

Hawai'i suicide rates by occupation study calls for attention to support farmers

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Farmers, EMS, and participants from the Office of Wellness & Resilience spent a day in the lo'i at Ho'okua'aina to restore and connect together.

Based on all recorded suicide deaths from 2013 to 2023, those in construction, agriculture, and the arts, males and especially those under 40 years old showed the highest suicide rates. Led by Thao Le of the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa's [College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resilience](#) (CTAHR (College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resilience)) and retired epidemiologist Dan Galanis with Hawai'i State Department of Health Emergency Medical Services and Injury Prevention System Branch, the [new study](#) revealed how occupational context is associated with suicide risk in Hawai'i, particularly occupations where people experience chronic uncertainty and low control.

Farmers are consistently exposed to invasive pests, volatile market prices and extreme weather such as the recent Kona low storms. Beyond the physical destruction of crops and infrastructure, the storms have left a trail of mental and emotional exhaustion.

For an occupation already battling thin economic margins, these storms represent more than financial loss—they are challenging farmers’ sense of purpose and identity.

“A farmer’s mental health is tied to the health of their land,” said Le. “When the ‘āina is inundated and the crops and livestock are lost, the emotional toll is immediate and profound. Our farmers are essentially first responders to our food needs, so we need to act as first responders to them now. They are essential to our own livelihood.”

Without immediate concrete support, in the way of streamlined access to financial aid, supplies and temporary housing for displaced farmers, Hawai’i risks losing its agricultural workforce, which is the backbone of the state’s food security and sustainability goals.

“If structural forces and policies continue to contribute and exacerbate distress, farmers may feel a sense of moral injury, feeling unsupported and abandoned by the systems purported to support them, and distress in inability to uphold their commitment to their land and livelihood due to factors beyond their control,” Le said.

Holistic approach

Beyond concrete material resources, immaterial recognition is equally essential. Elevating respect for farmers, ranchers and fisheries’ hard work and recognizing their role in community wellbeing is a vital form of psychological “capital” that can foster their wellbeing. The Seeds of Wellbeing (SOW)-CTAHR, and Culturally-Based Community Connections project aims to prevent suicide risk through a holistic, community-integrated approach of care that includes a peer mentorship model, incorporating ‘āina-based modalities and Native Hawaiian contemplative practices and free mental health vouchers. Planning is in the works to provide a 3-day immersive leadership and mental mindset training/seminar experience for ag mentors and leaders, an investment for advanced mental health skills building.

SOW-CTAHR is only a small contributor in the larger network of ag supporters led by Agriculture Stewardship Hawai’i of Hawai’i Statewide Food System Coordination including Hawai’i Farm Bureau, Hawaii Farm Union United, Maui Farmer Support Network, Hawai’i Good Food Alliance, Hawai’i Agricultural Foundation, Pacific Gateway and many more.

The [Prevent Suicide Hawai’i Taskforce](#) is the major statewide, community-driven suicide prevention/mental health collaborative in the state. Valuing life and preventing suicide is everyone’s responsibilities.

Hawai’i CARES 988 is a 24/7, free support service for help with crisis, mental health and substance use. Dial 988 or text “ALOHA,” no judgement, just help. [Visit this website for more information.](#)