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Introduction

Since the late 1980s, suicide rates have shown a decrease in most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. In Japan and South Korea, however, the rates increased sharply during the late 1990s and have remained high ever since (Figure 5.1). In this chapter, we examine the following questions, with the aim of contributing to the development of suicide prevention policies. Question 1 (Q1): Why did the suicide rate increase in Japan and Korea? Question 2 (Q2): What are the main factors in suicide rate change? Question 3 (Q3): What social policies can prevent suicide attempts and reduce national suicide rates, and how do such social policies prevent suicide?

International comparison of suicide rates in previous studies suggest that the main factors that affect suicide rates include change in unemployment rate, (crude) divorce rate, (crude) marriage rate (Neumayer 2003), and public expenditure on active labor market policies (ALMPs), which include labor market training, subsidized employment, employment services, administration (Stucker et al. 2009). Unemployment rate and divorce rate are suggested to increase suicide rate, whereas marriage rate and public expenditure on ALMPs are suggested to decrease suicide rate. The backgrounds of these effects are that unemployed persons and divorced persons are thought to tend to suffer severe stress from social isolation, whereas marriage and ALMPs are thought to tend to reintegrate divorced persons or unemployed persons into new intimate or social relationships through new marital life or public job training and other assistive services. However, these previous studies neither focused on Japan and Korea nor investigated how ALMPs can prevent suicide.

In this study, we conducted dynamic first-difference generalized method of moments (FD-GMM) estimation on the determinants of country-level suicide rate, using the most comprehensive panel data available today that covers 27 OECD countries including Japan and Korea during the period 1980 to 2007. In the estimation, we controlled for suicide rates in the previous year, country-specific
linear time trends, year-specific fixed effects, changes in unemployment, divorce rate, marriage rate, general-government (or public) social expenditure in each policy area, and other variables that could be thought to relate both to suicide rate and the above independent variables. In the estimation, we focused especially on Japan and Korea, using the country-dummy variables of these two countries.

Additionally, we pursued a new theoretical inquiry. Divorce rate and marriage rate are thought to belong to the private sphere, whereas ALMPs are in

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1 “Age-standardised death rates per 100,000 population for selected causes are calculated by the OECD Secretariat, using the total OECD population for 1980 as the reference population. The age-standardised death rates are necessary for comparing the level of mortality across countries and over time since they take into account the differences in age structure of the populations” (cited from Definitions, Sources and Methods in OECD (2012). Health Data 2011).