

# Study finds suicide accounts for more deaths at sea than fatal injury incidents

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Suicide cases accounted for more deaths at sea than fatal injury incidents according to a major new survey looking at the fleet insured by Norway's Gard.

Gard's second crew claims report, published yesterday, outlines trends and developments in seafarer injuries, illnesses and fatalities worldwide drawing on claims data from 3,000 cases last year as well as insights from over 6,000 seafarers with the suicide data grabbing headlines.

"This underscores the importance of having a stronger focus on mental health and wellbeing at sea," said Lene-Camilla Nordlie, head of people claims at Gard. "While some stressors can be handled by seafarers themselves, many factors are controlled or influenced by companies and authorities."

Most suicide cases involved officers, both senior and junior. In 75% of the cases, the seafarers were below the age of 41 – a younger profile than other deaths onboard.

Most deaths from suicide resulted from hanging or drowning. In most cases, death by suicide was excluded from contractual compensation.

This alarming statistic, where self-inflicted deaths surpass those from occupational accidents, echoes a finding from the International Labour Organization (ILO) which, in its 2023 data based on information from 51 countries, reported 26 suicide cases (6.5% of total

deaths) among seafarers, with a further 91 cases of person overboard incidents where the cause remains undetermined but may include suicides.

For years, mental health issues among seafarers have been described as a silent epidemic, largely due to the unique challenges of the profession and a pervasive culture of underreporting.

Experts like Steven Jones, founder of the Seafarers Happiness Index, have long suggested that actual suicide figures are likely much higher than official statistics. Historically, the absence of a single, agreed international framework for recording suicides at sea has contributed to this opacity.

Reasons for underreporting include the difficulty in definitively determining if a death at sea is suicide without eyewitnesses, and a desire to protect families emotionally and financially, as insurance payouts can be affected by suicide classifications. There is also a deep reticence to discuss the issue within the industry, compounded by cultural sensitivities around suicide.

Multiple studies and industry reports consistently point to a confluence of factors contributing to the severe mental health strain on seafarers. Factors include prolonged isolation and separation, crew fatigue and sleep deprivation

More shipping companies and maritime charities are offering anonymous helplines with multilingual support, counselling services, and online platforms to improve access to mental health resources.