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Should Bridges Be Suicideproof?

WHY BARRIERS TO JUMPERS MIGHT MAKE THE PROBLEM WORSE.



(Illustration by Lino)

By **TOM KEANE** | October 22, 2006

The good folks of Augusta, Maine, have a very pretty bridge over the Kennebec River that is about to become much less pretty. The reason is that some believe the Memorial Bridge is a magnet for suicide. A barrier, soon to be installed by the state, should save lives. Or maybe not.

There's an interesting history here. From 1960 until 1983, the Memorial Bridge saw 14 people leap to their deaths. Responding to public outcry, the state of Maine in 1983 erected an 11-foot-high fence, effectively stopping any would-be jumpers. Last year, the bridge was renovated and the fence removed. A gorgeous vista was unveiled - "a dramatically beautiful sight that just could not be appreciated through the tiny openings of the old chain-link," editorialized the *Kennebec Journal*. Still, the Augusta City Council insisted on reinstalling the barrier. The issue became controversial; an anti-fence petition drive was launched. The effort failed, however, and a new \$350,000 barrier similar to the old will appear, salvaging consciences while obscuring the view.

Salved or not, it's not clear that the new barrier will save lives. Yes, when the fencing was in place, there were no suicides from the bridge. That didn't mean there were fewer suicides overall, however. In the five years before the barrier, Maine's suicide rate was 13.45 per 100,000

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residents. In the five years immediately following, it was actually slightly higher - 13.51. What that suggests is, with the Memorial Bridge inaccessible, the suicidal simply found other places or other means. After all, even if one bridge has a barrier, others might not. And even if every bridge were to have a barrier, what of cliffs, ravines, tall buildings, and towers? Or guns, poison, and rope?

Suicide barriers are haphazardly used. They're on both the Sagamore and Bourne bridges, for example, while the Tobin and Zakim don't have any (even though the Tobin served as platform to one of the more well-known Boston suicides - Charles Stuart in 1990). And for decades, San Franciscans have debated whether the Golden Gate Bridge should have one. Just last month, the bridge's board of directors voted to spend \$2 million on a two-year feasibility study; if erected, a barrier might cost up to \$25 million.

The theory behind suicide barriers is that bridges in effect "cause" suicide - that they are so tempting that people jump who otherwise might not kill themselves. That's been the contention in California, where some blame the Golden Gate for an average of 19 deaths annually. Logic and data don't support the argument. Bridges don't cause suicide; depression does. And despite the alleged temptation from the Golden Gate, California's suicide rate turns out to be one of the lowest in the country. (If anything, suicide and jumping from bridges seem inversely correlated - the states with the highest suicide rates have the fewest suicides from falls.)

Barrier opponents in Augusta and San Francisco are right. Barriers are ugly and expensive. Moreover, by putting them up, we in fact might be making the problem worse.

Here's why. Suicide is an impulsive act, driven by loneliness and despair. If it is possible to intervene - to simply talk to someone or even reach out a hand - many might hesitate. But intervention is impossible when the suicide is some place private and alone. Bridges, on the other hand, are public places. Roberta Hurtig, executive director of the Boston-area suicide-prevention organization Samaritans (and, it should be said, a supporter of barriers), notes that the Tobin Bridge once had a dozen jumpers a year. Because barriers were impossible to erect, security cameras and regular police patrols were put in place instead. The number of suicides is now down to three or four.

Barriers, I fear, simply push the problem elsewhere, making it less visible but not less likely. The lesson I draw from the Tobin experience is that, instead of money for fences, perhaps it would be better to spend our resources on surveillance and response. Such an effort probably wouldn't stop all who try to jump, but those it prevented might find their lives truly saved.

Tom Keane, a Boston-based freelance writer, contributes regularly to the Globe Magazine. E-mail him at tomkeane@tomkeane.com. ■

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