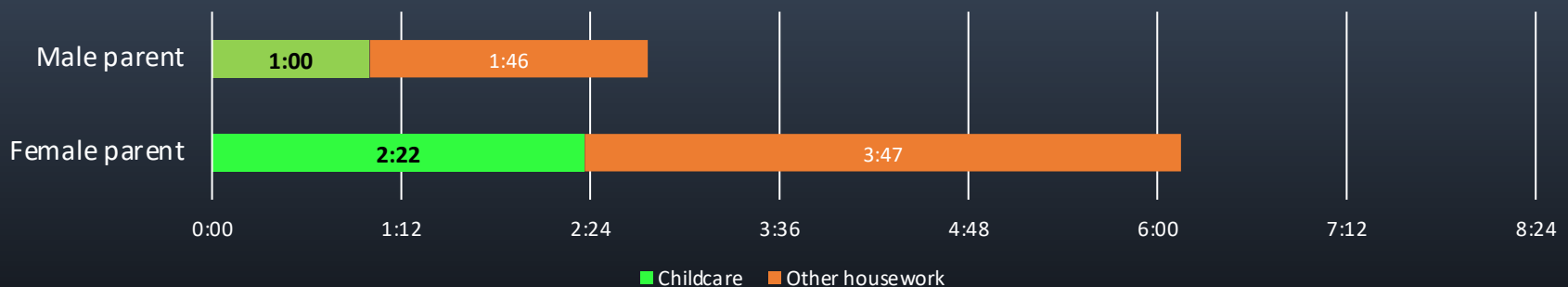
- School closure: from March 2 for 3 months
- Some suggestive findings:
 - Study by National Center for Child Health and Development → 72% of students reported stress reactions; 25% of them suicidal
 - Our survey: 28% of student respondents considered moderately to severely depressed
- Potentially affected both students and their caregivers

Hours spent on housework and childcare

Japan



United Kingdom



Conclusion

- Suicide may temporarily decrease during the pandemic, but can be followed by an increase
- High risk groups:
 - Relatively young women
 - Economically vulnerable individuals
 - Students
- Why increased from summer 2020?
 - Expired unemployment benefit
 - Return to semi-normalcy

Implications

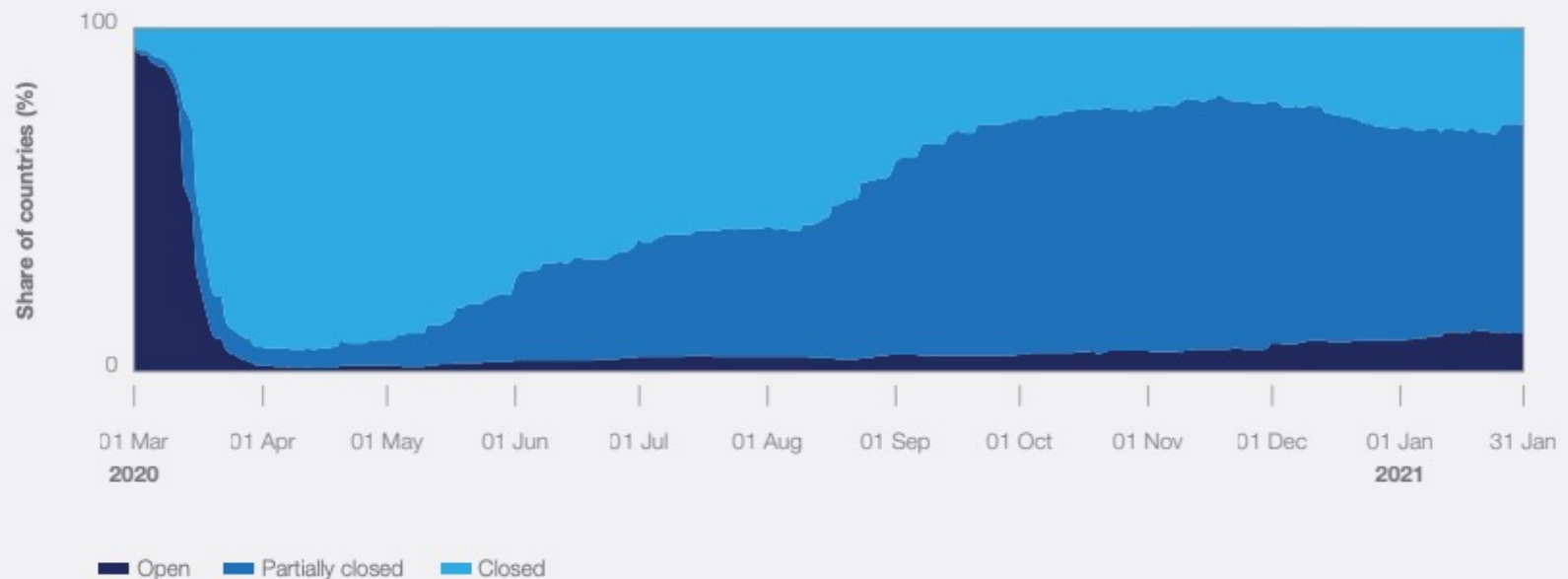
- In many countries, women tend to
 - be employed in industries affected by the pandemic;
 - have a position with less social protection;
 - spend more time on housework, childcare, eldercare than men do and thus disproportionately affected by the pandemic

Implications

- Many countries introduced school closures; Impact on students should be monitored

FIGURE 2.7

Disruption to in-person education, March 2020–February 2021



Source

Oxford University, Blavatnik School of Government,
COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, 2020.

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.10.004>
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<https://www.stat.go.jp/data/roudou/index.html>
- National Police Agency, Suicide Statistics (various years)
https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/seisakunitsuite/bunya/hukushi_kai/seikatsuhogo/jisatsu/jisatsutoukei-jisatsusyasu.html
- World Economic Forum (2021) Global Gender Gap Report 2021.

A photograph of the Waseda University campus. In the background, a tall, modern building with a 'W' logo on top stands next to a historic clock tower with a crenellated top. The foreground is filled with lush green trees and manicured hedges, with a few people walking on a path.

Thank you

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