

# The Link Between Employment Conditions and Suicide:

## A Study of the Electronics Sector in China

November 2018



Responsible public procurement.  
Rights of electronics workers.



ECONOMIC RIGHTS INSTITUTE  
BUILDING BRIDGES TO BETTER WORK

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report is the product of the combined efforts of the Economic Rights Institute and Electronics Watch. The Economic Rights Institute grew sensitized to the issue of suicide from the sheer number of stories workers told us. Electronics Watch believes these stories should be heard and that they can help steer needed industry-wide improvements. Together, the two organisations designed this study to use their distinctive resources to promote respect for workers' rights and drive positive development in the electronics sector.

The Economic Rights Institute supports alliances that strive to actualize economic development that respects the rights of all. We design methods and tools to strengthen multi-tiered discussions: between employees and management, NGOs and the business community, buyers and suppliers. We put the insights and momentum of these discussions in the pursuit of solutions to foster the conditions for better work.

Electronics Watch is an independent monitoring organisation that helps public sector organisations work together to protect the labour rights and safety of workers in their electronics supply chains. Electronics Watch works with an international network of local civil society organisations that conduct worker-driven monitoring with the goal of strengthening workers' own voices to report on and address labour and safety issues in their factories.

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# 1. Note to the Reader

This report explores the link between employment conditions and suicide in the context of the Chinese electronics industry. It is not our intention, however, to suggest the problem of employee suicide is more or less serious in Chinese electronics versus other countries or industries. Such conclusions would require evidence beyond the findings presented here.

Furthermore, we wish to underline that every suicide is likely a response to multiple stresses. When responding to employee suicides, we should determine whether or not employment conditions contributed to the loss of life through a review of available evidence. Employers should not be held responsible for every suicide of their employees, and we would resist efforts to dramatize incidents of suicide to attack employers. We anonymize the results of this report to divert attention away from any single employer and to promote wider discussion of the issue.

We urge others to build on this study to consider how employment conditions might contribute to suicides. Positively, we believe this report is galvanizing new efforts to promote worker wellbeing only possible with the support of industry and government. We urge industry and government to work inclusively with civil society and independent experts to fully address their role and responsibilities to prevent suicides linked to employment conditions.

## 2. Foreword

The photo to the right symbolizes existing discussions of employment and suicide in China. The use of nets to deter employees from jumping off of buildings is one of the more obvious prevention efforts to emerge from concerns stirred by the string of widely reported suicides in 2010. Only the nets shown here include the holes left by the employee who fell through them in 2013.<sup>1</sup>

The nets possibly prevent impulsive suicides by slowing down depressed employees long enough that some might reconsider their decision to end their lives. Workers' rights groups nonetheless criticize the nets for ignoring deeper issues. And the holes in the net shown in the photo amplify their question, do poor work environments drive employees to suicide?

Since the 1990s, the number of Chinese citizens committing suicide is in decline. For some, this is enough to suggest the issue of suicide is less urgent. Some observers of the suicides in 2010 were likewise quick to suggest suicide in the electronics sector fits the "norms" of Chinese society. However, this suggestion ignores how the 2010 suicides differ from wider trends, even trends within the firm whose employees so prominently committed suicide. Others point to how psychology, poverty or culture contribute to Chinese suicides. But when employees explicitly refer to work stress and infringements of their rights before they commit suicide, the more prominent question is, do employment conditions contribute to suicides?

Discussion of this issue is politicized and torn between censorship, which obscures the issue, and news reports which present suicides only through short lived exposés. The objective of this report is to disrupt this cycle by presenting evidence of the connection between

employment conditions in the Chinese electronics sector and the risk of employee suicides. We hope this evidence will shift perceptions of the drivers of suicide, spur policy reform and guide others to further explore the findings presented here.

To promote the availability of this report to a wider audience, we considered its user-friendliness when deciding how to present findings. Experts in the field might find this reporting style omits some issues of interest. They might prefer more extensive discussion of the study's methods, more thorough reporting of data analysis or discussion of how the findings intersect with higher level theories. We hope these experts consider this report only one step in a wider effort and forgive its limits. We welcome further inquiries and discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> - 杨雄. 2013. "富士康围城: 跳楼仍频发 工人流水线站着睡觉." 搜狐, May 7. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://business.sohu.com/20130507/n375027296.shtml>).

# 3. Synopsis

## 3.1. In short

This study uses three methodologies to explore the link between employment conditions and employee suicide, with every methodology designed to build on the lessons of the preceding effort:

We first collected hundreds of internet sources referring to suicide incidents in the Chinese electronics sector. The quantitative data derived from these sources exposes surprising trends which run counter to the narrative of much publicity surrounding Chinese suicides. We use this data to piece together a macro perspective on the motives commonly cited in connection with incidents of employee suicide mentioned in news reports and internet posts by electronics employees.

The second methodology uses the lessons of public references to suicide to guide quantitative analysis of independent surveys of the employment conditions of over 40 electronics firms. The depth of the survey permits us to distinguish traits of suppliers where employees committed suicides from those of suppliers where no suicides were reported. Through this quantitative analysis, we identified specific employment conditions linked to the occurrence of suicide incidents.

We use the frequently counter-intuitive lessons of this analysis to identify suppliers where we hypothesize the risk of new suicides is higher. We selected four of these suppliers and conducted semi-structured off site interviews with their employees. This qualitative methodology deepened the findings of the quantitative analysis with the richness of employees' open-ended testimonies. The structured selection of suppliers for fieldwork likewise permitted us to test how well we identified the risk of new suicides and whether these suicides were linked to the specific conditions we hypothesize contribute to the risk of suicide.

This study will not end discussion of the question of how employment conditions contribute to suicide. In simple

terms, however, we believe this study presents strong evidence that:

- the phenomenon of employees in the Chinese electronics sector committing suicide extends well beyond the well publicized events of 2010;
- employment conditions contribute to suicides.


The diversity and depth of the methods of this study offer insight beyond these simplified conclusions. They permit us to theorize cycles of influence to describe how employment conditions influence suicides. In short, when employers ignore signs of employee stress, when they set the speed and intensity of work and use punitive forms of discipline to enforce production objectives, they directly contribute to stress and tensions on the shop floor. Tensions rise between employees, supervisors and security personnel contributing to conflicts which sometimes devolve into fistfights and worse forms of violence. The pressure of work environments like this contributes to the emergence of privileges for preferred employees. This contributes to employees' belief that income is not connected to merit or effort. This stressful environment and employees' belief that neither merit nor effort will improve their condition is tied to employee depression and the risk of suicide.

Employers' freedom to push employees beyond their limits is to some extent only possible through the repression of workers' rights. Whether it is responding to survivors' efforts to publicize suicides to win concessions from employers or employees' collective responses to hostility by supervisors and security personnel, the government is continuously exerting pressure to prevent employees from more effectively defending their rights, maximizing employers' discretion over the work environment. Still, employees' diminished position is not entirely the government's responsibility. Chinese employers routinely restrict employees' freedom to refuse excessive hours or to



resign to circumvent the production pressure they would otherwise feel. Even with the simple freedom to work overtime and resign on their own terms, our evidence suggests Chinese employees could exert sufficient collective influence to force employers to rethink decisions on diverse issues including productivity, enterprise discipline, respect in the work environment and the logic behind income and incentives.

If the government and employers were not using coercion to force employees to work, the structure of employment would evolve. Employees overwhelmed by long hours would use time off to resist the effects of stress. Students would refuse internships unless they found them worthwhile. Employees would mobilize to fight for their dignity and resign from jobs that neglected their needs. Wherever they needed employees to exert themselves—whether to finish sensitive orders on time, speed up production or implement new requirements—employers would need to build consensus with employees or otherwise incentivize them. This dynamic would reinforce respect on the shop floor and pressure employers to consider incentives responsive to employee perceptions of merit and effort. Respect for employees and positive incentives would limit the excesses of some employers and reduce the number of suicides.



## 3.2. By the numbers

THIS STUDY INCLUDES:			
	INTERNET SOURCES	EMPLOYEE SURVEYS	FIELDWORK
	<b>167 incidents including: completed suicides suicides ending only in injuries public shows of the desire to commit suicide</b>	<b>44 suppliers</b> <b>5,592 employees survey</b>	<b>4 suppliers</b> <b>252 employees</b>
<b>SUICIDE and DEPRESSION</b>	34 incidents in one supplier known for the spike of suicides of its employees in 2010 109 incidents in 67 other electronics firms 24 incidents where no employer in specified	24 suppliers where over 10% of surveyed employees reported anxiety or depression 11 incidents of suicide involving 11 suppliers	15 incidents of suicides involving 4 suppliers including 2 suicides within two months of interviews
<b>PROTEST</b>	27 incidents of suicide protest including 14 incidents in 2015		
<b>HOSTILITY</b>	15 incidents connected to hostility in the work environment	24 suppliers where employees reported conflicts with supervisors 23 suppliers reported injuries from fistfights on the shop floor	3 suppliers where employees reported conflicts with supervisors including one where a strike occurred over supervisor hostility and one where a supervisor reported other supervisors hitting employees they do not like [“看不慣就動手”]. 4 suppliers reported injuries from fistfights including one supplier where tensions led to a riot which ended in two employees and a police officer dying 4 suppliers reported homicides
<b>WHITHELD INCOME</b>	14 incidents connected to withheld income 4 incidents connected to withheld income linked to denied permission to resign		2 suppliers use fines to discipline employees 2 suppliers explicitly restrict the number of employees per month permitted to resign
<b>TIME OFF</b>	9 incidents connected to requests for time off denied		4 suppliers frequently deny requests for time off
<b>PRODUCTIVITY</b>	6 incidents connected to “work pressure”	16 suppliers where over 20% of surveyed employees believe speed of work excessive	“Work is like “prison” [“上班像坐牢”] “If employees die from overwork, it’s to be expected given the speed of the work” [“這樣的工作速度累死是很正常的”]
<b>OHS</b>	3 incidents by employees suffering from OHS injuries or illness	7 suppliers where employees died in OHS incidents not involving suicide	3 suppliers where employees died in OHS incidents not involving suicide

### 3.3. The longer synopsis

This study uses three distinct methodologies to explore employee suicides in the Chinese electronics sector.

#### 3.3.1. Typology of suicide in the news

First, we found internet references to 167 suicide incidents in the Chinese electronics sector from 2003 to 2017.

Most of these references were from credible news reports. Some sources were blogs or other internet writings subject to few or no requirements to verify their truthfulness. To strengthen the credibility of the sources, for every reference to suicide we found, we sought multiple sources. We verified some incidents through people in direct discussion with survivors. We did not, however, possess the resources to verify every reference to suicide. We use the internet sources of this study conscious of the limits of their credibility: Even if internet sources do not represent verified suicides, one to one, the collection of these sources is still useful to suggest possible trends. Likewise, internet sources represent public perceptions of suicide even when these perceptions risk misrepresenting the truth of specific incidents. Thus, we use these sources to identify public perceptions of stresses in the work environment contributing to suicide and from this, develop indices of risk.

The internet references to suicide we found include:

- completed suicides where the employee died;
- incidents where the employees survived their injuries; and,
- incidents where employees showed intent to commit suicide, e.g., by climbing to the roof to jump, but never took the step to injure themselves.

For context, we review the publicity surrounding the issue of employee suicide in 2010 when one of the most prominent electronics suppliers, Supplier F, experienced a string of suicides. We then highlight the extent to which publicity surrounding these suicides neglected suicides in other electronics firms. To keep the limits of internet sources in perspective, we note the effects of censorship on the availability of reports of suicide and

outline both employers' and the government's roles in minimizing public reports of suicides. While employers might censor discussions of suicide to limit pressure on them to recompense survivors and government censorship is likely intended to limit the growth of employment disputes, some censorship is likely driven by concerns that publicity might inspire new suicides through the Werther effect.

Possibly, one of the visible effects of this censorship is the curious distribution of suicides on the public record by region, with 73% of reported suicides outside of Supplier F occurring in China's southernmost province. Even if something unique to investment or employment conditions in the south is contributing to the higher incidence of reported suicides there, it is difficult to envision censorship is not contributing to the uneven distribution of public reports.

The next section reviews different "types" of employee suicide by reviewing the motives internet sources commonly link to employee suicides. Judging by the proportion of publicly reported suicides, the most prominent form of employee suicide occurs when employees use the publicity they might expect from the possibility of someone committing suicide to pressure employers to resolve employment disputes, something we term "suicide protests". Of note, suicide protests were only a tiny fraction of suicide incidents till they grew to represent 48% of incidents in 2015. The number of reported suicides then dropped dramatically. Loss of employment or withheld income were the motive behind 81% of employees' use of suicide in protests. It is likewise worth noting, most suicide protests were collective efforts, involving two or sometimes a hundred or more people, and only with one exception, they did not end in completed suicides.

Internet reports commonly connected suicide events to hostility in the work environment. In some incidents, sources refer to hostility only in terms of shouting by or disputes with supervisors triggering someone to commit suicide. In other incidents, internet sources suggest hostility is a deeper issue within the work environment, influencing wider segments of the workforce well beyond the few people who might consider suicide. We see this reflected in the vehemence of observers' comments on hostility by supervisors or security personnel and how

explicitly observers connect hostility to suicide.

Discussions of suicide seldom explicitly tie overtime to the motive for suicide. However, discussions of suicide explicitly mention:

- firms denying employees time off from overtime;
- requests for time off becoming the source of disputes that involve hostility from supervisors; or
- these disputes resulting in employees losing their jobs and incurring fines and other forms of withheld income to punish them for taking time off without permission.

Some incidents of suicide refer to the concept of “work pressure,” and overtime could contribute to employees’ sense of pressure. However, internet sources did not provide sufficient evidence to explore this type of suicide.

Sixteen percent of reported suicides were tied to dating and marriage, and these incidents show some gendered trends. The most obvious of these is the number of combined homicides and suicides involving men who murdered women who rejected them before committing suicide. Disputes in the work environment contributed to one of the incidents of homicide tied to suicide. But there is too little evidence to explore these kinds of connections.

Economic pressure is frequently a theme of suicide motives, too, though it is visible in different forms. While unemployment is widely considered a stress which could contribute to the risk of suicide in other contexts, there were few reported incidents of completed suicide tied to the loss of employment. Seventy-two percent of these incidents were linked to suicide protests which did not end in the loss of life. Employees who experienced economic pressure from fines or employers’ refusing to cover surgery and other expenses tied to work injuries, however, were a visible source of suicides. Internet references to suicide likewise highlight how even modest sums might trigger suicides if the disputed sum is connected to employees’ sense of dignity. This and a sense of loss of control is possibly why some employees commit suicide when the employer denies their request to resign even if they only risk one month’s worth of income by walking away.

### 3.3.2. Suicide and the difference on the shop floor

The second methodology explores the issue of suicide through the lens of surveys of 44 electronics suppliers including 11 suppliers where employees reported suicides. The surveys identify the employment conditions that distinguish suppliers where suicides occurred, from suppliers where suicides were not reported.

A number of findings support the hypothesis that some work environments contribute to the risk of suicide. First, the evidence suggests that suppliers were more likely to experience suicides where occupational safety and health (OSH) systems less effectively prevent serious injuries on the job. One of the more visible signs of this is the link between the risk of suicides and the risk of employees dying in other incidents. Four of the five suppliers where employees reported someone died from non-suicide incidents witnessed employees committing suicide in completely independent incidents.

The survey offers further evidence of how suicides reflect the wider environment. In simple terms, the employee who commits suicide might distinguish themselves by the extremity of their decision. The stress which brings them to their decision, however, is seldom unique to them, and we see the effects of this stress more widely throughout the workforce. This is why nine out of 11 suicides occurred in the 50% of suppliers where 10% or more of surveyed employees reported anxiety or depression.

Employees’ depression levels do not exclusively reflect the effects of the work environment, and it is difficult to interpret some of the survey findings. Suicides were much more likely in suppliers with younger, single employees. Surprisingly, however, even though the evidence suggests friendship protects employees against anxiety and depression, suicides were more likely in suppliers where employees were more likely to find friends within the workforce.

The survey confirms the influence of enterprise size on the likelihood of suicide. Of 44 surveyed suppliers, suicides were more likely in the 14 suppliers employing 4,000 or more people. Of note, however, bigger

employers were more likely to hire younger employees. So it oversimplifies the problem to suggest bigger suppliers experience more suicides exclusively due to their size.

If bigger employers see more suicides when they hire younger people, to the extent this reflects youth's sensitivity to suicide, it might reflect issues outside the scope of employment conditions. However, bigger suppliers' tendency to hire younger workforces is, to some extent, a purposeful choice possibly connected to their desire for more flexible workforces. And this is a choice frequently executed through discrimination against older job applicants. So further study is needed before we might conclude with confidence that younger employees' higher risk of suicide is not to some extent influenced by employers' choices and responsibilities.

The survey highlights the influence of subjective perceptions of income on suicides. Strikingly, suicides were less likely in suppliers where more employees believed their income did not meet government requirements or where more employees reported the employer withheld income to keep employees on the job. However, the risk of suicide rises visibly when employees believe their income is too low despite meeting minimum requirements. It is counter-intuitive to consider the possibility that employees believe their income does not meet minimum requirements without believing their income is too low. But these findings simply highlight that less skilled employees might feel content with more limited options while employees with higher hopes or more confidence in their options might feel offended by higher incomes they do not consider high enough.

Closer inspection of the survey results suggests concrete links between employment conditions and suicides. Eight out of 11 suicides occurred in the 50% of suppliers where more employees believed the speed or intensity of their job is excessive. Likewise, perceptions of the speed and intensity of the job were strongly connected to employee perceptions of their supervisors and security personnel. When this contributed to more employees experiencing conflicts with their supervisors, we see employees' perceptions of income differences within the firm shift, with more employees likely to believe supervisors give employees they prefer privileges

and incentives they do not merit. These kinds of income differences contributed to employee depression levels and were strongly linked to the occurrence of suicide. Even more telling, ten out of 11 suicides occurred in the 50% of suppliers where more employees believe employers could improve production efficiency by showing more respect to employees.

The question of respect is reflected through employees' experience of security personnel. When more employees believe the employer does not sufficiently consult employees in the event of disputes and fines, employees were more likely to criticize security personnel. Both of these indices were connected to the higher risk of suicide. Punitive work environments contribute to tensions, and in 52% of surveyed suppliers, one or more surveyed employees reported someone suffering injuries from fistfights on the job. Fistfights contributed to employee criticisms of security personnel. And ten out of 11 suicides occurred in the 50% of suppliers where more employees reported injuries from fights on the shop floor.

One counter-intuitive issue worth noting, suicides were less likely in suppliers where more employees expressed the preference to shorten their working hours. We believe this mostly reflects how Chinese employees prioritize monthly income over hourly income. However, survey results suggest the risk of suicide is linked to shift work. When more employees expressed the need to reform shifts arrangements, employees were more likely to express anxiety or depression. Furthermore, nine out of 11 suicides occurred in the suppliers where employees felt the need to improve shift arrangements is more urgent. These findings look consistent with other studies on the effects of shift work, but the present study did not include sufficient findings to interpret the issue beyond noting the link to the risk of suicide.

### 3.3.3. From the field: Suicide mirrors supplier discipline and flexibility

In the next step of this study, we tested the hypotheses from the first sections to see if we could use data derived from internet sources to identify suppliers where new suicides were likely and whether employment conditions

of these suppliers would show the tendencies we expect to intersect with the risk of suicide. We selected sites of four suppliers where internet sources refer to multiple suicides. We then visited these suppliers and conducted semi-structured interviews with 252 employees to explore employees' experience of their employment and, where possible, employees' knowledge of and thoughts on suicide incidents where they worked.

Every one of the firms selected for this fieldwork is one of the world's most prominent suppliers of electronics goods for well-known clients. The sites we visited included the production of servers, computers, mobile phones, telephone screens, cooling systems and other components.

Some internet sources were quite loose in their descriptions, so we did not presume their credibility. Yet interviewees in the field identified new suicides not mentioned in internet sources in every one of the selected suppliers. In three of the four suppliers, interviewees knew of multiple incidents of suicide.<sup>2</sup> Two of the more recent suicides occurred within two months of the interviews we conducted. It is worth noting we identified these incidents despite the limited number of interviewees and the efforts of some firms to prevent the publicity of suicides. In one of the suppliers, interviewees suggested the employer even offers witnesses to suicides ¥ 20,000 to resign to better ensure few employees in the vicinity of the suicide know of the incident. We conclude that a history of previous suicides is linked to the risk of new suicides.

Interviews in the field likewise echoed the themes of internet sources and the survey. The four suppliers, selected for previous incidents of suicide, were not poor performers in terms of their income and benefits. Some suppliers offered employees minimum incomes ¥ 500 over the required minimum income in the region. The better income and benefits offered were likely intended to offset the effects of obvious struggles over productivity. In this vein, employees criticized one supplier for sometimes forcing employees to spend months on extended night shifts despite the ¥ 15 per

night premium the firm offered.

Employees from every supplier reported receiving little time off in busier months and work hours well beyond government restrictions on overtime. They sometimes spend these long hours cycling through one simple motion every few seconds. Employees to some extent welcomed the long hours for the higher income they derived from overtime. But evidence of coercion emerged wherever employees resisted employers' production objectives. Interviewees of one supplier suggested they were required to work off the record without income to finish their objectives. Other stories emerged of supervisors who refused to give employees time off even to visit doctors to check symptoms they believed were the result of exposure to toxins in the work environment. Students of one supplier told the story of how they were explicitly instructed they could not request time off even though Chinese requirements prohibit students from working overtime. One student, afraid the firm would raise her productivity requirements, recounted that she struggled to work more slowly despite her supervisor frequently shouting for her to speed up.

Some suppliers intensified the pressure on employees through fines. In one supplier, interviewees cited these fines to justify why they chose to work without protective equipment to keep up with the speed required of them. Interviewees from two suppliers knew of incidents of employees who died unexpectedly. In one of these suppliers, employees explicitly connected employees' dying to the intensity of work requirements. In the second supplier, employees were less likely to hold the employer explicitly responsible for employees dying. But they suggested this supplier screens job seekers for blood pressure or "weight" problems to exclude them from employment to reduce the likelihood of employees dying on the job. This begs the question, how intense is the job if the employer is afraid people with high blood pressure or weight issues will die on the job?

Consistent with previous findings, the discipline required for high productivity is connected to tensions on and off the shop floor. Employees from three of the four suppliers told stories of supervisors hitting employees. One supervisor even expressed the belief senior personnel contribute to supervisors' assaults

<sup>2</sup> This includes two incidents where employees were intent to commit suicide but were convinced not to by people who intervened.

on employees by seldom disciplining supervisors who hit employees. Elsewhere, interviewees mentioned employees of one line stopping their work till senior personnel stepped in to rebuke their supervisor's hostility towards them. Tensions and disputes from the shop floor were visible in the wider environment too, contributing to reports of homicides in some of the suppliers. Interviewees of one supplier told stories of resentful employees joining fights between security officers and employees. In one incident, when security officers intervened to rein in protests by hundreds of employees who felt excluded from overtime, the conflict intensified. Sources suggest that two employees and one police officer died in the ensuing riot.

If the interviews echo previous sections of this study on the speed of work, enterprise discipline, and tensions with supervisors and security personnel, the fieldwork added new perspective too. The fieldwork permitted more open-ended reviews of employment conditions. Two distinct enterprise models emerged, and initial evidence suggests these models intersect with the risk of suicide.

The two southern suppliers, both components suppliers, were more likely to use economic coercion to discipline employees. Interviewees suggested both employers explicitly limited the number of employees per production line permitted to resign every month. This limit helps them ensure the consistency of production despite some employees' tendency to flee the poor work environment. One of the firms, interviewees suggested, refused to pay new employees if they resigned before the end of their first week. The other firm employed non-negligible numbers of students. Some students reported they were coerced by their schools to complete internships. And interviewees noted, both of these suppliers use fines to discipline employees. In both firms, suicides were linked to denied requests for time off, fines or withheld income and disputes with supervisors.

The two suppliers in the region surrounding Shanghai, both firms offering more comprehensive services and a more diverse selection of products, relied on some extent of coercion. But interviewees noted the firms did not fine employees, and one of the firms is noteworthy for reducing the time between the cut-off

ending one month of employment and when employees receive their monthly income. This reduces the income employers could withhold if employees resign without "permission" and is a sign the supplier relies less on coercion to improve employee retention. To substitute for coercive incentives, these two suppliers were more likely to offer bonuses employees receive only if they meet the employer's requirements. This is a positive shift in incentives. The problem, however, is these suppliers were committed to offer short-term incentives but circumvented longer term commitments which might reduce their flexibility to revise incentives or downsize the workforce when the business required it.

To reduce long term commitments to employees, these suppliers either required or incentivized most of their employees to seek jobs through outside recruiters. Interviewees reported that recruiters signed them for only three months or less, infringing requirements to give employees more employment security. Recruiters were notorious for illicit fees and for sometimes outright refusing to give employees bonuses they were promised. In pursuit of short-term signing bonuses that sometimes exceeded their monthly income, employees consented to this cycle of short-term employment. Surprisingly, interviews suggested that employees frequently work for three months in one of the selected suppliers, just long enough to receive their signing bonus. They then resign, move and seek a job with the other supplier selected for this study, where they again work for three months for a signing bonus, before resigning and returning to the first supplier to begin the cycle again. In these two suppliers, suicides were linked to disputes over income withheld by recruiters and employees distraught over dating difficulties. These suppliers' effort to incentivize short-term employment thus contribute to the risk of problems employees experience when hired by recruiters. Though the issue requires further study, we likewise believe the cycle of short-term employment intensifies the insecurity and difficulties employees experience through dating and marriage. Worth noting, too, recruitment notices for these two firms explicitly limited recruitment to people 35 years old or younger. Employee testimonies and recruitment notices highlight the diverse methods these suppliers use to ensure their flexibility and how these methods might pose problems for employees seeking more settled lives.

### 3.3.4. The choice of the electronics sector

This study explores the link between suicide and employment conditions in the Chinese electronics sector. This is not to suggest that the issue of employee suicides is more or less serious in Chinese electronics versus other regions or industries.

If we consider the findings below, it is true that the Chinese electronics sector exhibits some traits we would expect to heighten the risk of suicide: Long hours including night shifts; production lines that reduce employees' control over the rhythm of production; the restriction of union and mobilizing efforts to strengthen employees' collective influence on employers; the wide use of flexible employment. We expect these traits to heighten the risk of suicide.

However, we studied the Chinese electronics sector since that is where our expertise lies, and this is where we had data available to support the more rigorous study of suicide. Employee suicides occur elsewhere. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest there is a worldwide trend of suicides linked to employment conditions.<sup>3</sup> The diversity of the countries and industries involved seems to counter theories linking suicides to culture or the conditions of jobs requiring less skill versus the conditions of "cognitive" work which give employees more autonomy and freedom. With this in mind, we wish to stress that while the findings of this study might inform future efforts to determine whether the problem of suicide is more or less serious in Chinese electronics, this question beyond the scope of the present study.

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<sup>3</sup> Waters, Sarah. 2017. "Workplace Suicide and States of Denial: The France Télécom and Foxconn Cases Compared." *TripleC* 15(1): 191-213.



## 4. Suggested actions

It is not the intention of this study to oversimplify conclusions from the evidence presented here. The rise and evolution of employee suicides in the Chinese electronics sector merits further study. We hope observers will consider the complexity of the issues when reporting or commenting on this study's findings.

Despite questions and controversies which will persist, we believe the findings of this report should mobilize Chinese society and the electronics sector to pursue new thinking, review systems of accountability and pursue new efforts to prevent the needless loss of life. In this pursuit, we should recognize the issue of employee suicide is undoubtedly intertwined with infringements of workers' rights. Even when some issues resist quick solutions, more modest efforts to ensure workers' rights and dignity in employment should move forward urgently.

### **We recommend the following next steps:**

#### **4.1. For the electronics sector**

##### **4.1.1. Own the problem: Recognize that employment conditions contribute to suicides**

Electronics firms should recognize the growing evidence: employment conditions contribute to the risk of suicide. They should support credible, independent and thorough studies, first and foremost, by providing available data to experts to explore the problem and to contribute constructively to government and civil society efforts to identify the scope of employers' responsibilities with the objective of developing monitoring and prevention systems needed to prevent suicides tied to infringements of workers' rights.

The EICC (now the Responsible Business Alliance)

studied risks to employee well-being in 2012, possibly in response to the well-publicized suicides of 2010.<sup>4</sup> The report is constructive in recognizing some employers' responsibilities. It highlights the risk some enterprise policies pose for employees' well-being, citing policies prohibiting employees from talking during their shifts or prohibiting employees of one region from living together.

The report, however, is limited in its review of other issues linked to employee suicide. It mentions the risks of repetitive motions, even citing one expert who terms them "oppressive." Yet the report suggests without evidence that it is difficult to reform this issue in light of Chinese employees' modest skill sets. The report highlights employees' desire for overtime. On income, the report cites the rising trend of Chinese incomes. However, the report then does not discuss employers' common use of coercion to resist employee requests for time off and requests to resign even though these issues figure prominently in suicide stories and even though these forms of coercion undermine sensible limits on hours and limit the income growth Chinese workers should expect were they free to refuse excessive overtime and resign when they wish.

We offer this study to the electronics sector to review the issues on their own without the pressure of exposés and explosive rhetoric. Even when firms do not support some of the conclusions of this study, we sincerely hope they will recognise the connection between employment conditions and the risk of suicide and shoulder their responsibilities where appropriate.

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<sup>4</sup> Electronic Industry Citizenship Coalition. 2012. Understanding employee health & welfare issues in China. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.responsiblebusiness.org/media/docs/publications/EHWTASKFORCEFINAL.pdf>).

#### 4.1.2. Develop and disclose records of employee suicide

The electronics sector should work with independent experts to develop methods to collect more comprehensive records of suicides. They should use these methods to seek insights and steer effective responses to suicides. Concurrently, they should publicize records of suicides through structured forums to support credible, more comprehensive efforts to explore and monitor the evolution of suicides over time.

Suppliers know of suicides before their clients, the government or news reporters, and they will likely resist publicizing suicides wherever they believe it might pressure them to offer settlements to survivors or trigger deeper interventions by their clients. However, knowledge of suicide is needed to develop effective responses including the development of sensible guidelines on the scope and limits of employers' responsibilities when suicides occur. The electronics sector is in one of the better positions to collect comprehensive records of suicides. To do this effectively, however, the electronics sector should work with independent experts to ensure the credibility of their efforts. Likewise, we need structured forums, sensitive to business concerns of the issue becoming politicized, to support publicizing these records for the benefit of longer term objectives.

#### 4.1.3. Drive sector wide improvements and systems of accountability

There is no single lever which contributes to the worsening of employment conditions to the point where they contribute to suicides. Identifying and successfully using opportunities for intervention to prevent employee suicides will require wide support by the electronics sector. The electronics sector could improve the reporting of suicides, more effectively explore where employment conditions contribute to suicides, monitor how this evolves over time and develop collective resources for interventions.

This collective effort needs to be mobilized in conjunction with the development of better systems of accountability for suicides where there is good evidence that neglect of workers' rights contributed

to the suicides. It is not the intention of this study to suggest this is simple to do. Counter-intuitive evidence suggests that fewer suicides occur in suppliers less likely to respect minimum income requirements. This strongly suggests evidence of the employment conditions which contribute to suicide will sometimes look very different from less evidence-driven theories of the effects of "difficult" conditions.

Nonetheless, this study offers multiple sources of evidence that suppliers where employees commit suicide represent poor performers on key indices of employment conditions. The electronics sector will find it difficult to effectively mobilize needed improvements if no one ensures the accountability of this higher risk group of firms.

Defining employers' accountability for suicides where appropriate will not only incentivize poor performers to reconsider the costs and benefits of respect for workers' rights. It will mobilize wider improvements by building confidence that the firms posing the highest risk will shoulder the cost of needed improvements and firms committed to improve will not see their investments undermined by competition from poor performers who bet their future on efforts to hide from their responsibilities.

#### 4.1.4. End "soft" forms of forced labour

Codes of conduct commonly require firms to respect freedom of employment. However, Chinese electronics suppliers widely impose "soft" restrictions of freedom of employment with impunity. The electronics sector should prioritize suppliers' respect for employees' freedom of employment including employees' right to refuse overtime and their right to resign when they choose to without risking the loss of income owed to them for previous work if the employer finds the timing of their choice inconvenient. The evidence of this study suggests such efforts will reduce triggers of suicide in the work environment.

Of note, the International Labour Organization (ILO) considers overtime that exceeds government requirements performed under the threat of punitive

consequences a form of forced labour.<sup>5</sup> Chinese employers resisted this view of forced overtime and cited it to justify withholding support of ILO Conventions. Still, freedom of employment is covered by the ILO's core conventions which the ILO considers binding, despite Chinese employers' misgivings.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, when employers withhold employees' income to obstruct their freedom to resign, the work they perform becomes a service completed under the influence of coercion and is a form of forced labour.<sup>7</sup>

The ILO's core conventions represent the minimum rights needed to empower employees to defend their own rights, and we should expect enforcement of employees' freedom to refuse excessive overtime or resign will promote improvements elsewhere in the work environment. The findings of this study fully support business comments that employees willingly work overtime. But employees empowered to exercise their right to refuse overtime will use this right to request time off when they need it. The extent to which they willingly work overtime will not follow employers' preferences 100%, more so for jobs which require employees to work continuously on their feet or loop through repetitive, monotonous motions for long hours. If enforced, employees' freedom to refuse overtime will not only reduce the risk of suicide. It is likely to support sensible limits on overtime and productivity, even without other interventions.

Employers who find scheduling more difficult without coercion will need to use other incentives to ensure employees consent to requests for overtime. The

<sup>5</sup> International Labour Organization. 2007. General Survey concerning the Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29), and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105). Geneva. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms\\_089199.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_norm/---relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_089199.pdf)).

<sup>6</sup> International Labour Organization. 2010. ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its Follow-up. Geneva. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.ilo.org/declaration/thedeclaration/textdeclaration/lang-en/index.htm>).

<sup>7</sup> International Labour Organization. 2016. Checkpoints: Eliminating and Preventing Forced Labour. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_456961.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/@publ/documents/publication/wcms_456961.pdf)).

freedom to resign will force employers to consider new incentives to ensure employee retention. The electronics sector might resist these reforms, sensitive to the new expenses they imply. But this is precisely the point. Employers use coercion to force employees to do things they would not otherwise do under existing conditions. Permitting this coercion undermines the incentives that pressure employers to respect employees' limits.

#### 4.1.5. Strengthen efforts to end hostility in the workplace

The electronics sector should develop more effective methods to identify hostility in the work environment and prioritize efforts to resolve this hostility. These methods should identify signs to distinguish when incidents of hostility represent one-off incidents and when they reflect systemic issues including but not limited to excessive productivity requirements, coercive forms of discipline, cronyism and disrespect for employees. This will help identify suppliers where the risk of suicide is higher, drive improvements which lower the likelihood of suicide, protect employees from more extreme forms of hostility and help suppliers evolve to become more efficient, better performing businesses.

In code of conduct circles, the issue of dignity in employment is frequently depicted as a lower order requirement. People recognize the desire for dignity but it is considered something to address only when other issues get resolved. The link between suicides and hostility in the work environment, underlined by quantitative and qualitative findings including stories of homicide this study uncovers, should prompt the electronics sector to reconsider their priorities. Do existing monitoring efforts spend sufficient time and effort to identify hostility in the work environment and its effects on employees? Do responses to more extreme incidents respond exclusively to the incidents themselves or explore the need for wider reforms? Is the monitoring of recommended reforms sufficient to verify whether systemic issues were resolved?

#### 4.1.6. Review and reform purchasing practices that contribute to the risk of suicide

Buyers of electronics should review where their business choices might pressure suppliers to prefer employment

conditions linked to employee suicide. Where possible, buyers should explore options to relieve this pressure on suppliers.

When buyers come to suppliers with unexpected orders, the size of orders swings to extremes or buyers expect suppliers to fulfil their orders on short notice, they directly contribute to the pressure to speed up production. When buyers expect to fulfil orders without considering the time and expense suppliers need to recruit new employees where needed, buyers contribute to suppliers' use of coercion to meet their objectives. This includes forced overtime, the use of fines and other punitive forms of discipline, denied requests for time off and the use of withheld income to keep employees from resigning. The speed of production and coercion contribute to shop floor tensions, hostility and depression which heightens the risk of suicide. Likewise, when buyers ignore the expenses suppliers incur from the need to downsize once they finish short term orders without the security of future orders, they contribute to illicit forms of flexible employment designed to shirk longer term commitments to employees. Flexible employment disrupts employees' lives and is tied to suicides by employees who might be swindled by recruiters or struggle with insecurity in their lives off the shop floor. The more buyers plan for consistency, give suppliers time and flexibility to finish orders and price orders using methods that better reflect suppliers' expenses, the more they will offset these tendencies, support dignity in employment and reinforce suicide prevention efforts.

#### **4.1.7. Support employees' collective involvement in key enterprise decisions**

Electronics firms should seek out and support efforts to empower employees to get involved in the collective resolution of employment tensions.

This study links suicide to intertwined issues like productivity, enterprise discipline, income and benefits and flexible employment. Some of these issues do not lend themselves to quick or simple solutions. And we expect neither business codes of conduct nor government policies will drive deeper improvements with sufficient sensitivity and flexibility. Consider the following:

This study links depression and suicide to income differences within the firm. How could codes of conduct or even government requirements set income differences sensitive to business needs while responsive to employee needs both of which will shift and evolve? Likewise, giving employees the freedom to refuse overtime is likely to highlight the need for credible forums for employees to come to consensus with employers on the rules to structure compromises on their competing interests. Even if outside pressure is sometimes needed to spur the process, there is no substitute for empowering employees to explore their own needs, define priorities and collectively seek solutions with employers.

## **4.2. For government**

### **4.2.1. Reconsider the censorship of suicides**

The government should develop guidelines to permit public reporting of suicides through credible forums which contribute to prevention efforts. This should include review of police interventions and reports to the public, censorship in news reports, internet and mobile telephone forums.

The risk of the Werther effect whereby the visibility of one suicide inspires new suicides is genuine, and we recognize some control of the publicity surrounding suicides possibly helps reduce the number of suicides. Yet censorship undermines deeper solutions when it permits employers to circumvent accountability for negligence that directly contributes to suicides. And it prevents more effective monitoring and analysis of the frequency and evolution of suicides which could contribute to prevention efforts.

### **4.2.2. Include suicide in entitlements linked to work injuries**

The government should consider some suicides eligible for entitlements for work injuries. If employers owe suicide survivors the non-negligible settlements outlined in existing Chinese requirements on work injuries, it will incentivize employers not to ignore the infringements of workers' rights which existing evidence links to suicides.

The government should consider this in conjunction with the development of guidelines to define employers' accountability for employee suicides and distinguish the conditions under which suicide is considered outside the scope of employers' responsibilities. The evidence suggests the government does sometimes pressure employers to offer restitution to suicide survivors. However, the government does this outside of public view and without explicit rules, so the process is sensitive to corruption and influences independent of the suicides themselves. This contributes to disputes and resentment in connection with suicides since people consider existing norms for settlements neither consistent nor just.

The government should hold employers accountable for suicides when evidence links them to employers' gross negligence of workers' rights. But holding employers accountable for every suicide is not constructive. It incentivizes employers to exclude people from employment wherever they see the risk of suicide. This could needlessly intensify the pressure on segments of society prone to depression. The question becomes, when is it appropriate to consider employers accountable for suicides? We need to develop and revise guidelines for this through experience.

#### **4.2.3. Develop risk appraisals to steer effective responses to suicide**

The government should develop simplified methods to cost-effectively review the conditions of firms where suicides occur to steer their response to those suicides. Consistent, widely implemented methods could identify work environments where the risk of suicide is higher. This could steer decisions to prioritize where pressure or investment is needed to prevent future suicides. Systemic risk appraisals could contribute to decisions to determine employers' accountability for suicides. They could likewise contribute to the development of wider prevention efforts focused on the issues more closely linked to the risk of suicide.

One method the Economic Rights Institute (henceforth ERI) is experimenting with is mentioned below. Survey questions identify the proportion of employees who exhibit signs of anxiety or depression. Indices like these not only suggest where the risk of future suicides

is independent of the size of the workforce, they link single incidents of suicide to conditions in the wider environment. Other simplified indices, like the proportion of employees who know of supervisors and security personnel hitting employees, could more directly identify employers where neglect is contributing to systemic problems we expect contribute to the risk of suicide.

#### **4.2.4. Consider the policies needed to support employee involvement in enterprise decisions in connection with productivity, enterprise discipline, income and benefits and flexible employment**

The government should consider how they will support experiments and forums that empower employees to express and defend their collective interests and effectively bind employers to sensible rules, incentives and limits in the work environment.

A fuller discussion of freedom of association is beyond the scope of this study. Nonetheless, this study's findings on suicide highlight excesses of the Chinese electronics sector and their dependence on coercion, with serious consequences for employees. Coercion, whether in the form of forced overtime, withheld income, hostility from supervisors or something else, is one of the side effects of economic models prioritizing growth and incentives for investors. While growth and investment contribute to fuller employment, the evidence suggests the existing model of Chinese economic development promotes employment structures which pose serious risks of long-term detriment to Chinese society. The number of employees who commit suicide due to employment conditions is limited, even tiny, when considered next to wider employment figures. Yet these suicides represent only the point where the cloth of Chinese society is ripping. The stresses behind the rips extend more widely. It is difficult to envision Chinese society empowered with millions of citizens being dependent on stressful, depressing jobs that offer them no security and drive some to suicide. Adapting this model to promote more sustainable employment will require empowering employees to seek collective compromises with employers which respect their rights and interests.

## 5. Suicide in the news and on the internet

### 5.1. New light on suicide

Reports of suicide in the Chinese electronics sector emerged prominently in 2010 in connection with the electronics supplier we refer to with “Supplier F”. These reports would come to define public perceptions of the issue. This study does not discuss Supplier F, per se, in the hopes people will interpret the findings here with fresh eyes. We do wish, however, to highlight preconceptions which Supplier F’s experience set in the public’s mind.

It is worth keeping in mind the influence of publicity on discussions of suicide. Despite the extensive reporting of the 2010 suicides, they were not the first suicides of Supplier F’s employees. One of the first public references we could find is a story of one employee who hung herself the evening before she expected to resign in 2007.<sup>8</sup> These less reported suicides never triggered the scrutiny of the 2010 suicides.

Public scrutiny intensified in the middle of 2010 when seven employees committed suicide in only one month.<sup>9</sup> Testimonies by the survivors of employees who

committed suicide and their peers, together with the rising number of suicides, contributed to the urgency of discussions of Supplier F’s responsibilities.

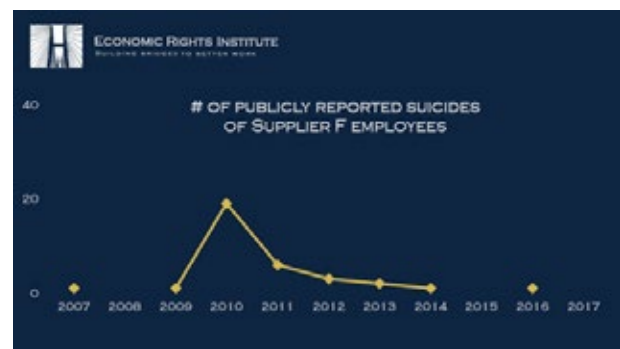
Under pressure, by the beginning of June 2010, the firm pledged to improve employees’ income by 20% in the hopes of preventing new suicides.<sup>10</sup> Despite the pledge, however, the suicides continued, and by the end of 2010, close to 20 of Supplier F’s employees had tried to end their lives. How income intersects with why employees commit suicide or efforts to prevent employee suicide is a key question to which we will return.

Though Supplier F continues to experience suicides from time to time, the number of suicides declined visibly since 2010. Publicity surrounding the 2010 spike in suicides nonetheless pulled the issue out of obscurity and linked Supplier F to suicides in the public’s mind. Now, when new incidents occur, reporters and the public quickly refer to the 2010 suicides and envision the risk of a new string of misfortune. The reporting of a new suicide by Supplier F’s employees in 2018 exemplifies this.<sup>11</sup>



<sup>8</sup> - 肖柳. 2009. “血汗工厂”富士康“欠下累累血债:近年员工非正常死亡.” 和讯, July 21. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://stock.hexun.com/2009-07-21/119781762.html>).

<sup>9</sup> - Barboza, David. 2010. “After Suicides, Scrutiny of Grim Factories” . New York Times, June 6. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/07/business/global/07suicide.html>).



<sup>10</sup> - Hille, Kathrin. 2010. “Foxconn to raise salaries 20% after suicides.” Financial Times, May 29. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://www.ft.com/content/5e1ee750-6a05-11df-a978-00144feab49a>).

<sup>11</sup> - Fullerton, Jamie. 2018. “Suicide at Chinese iPhone factory reignites concern over working conditions.” The Telegraph, January 7. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/01/07/suicide-chinese-iphone-factory-reignites-concern-working-conditions/>).

## 5.2. The question of the employer's responsibilities

The controversies surrounding the publicity of the 2010 suicides centred on the question of whether Supplier F should be considered responsible for the suicides. And in this vein, the core question of this study is:

*Do employment conditions contribute to the risk of suicide and if so, how?*

Professors from 20 universities conducted one of the first genuinely independent, comprehensive reviews of Supplier F following the suicides. They linked the suicides to long lists of infringements of workers' rights including but not limited to coercive internships, punitive discipline and gruelling schedules that prevented employees from developing lives outside of work.<sup>12</sup> Other experts were more reserved in linking the suicides to employment conditions, observing that conditions in Supplier F were not the worst in the sector.<sup>13</sup> Followed through to its conclusion, the logic implied that the firm's infringements of workers' rights were not responsible for the suicides if other firms with more serious infringements of workers' rights were not experiencing suicides.

One of the more common counters to criticisms of Supplier F concerned its size. The likelihood of enterprises seeing one of their employees commit suicide is tied to the number of people they employ. The more people they employ, the more likely it is someone will commit suicide. Supplier F employed close to 1,000,000 people during the 2010 string of suicides. For some, this undermined the suggestion that they should be held responsible for the suicides since the proportion of suicides looked low vis-à-vis a national average of 15

suicides per 100,000 people.<sup>14</sup>

This use of a national average to predict the number of suicides we might expect from Supplier F employees is, however, unscientific. It ignores the obvious selection process which distinguishes Supplier F employees from wider Chinese society, and how this process intersects with the risk of suicide. Consider the following: If 10 students from a school unexpectedly died of Alzheimer's, we would find it ridiculous for someone to suggest the school should ignore the issue if the number of students who died is below a national average of people who die of Alzheimer's. We instinctively recognize Alzheimer's tends to influence the elderly, and we should expect a national average will misrepresent the risk of Alzheimer's for students in their twenties.

Suicide is more complex. Yet the risk of suicide is visibly lower for some segments of Chinese society including younger people and people employed in cities. Studies suggest elderly suicides represent over 40% of Chinese suicides.<sup>15</sup> Other studies suggest 88% of suicides by Chinese youth occurred in the countryside.<sup>16</sup> This is why studies show the number of suicides of Chinese youth living in the cities is well below 15 per 100,000. One study suggested the number of Chinese citizens from 20 to 34 years old living in the cities who commit suicide declined to under 4 per 100,000 beginning in 2006 through to 2011.<sup>17</sup>

Supplier F employees do not represent the full cross section of Chinese society. For one thing, surveys following the 2010 suicides suggest their employees were

<sup>12</sup> - “两岸三地”高校富士康调研组. 2010. 富士康调研总报告. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://mfiles.sohu.com/it/foxconn.doc>).

<sup>13</sup> - 2010. “Suicides at Foxconn: Light and Death.” *The Economist*, May 27. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://www.economist.com/node/16231588>).

<sup>14</sup> - Ford, Peter. 2010. “Why have suicides spiked at Apple iPad supplier Foxconn in China?” *The Christian Science Monitor*, May 25. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-Pacific/2010/0525/Why-have-suicides-spiked-at-Apple-iPad-supplier-Foxconn-in-China>).

<sup>15</sup> - Wang, Ch., Chan, C. & P. S.F. Yip. 2014. “Suicide rates in China from 2002 to 2011: An update.” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 49: 929-941.

<sup>16</sup> - Li, X. et al. 2008. “Risk factors for suicide in China' s youth: a case control study.” *Psychological Medicine* 38(3): 397-406.

<sup>17</sup> - Wang, Ch., Chan, C. & P. S.F. Yip. 2014. “Suicide rates in China from 2002 to 2011: An update.” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 49: 929-941.

an average of 23 years young.<sup>18</sup> When observers citing Supplier F's size and a national average of 15 suicides per 100,000 people brushed off the question of accountability for the suicides, they were grossly misusing the numbers on which they grounded their logic.

Still, questions of whether Supplier F's conditions contributed to the suicides were never settled. One of the unresolved questions is, if employment conditions contribute to suicides, why did few of their employees commit suicide before 2010? More strikingly, some experts were strongly suspicious of Supplier F's response to the 2010 suicides and highlighted the continued infringement of workers' rights there.<sup>19</sup> Yet the number of publicly reported Supplier F suicides fell in 2011 and continued to decline for a long time. This would suggest one of three possibilities:

- Supplier F is doing something different which effectively prevents some suicides;
- The infringements of workers' rights which persist do not by themselves trigger suicide;
- Some suicides of Supplier F employees were not publicly reported.

Furthermore, the evolution of Supplier F's suicides defies the logic of observers who considered the 2010 suicides within the "norms" of Chinese society too. If 20 suicides for 1,000,000 employees is within the "norm" and Supplier F continues to employ close to 1,000,000 people, we should expect more employees to commit suicide. Why then does Supplier F not see this frequency of suicides consistently over time?

This study will not settle these questions. We do believe the findings presented here show with seldom seen precision that employment conditions in the Chinese electronics sector contribute to suicide independently of the psychology of those committing suicide. We hope,

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18 - Fair Labor Association. 2012. "Independent Investigation of Apple Supplier, Foxconn Report Highlights." March. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([http://www.fairlabor.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/foxconn\\_investigation\\_report.pdf](http://www.fairlabor.org/sites/default/files/documents/reports/foxconn_investigation_report.pdf)).

19 - "兩岸三地" 高校富士康調研組. 2012. "富士康, 你改過自新了嗎?: 2012年度 "兩岸三地" 高校富士康調研報告." Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://economy.guoxue.com/?p=6022>).

too, the findings highlight the urgency with which we need to pursue deeper questions and solutions.

### 5.3. A wider perspective

Despite the opening, the subject of this report is not Supplier F. Here we hope to tell the story of other suicides, the ones overlooked by news outlets that look for simple stories. We believe it is this desire for simplicity which contributed to the public's exclusive focus on one firm, and this undermines the effort to respond effectively to the suicides themselves, in Supplier F and beyond.

ERI's interest in conducting this study developed in response to the surprising number suicides which workers reported to ERI through surveys we perform in the Chinese electronics sector. Once we were sensitized to the trend, we went digging through survey records and were surprised to discover employees from 14 out of 64 suppliers we surveyed, 22%, reported recent suicides.

Beginning when the first Supplier F suicides were noticed in 2010, English news outlets and other sources published hundreds of pieces discussing Supplier F, exploring why their employees commit suicide, whether employment conditions contribute to suicide and the firm's response to the scrutiny. With few exceptions, however, the English news cycle is silent on Chinese suicides outside of Supplier F.

When we looked, however, we found Chinese sources document numerous suicides in the electronics sector. Mostly, however, reports discuss these suicides one by one. Apart from the employees of firms known for multiple suicides, few observers seemed to consider the trends. From time to time, reporters linked the phenomenon of suicides to the evolving desires of Chinese youth. In 2015, some reporters noticed the trend of employees using suicide to settle wider employment disputes [see Section 5.1.2]. These reports were low enough profile, however, so they were seldom noticed, even by experts in the field considering the



deeper import of the Supplier F suicides.<sup>20</sup>

To bring the existence and scope of suicides outside of Supplier F to light, ERI poured through hundreds of websites to collect references to Chinese electronics employees committing suicide. This effort highlighted the diversity of suicides and public reports of their motives. We used these sources to define the foremost types of suicide to better explore their possible link to employment conditions.

When we were finished, we had found references to 167 suicide incidents in the Chinese electronics sector from 2003 to 2017. Of these, 34 suicides were of Supplier F employees. The other 133 suicide events involved 67 employers and 24 suicides where internet references do not specify the employer.

## 5.4. Censorship in mind

People should remember the tens of millions of Chinese citizens employed in the electronics sector. In proportion, the number of suicides this study considers is modest.

The references to suicides we found through internet sources, however, reflect only a selection of the true number of suicides. We could not guess the scope of suicides out of the public eye. But censorship is ubiquitous in the Chinese context even when it is complex, involving interwoven lines of outright censure and more subtle forms of influence.<sup>21</sup> No credible discussion of Chinese suicide should ignore the likely existence of unreported suicides. And while censorship is mostly hidden from view, we outline some of the tendencies we observed over the course of our studies of suicide.

<sup>20</sup> - Chan, Jenny. 2013. "A suicide survivor: the life of a Chinese migrant worker at Foxconn." *New Technology, Work and Employment* 28(2): 84-99.

<sup>21</sup> - Elfstrom, Manfred and Cairns, Christopher. 2014. "Strikes, Social Media and the Press: Why Chinese Authorities Allow or Suppress New and Old Media Coverage of Labor Disputes." Paper presented to the American Political Science Association during its 2014 Annual Meeting, Washington, DC, August 28-31.

### 5.4.1. Government required restitution

Chinese employers frequently prefer to reduce or, where possible, prevent publicity surrounding suicides, though this phenomenon is not limited to the Chinese context.<sup>22</sup> One of the incentives to do this is employers' interest to limit settlements they might need to offer suicide survivors. To put the risk of settlements in context, we need to first consider the principles of settlements required by the Chinese government.

The government sets out explicit requirements for the restitution owed survivors should someone die in connection with their employment. Article 39 of the Rules for insuring work injuries [henceforth, the "Rules"] specifies this should include:

- Expenses for burying the victim.
- Economic support for surviving dependents.
- One-off restitution worth 20 times the national average income for city residents of the previous year.

Together, the sum implied here is close to ¥ 1,000,000, though evidence suggests survivors seldom receive this theorized sum. China's national average income for city residents in 2017 rose to ¥ 36,396.<sup>23</sup> Twenty times this index represents restitution of ¥ 728,000 without considering the longer term economic support possibly owed to the victim's surviving dependents.

If someone dies in connection with their employment and they were registered for and contributing to social security, in theory, funding for this restitution lies with the social security office. However, Chinese employers seldom follow social security requirements to the letter. And if the victim is considered outside of the social security system, Article 62 of the Rules specifies that responsibility shifts to the employer. Rules like these drive employers' sense of urgency in discussion of their responsibilities in connection with the loss of life.

<sup>22</sup> - Waters, Sarah. 2017. "Workplace Suicide and States of Denial: The France Télécom and Foxconn Cases Compared." *TripleC* 15(1): 191-213.

<sup>23</sup> - 李楠桦, 蒋琪. 2018. "统计局: 2017年全国居民人均可支配收入25974元." 人民网, January 18. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://finance.people.com.cn/n1/2018/0118/c1004-29773181.html>).

However, the Chinese system presently does not require employers to offer survivors of suicide restitution. The Rules outline employees' eligibility for employment benefits covering injuries or illness. Employees injured on the job commonly enjoy eligibility for benefits. The process to determine whether the employer is responsible for illness is more prone to misuse. More simply, however, the government considers employees who die within 48 hours of the moment they experience symptoms of illness on the job eligible for entitlements. In the Chinese context, even employees en route to and from work hurt in the street by vehicles driven by people with no connection to the employment setting still enjoy the right to employment benefits.

When the government revised the Rules in 2011, however, they took a simplistic view of suicide, and Article 16 explicitly excludes suicide from eligibility for entitlements.

#### 5.4.2. Settlements outside of explicit requirements

With the exclusion of suicide from eligibility for employment benefits, we might expect employers to side-step responsibility to offer restitution to suicide survivors. We know, however, the survivors of one suicide sought the sum of ¥ 3,000,000 from the employer.<sup>24</sup> The employer only consented to give ¥ 100,000, but the evidence suggests they were not the only ones to offer survivors some restitution, and the more public the suicide, the more likely the government or even business clients will pressure the employer to settle disputes with survivors.

There is little light on this element of employee suicides, and few news pieces refer to the settlements between employers and survivors. So it is difficult to confirm why some employers offer restitution when others do not. Of the 133 suicide incidents outside of Supplier F we reviewed, public records confirm settlements for only 10 incidents, including one incident where the employer offered only 20% of the restitution survivors were seeking, and the news piece never specified the end result of their discussions.

<sup>24</sup> - 柯兵. 2013. “横沥电子厂女工跳楼身亡 家属索赔308万元.” 本地宝, November 17. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://dg.bendibao.com/news/20131014/content98404.shtml>).

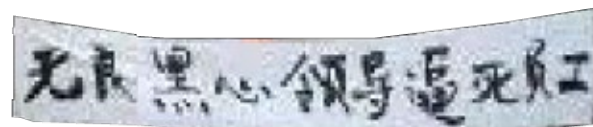
Still, of the ten suicides where public records confirm some kind of settlement, approximately 50% of employers offered survivors ¥ 40,000 to ¥ 60,000. Settlements in the other incidents were for approximately ¥ 100,000 except one settlement closer to ¥ 500,000. These ten settlements thus highlight the possibility of pressures building on employers to offer non-negligible sums to suicide survivors.

#### 5.4.3. Employers' role in hindering public reporting

By obstructing wider discussion of employee suicides, some employers limit the pressure survivors might use to win higher offers of restitution. Employers likewise seem nervous that offers of restitution might “incentivize” others to commit suicide and thereby ensure benefits for their survivors.

Thus, some employers silence publicity on suicides through efforts to keep quiet, resolve or repress disputes with suicide victims' survivors. In the Chinese setting, survivors commonly hold ceremonies to burn incense close to where their loved one died by suicide. If the employer does not permit survivors to enter the premises, survivors frequently perform their ceremonies in front of the firm. This is frequently where survivors protest employers, using signs, mobilizing others and talking to news reporters and others to publicize the suicide and suggest the employer is responsible for the suicide.

Unless they settle on the terms of restitution for the suicide, these ceremonies frequently end with employers seeking the intervention of police. Numerous



Protest sign used by suicide survivors:  
“Management without conscience push employees till they die”.

reports refer to police using violence to disperse survivors' protests, even if the protest consists only of crying in public with signs to let observers know the context for the scene.

The support police give employers does not end there. Since employers frequently discover suicide victims before others, testimonies from and interviews with survivors suggest employers commonly collect the victim's belongings either from their person or their dormitories. In numerous incidents, survivors encountered difficulties getting the belongings of their loved ones returned to them. This is a sensitive issue since it might influence the collection of evidence to support one or other perspective on the employer's responsibility for the suicide. By restricting survivors' rights to review the belongings of the suicide victim, employers force survivors to depend more on the version of events presented by employers and police.

In one recent incident, the employer told survivors the victim committed suicide over tensions with her boyfriend. Survivors did not believe this, but the employer replied that police showed them phone texts between the victim and her boyfriend showing the evolution and timing of the tensions. Police discussed this evidence with the employer without discussing it with the survivors and denied survivors the right to collect the victim's phone to verify the texts themselves.



*The survivors of one suicide express their grief and protest outside the firm where the suicide occurred.*

Employers likewise sometimes prevent survivors from collecting other sources of evidence on the course of events. They frequently prohibit employees who observed the suicide from discussing it with the victim's survivors, reporters or others. They sometimes disperse observers by shifting them to new dormitories or other job sites. News reports suggest one employer offered witnesses of the suicide of one of their employees ¥ 50 for the promise to keep quiet [“封口费”].<sup>25</sup> One of the suppliers discussed more deeply in this study reportedly sometimes offers suicide observers ¥ 20,000 if they consent to resign [see Section 7.4.1].

<sup>25</sup> - 2009. “女工跳楼，索赔起纠纷 厂方：自杀现场派红包乃当地习俗。” 新闻中心, November 11. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://news.sina.com.cn/c/2009-11-11/041916587062s.shtml>).

These methods prevent survivors from getting independent views of the suicide and undermine survivors' confidence in their own beliefs concerning the course of events. This disadvantages survivors in settlements, since they find themselves with little to rebut employer-friendly versions of the suicide. With few resources to verify events, survivors frequently feel compelled to consent to negligible sums offered by the employer. And though ERI's direct experience with these settlements is limited, the evidence suggests employers frequently offer restitution to survivors only if they commit to stop publicizing the suicide or petitioning the government or the courts for better terms. In one settlement, government officers directly joined the employer to pressure the survivors to consent to this condition of the settlement. Together, these efforts limit the public's knowledge of how employers resolve their responsibilities in employee suicides.

#### 5.4.4. The government's role in censorship

The preceding section mentions police interventions to silence protests and actions which, consciously or not, privilege employers with evidence they use to pressure survivors in settlements. It is worth considering why police might do this. The obvious incentive is to prevent unrest. The Chinese government's concern for public protest is well documented, like the government's tendency to use police to disperse street protests or other efforts to minimise the visibility of protests which might inspire protests elsewhere. In this sense, police interventions in disputes connected to employee suicide seem consistent with other interventions. Government support for conditions on settlements which silence survivors likewise contribute to this objective to settle disputes quickly and limit their influence on future disputes.

Sometimes survivors explicitly worry the police is working in collusion with employers. In one incident, employees mobilized a strike to protest the employer's decision to move from Shenzhen. The second evening of the strike, one employee spent time with his brother, telling him he worried people were monitoring his telephone. He suggested his brother move out of Shenzhen. The following morning, police reported the employee had committed suicide though they reportedly refused survivors the opportunity to view

the body despite survivors' concerns the employer and police were using the veil of suicide to hide a homicide connected with the strike.<sup>26</sup> It is difficult to confirm the truth of these events. It is nonetheless worth noting, refusing to respond to survivors' doubts to the point of not letting them verify the condition of the body suggests the police's role in the incident exceeded the expected tendencies of police resisting protests.

The government's interest in quietly settling suicides comes in other forms too. Through credible sources, ERI knows of one incident of murder where social security officers worked in concert with the employer to pressure survivors to consent to the employer's first and low settlement offer. They did this despite convincing employee and supervisor testimonies linking the murder to two employees' dispute over their job responsibilities. Since the murder occurred on the shop floor with both employees involved on the clock, social security officers likely knew the incident met requirements for employment benefits. But since the employer registered the victim for social security, responsibility for funding the restitution would lie with the social security office. In this context, they found it more convenient to pressure survivors into the view they were not eligible for employment benefits and therefore should consent to the modest, "goodwill" sum offered by the employer and return to the countryside.

Even though the government excludes suicides from eligibility for employment benefits [see Section 4.4.1], they support some settlements offered to survivors. We know nothing of when they contribute or the guidelines for how much they contribute. But the murder settlement highlights how, when they get involved in suicide settlements, government officers might support different decisions depending on the expense they foresee.

The government's role in the censorship of suicides extends beyond the interventions of police or social security officers in the field. Some survivors use internet and telephone networks to seek outside support. They publicize the events surrounding the suicide of their

loved ones or their efforts to resolve differences with employers and police. They might even seek out news outlets in the hopes the risk publicity poses to the business will pressure employers to settle disputes.

However, websites and mobile applications like Weixin censor references to suicide sometimes within moments of their being sent. Even while collecting the internet sources for this study, ERI found numerous sources unexpectedly removed from the internet. Some websites were deleted with no sign the content ever existed. Other sources were deleted with explicit notices like the one to the right from the service provider responsible for removing the content. Over the course of this study, ERI spoke with two civil society groups with experience of this phenomenon too.

When censored content includes the tone of criticism or protest, it seems consistent with the government's preference to prevent publicity which could widen "unrest". Yet censorship frequently includes references to objective events without emotive requests for support or even references to employers' responsibilities. Censors delete criticisms of employers, stories of police ruthlessness and suspicions of wrongdoing. But they censor simple texts noting the time of the suicide and the victim's job too.

此内容因违规无法查看

由用户投诉并经平台审核，涉嫌违反相关法律法规和政策，查看对应规则

Weixin notice of censored content:  
*"Users protested this, and we verified the content is possibly a violation of pertinent laws"*

The scope of this censorship is difficult to verify, but it is common enough so people widely expect it. Furthermore, the censorship seems to occur consistently in different forums restricting public discussion of suicides in different regions in sometimes lightning quick response times. This suggests the censorship is steered by some higher level body or policies, like the government's effort to limit publicity of the Supplier F suicides in 2010.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> - 2013. "ASM三年三人墮亡竟隱瞞 家屬討公道 反被公安監控打壓." 蘋果, April 16. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://hk.news.appledaily.com/local/daily/article/20130416/18229635>).

<sup>27</sup> - Pun, Ngai et al. "Worker- intellectual unity: Trans-border sociological intervention in Foxconn." *Current Sociology Monograph* 62(2): 209-222.

Of note, when suicide survivors try to publicize their experiences, it is their intention to use one of the few resources they possess to pressure employers to respect their rights. So censorship of survivors' publicity efforts does not simply stop publicity surrounding suicides. It hinders independent monitoring which might pressure employers to respect sensible norms and requirements in their response to suicides.

The censorship of internet and telephone networks extends beyond survivors' efforts to fight for justice. The employees of firms where people committed suicide frequently seek out forums to post their feelings and experiences. Some simply express distress over suicides. Some publicize the course of events. Others more explicitly link the incidence of suicide in some firms to their employment conditions. This kind of discussion is more likely to devolve into discussions of employment conditions not expressly linked to the issue of suicide. Some do this with the conscious intention of counselling job seekers on the risks of working for the employer where the suicides occurred.

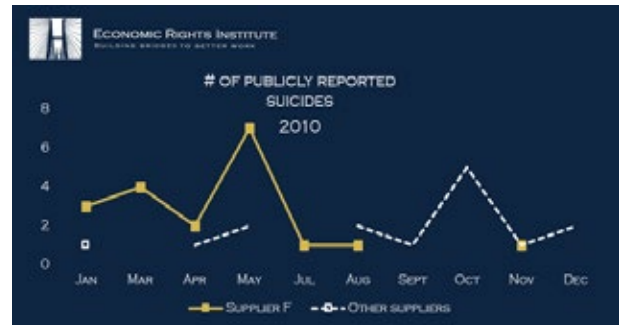
Discussions of suicide sometimes get deleted even when they do not include obvious links to protests. These sources might consider the risk of libel when discussions criticize specific firms. However, the evidence suggests this level of censorship is inconsistent. While some discussions get deleted, hundreds of other discussions still exist in internet forums. The current study could not determine why some suicides get censored while others do not. There is, however, some evidence to suggest one of the motives of Chinese censorship of suicide which we discuss in the following section.

#### 5.4.5. The Werther effect

Though the thinking behind the theory is not without controversy, experts suggest publicity surrounding suicides sometimes triggers more suicides. This is termed the Werther effect.<sup>28</sup> The process by which this occurs is less well studied, and newer studies suggest some kinds of publicity might reduce the incidence

<sup>28</sup> - Scherr, Sebastian et al. 2011. "Belief in a Werther Effect: Third Person Effects in the Perceptions of Suicide Risk for Others and the Moderating Role of Depression." *Suicide and Life Threatening Behavior* 41 (6): 624-633.

of suicides following reports of suicide.<sup>29</sup> By the time the Supplier F suicides spiked, however, the Chinese government believed news reports were heightening the risk of further suicides.<sup>30</sup> Studies would soon confirm symptoms of the Werther effect in Supplier F.<sup>31</sup> So with the Werther effect in mind, despite pressuring for the firm to improve and publicize their improvement efforts to the world, the government quite possibly set out to restrict the news cycle to prevent more suicides.



The number of suicides reported in the wider Chinese electronics sector rises together with the spike in Supplier F suicides in mid 2010. This might reflect how Supplier F's experience sensitized news outlets to report suicides, or it might suggest the Werther effect extended beyond Supplier F, contributing to suicides in other firms.

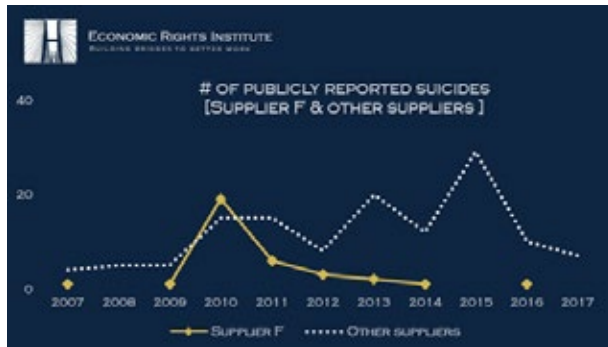
We might conjecture that when publicity surrounding these suicides went beyond some threshold, suicides outside of Supplier F continued to rise while Supplier F's improvements helped reduce the suicides there. But even if it is difficult to confirm why the number of Supplier F suicides fell or why the number of suicides elsewhere seems to rise, the longer term trend in the figure below lends itself to one incontrovertible conclusion. By 2011, suicides in the Chinese electronics sector were evolving independently of events in Supplier F. The number of

<sup>29</sup> Niederkrotenthaler, Thomas et al. 2010. "Role of media reports in completed and prevented suicide: Werther v. Papageno effects." *The British Journal of Psychiatry* 197: 234-243.

<sup>30</sup> - 2010. "富士康員工自殺 媒體報導受到限制和質疑." *大纪元*, May 27. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/10/5/27/n2920662.htm>).

<sup>31</sup> - Cheng, Qijin et al. 2011. "The Foxconn suicides and their media prominence: is the Werther effect applicable in China?" *BMC Public Health* 11: 841.

suicides of Supplier F employees fell visibly while reports of suicides in other firms grew in number. Though reports of suicides in the wider electronics sector fell in 2012, they then spiked independently of the direction of events in Supplier F. Despite the growing reports of suicides in the electronics sector, however, public scrutiny of the issue went silent with the drop in suicides by Supplier F employees, a silence which looks misguided when we view the wider trends.



We nonetheless believe one of the government's motives for censoring publicity surrounding suicides is the justified concern this publicity contributes to new suicides. Interestingly, one study suggests Chinese news outlets over-report youth suicides since they consider these stories more newsworthy.<sup>32</sup> Counter to the censorship we outline here, this implies Chinese news outlets enjoy the freedom to report suicides they find interesting. And worth noting, suicides in the electronics sector more likely involve younger people, so if the thesis of this study holds, we should expect Chinese news outlets to report suicides in the electronics sector more frequently. The problem is, this study limited its review of news reports to the first six months of 2006. So the study entirely misses the evolution of Chinese suicides since the spike of suicides of Supplier F employees. In essence, the study misses the moment when we expect the Chinese government first took notice of the Werther effect and revised their preferences for the public reporting of suicides.

## 5.5. Curious tendencies

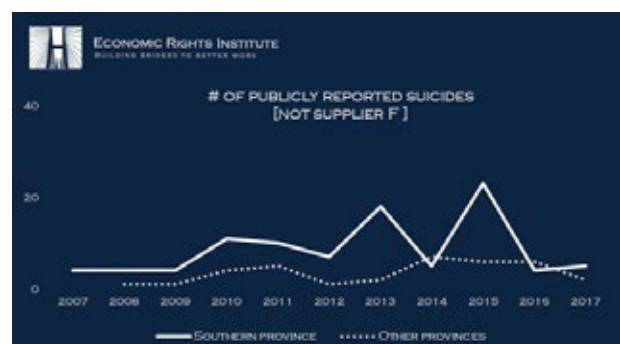
<sup>32</sup> - Fu, Kingwa et al. 2011. "Newspaper reporting of suicides in Hong Kong, Taiwan and Guangzhou: compliance with WHO media guidelines and epidemiological comparisons." *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 65(10): 928-933.

### 5.5.1. The clustering of references from the south

Some curious tendencies exist within the suicide reports we collected which possibly reflect the effects of censorship. The most prominent of these tendencies is that 73% of the employee suicides outside of Supplier F we found were from suppliers from Guangdong. An additional 10% of suicide references were from Jiangsu, 4% from Zhejiang, while the rest were dispersed between eleven other provinces.

Investment by the Chinese electronics sector is condensed in the southernmost Chinese province. Yet the proportion of employee suicides mentioned from the south suggests something else is influencing references to employee suicides. It is possible something unique to investment or employment conditions in the south is contributing to the higher incidence of reported suicides. The south is more dependent on recruiting people from other provinces, so it is possible or even likely residence issues contribute to the likelihood of suicides in the south. It is possible the Chinese government permits more freedom of expression in the region surrounding Shenzhen and other economic experiments which contributes to reports of employee suicides in the south which might be censored if they occurred in other provinces.

Without more evidence, it is difficult to comment on this phenomenon except to note: Internet references cited here offer a very limited view of employee suicides in non-southern provinces. One further point worth noting, however, is that trends in the number of employee suicides reported in the south versus other provinces show some correspondence.



## 6. Towards a typology of suicide in the electronics sector

Of the 133 suicides outside of Supplier F we considered, there were no references to why employees committed suicide in 44 of them. This provides a pool of 89 suicides where internet references suggest the motive behind the suicide.



*Firefighters observe this electronics employee while he considers jumping. In the next moment, they successfully pulled him from the ledge before he could hurt himself.*

confidence. But this methodology effectively highlights the public perception, by news outlets and employees posting their experiences on the internet, of employee suicides. This is useful to explore the diversity of possible motives behind employee suicides and helps identify points where public perceptions support or ignore issues we might otherwise believe deserve deeper discussion.

To develop this typology of suicides, the figure below identifies the motives more commonly cited in internet records of employee suicides. The sections below discuss these motives in more depth, reviewing specific incidents that offer insights into one or other types of suicide.

In studying these internet sources, we need to keep in mind the limits of the methodology. The depth and credibility of the sources reviewed in this study were mixed. Some references included extensive discussion of the context behind the suicides. Others were only brief comments which mentioned where and when a suicide occurred. Some sources included the comments of employees who worked for the firm where the suicide occurred or even survivors of the victim. Others included only the comments of observers or people with no direct knowledge of the incident concerned. Some observers were confident they knew why employees committed suicide. Others only offered guesses.

Considering this, it is impossible to determine the context and motive of the suicides covered in this study with

Reported motive	Number of suicide incidents	% of suicides with reference to motive*
Protests	27	30%
Loss of employment	20	22%
Fired	9	10%
Business closure	4	4%
Business moving	4	4%
Hostility	15	17%
Withheld income	14	16%
Dating and marriage	14	16%
Denied permission for time off	9	10%
Economic pressure [Without loss of employment]	8	9%
Work pressure	6	7%
Denied permission to resign	4	5%
Overtime	3	3%
Utilitarian	2	2%
Psychosis	1	1%

\* The figures here represent the frequency with which specific motives were mentioned in the set of 89 incidents where internet sources suggest the motive behind the suicide, so they do not include incidents where no motive is mentioned; the percentages exceed 100% since there were multiple motives behind some suicides.

## 6.1. Suicide and protests

### 6.1.1. The prominence of protests

If we only consider the number of internet references, the most common suicide event is when employees use suicide to attract publicity which they hope might pressure employers to resolve employment disputes. A visible 30% of the 89 incidents collected explicitly link employees' desire to commit suicide to protests.

It is impossible to determine the genuine number of suicide protests in wider society from internet sources. There is strong evidence of systemic efforts to censor the publicity surrounding suicides [see Section 4.4]. This reduces the number of employee suicides reported to the public, and we should expect even stronger censorship of suicide incidents linked to protests.

With censorship in mind, we should expect internet sources to underreport the number of suicide protests. Interpreting these numbers is more complex, however. Some suicide protests do receive publicity. And there is not enough evidence to define why censors remove the references to some suicides and not others.

Protesting employees tend to seek publicity and sometimes consciously strive to pressure the government to push employers to resolve disputes, so we should expect the government is more likely to censor references to suicide when they think it could reduce the risk of wider employment disputes. Still, censorship is not the only influence on the likelihood that suicide protests receive publicity. The community of observers interested in Chinese strikes and other collective incidents is more likely to echo reports of suicide when they connect with the topic of protests. Once recorded in sources beyond the borders of the Chinese internet, mentions of suicide resist censorship.

It is difficult to judge where and when one of these competing influences is stronger, whether they influence the reporting of employee suicides uniformly and whether they evolve over time. So we simply note: A visible proportion of the references to employee suicides we collected were not exclusively suicides but incidents where employees consciously used suicide to protest employment conditions.

### 6.1.2. The evolving use of suicide in protests

Despite the limits of available evidence, a distinct phenomenon emerges from internet references which permits some exploring. Over the 10 years covered by the 133 employee suicides not linked to Supplier F, the first reference to the use of suicide in protests is in 2008. The next incidents do not occur till 2011. The use of suicide in protests then continues but involves few incidents until a spike in 2015. Seemingly out of nowhere, internet references include 14 uses of employee suicide in protests, representing 48% of suicide incidents reported for 2015. Then, there is a drop in the reporting of such incidents, and even the number of reported suicides declines, seemingly out of synch with the trend of previous years.



If we put this in the context of the Supplier F suicides, a few hypotheses emerge. First, employees used suicide in protests before the publicity surrounding the Supplier F suicides in 2010. Suicide protests then grew following the 2010 spike in suicides. The 2010 suicides were not limited to Supplier F, but the firm received extensive publicity within and beyond Chinese borders. It seems quite possible employees struggling in difficult conditions noticed the world's sensitivity to the issue of suicide, and this inspired the wider use of suicide in protests.





It is still difficult to determine whether the evolution of the numbers reflects genuine trends in suicides or simply trends in the reporting of suicides. Available evidence does suggest, however, that suicide protests evolved beyond the events of Supplier F. Supplier F suicides declined from 2010, and in 2014 and 2015, there were no reported suicides of their employees. Yet this is precisely when suicide protests hit their “high”. So the spike in the number of suicide protests is independent of Supplier F.

The evolution of suicide protests suggests one further hypothesis. The number of suicide protests and the number of employee suicides decline in 2016 and 2017. It is likely the worldwide economic crisis of 2008 contributed to the 2010 rise in employee suicides, and national data suggest Chinese suicides rose in the two years following 2008 despite a long term declining trend.<sup>33</sup> There is no corresponding shift in conditions to suggest why internet references to suicides decline in 2016. In this context, it is difficult to believe the decline in reported suicides is entirely due to fewer incidents of employee suicide. It is possible, however, the government grew concerned with the rising use of suicide in protests, and this triggered tighter control of the public reporting of suicides. It is impossible to confirm this within the scope of this study, but the hypothesis merits further study.



### 6.1.3. Suicide protests seldom end in suicide

With this context in mind, we need to distinguish how

<sup>33</sup> - Wang, Ch., Chan, C. & P. S.F. Yip. 2014. “Suicide rates in China from 2002 to 2011: An update.” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 49: 929-941.

suicide protests differ from other employee suicides. First and foremost, suicide protests seldom end in employees genuinely risking their lives or dying by suicide. Most of the incidents we reviewed involved employees climbing to the top of buildings to show their willingness to jump. In most of these incidents, no one jumps, and of the 27 suicide incidents tied to protests, 97% ended with no one dying. This is dramatically different from the 106 employee suicides without protests where 91% ended with the employee concerned ending their own life.<sup>34</sup>

It is worth noting, employees in some neighbouring countries do end their lives to protest employment conditions, and the evidence suggests this extreme form of protest is linked to wider perceptions of the history of protest.<sup>35</sup> So it is possible the use of suicide protests could evolve in the Chinese context. Still, of the reports we collected, the single incident where the employee ended his life to protest his employer looks quite different from other protests. In this incident, the employee spent enormous sums [“巨資”] to recover from injuries he incurred on the job. He took the receipt of his doctors’ expenses to the employer for reimbursement on the 28th of one month. The employer refused to reimburse him, and by the 19th of the following month, the employee expected the employer to deny him reimbursement. So he climbed to the roof of the firm’s building and filmed himself. He commented, the employer “pushed people too far” [“逼人太甚”] and explicitly linked his employer’s shirking of their responsibility for his injuries to his suicide, commenting, “[they] do not pay, so I jump” [“不付了，跳樓了”]. Before jumping, he publicized the film of his comments on Weixin, ensuring they would inspire wider

<sup>34</sup> - Some of these suicides were connected to protests when survivors of the person committing suicide protested for recognition of responsibility and restitution from the employer. However, we distinguish this form of protest by the survivors from the protest of employees trying to commit or committing suicide.

<sup>35</sup> - Doucette J. 2013. “Minjung Tactics in a Post-Minjung Era? The Survival of Self-Immolation and Traumatic Forms of Labour Protest in South Korea.” Pp. 212-232 in *New Forms and Expressions of Conflict at Work*, edited by Gall G. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

criticism of the firm.<sup>36</sup>

This is not the progression of most protests which involve the spectre of suicide. Most employees who use suicide in protest neither injure themselves nor try to. Commonly, employees climb to the roof of office buildings to show their intention to jump without ever jumping.

#### 6.1.4. Struggle versus helplessness



It should surprise no one if suicide protests seldom end in injuries. In protests, employees hope for something useful to them in life. Their end objective is not to end their lives. It is to struggle for something.

Furthermore, the evidence suggests that suicide protests emerge from a limited set of employment disputes. Eighty-one percent of the suicide protests reviewed in this study were tied to employees losing their job or the employer withholding income owed to one or a group of their employees.

It is possible to conclude that employees use suicide in protests mostly to fight for entitlements tied to their loss of employment or money they feel owed by their employers, or both. They sometimes resort to suicide when other methods of dispute resolution do not deliver results. They seldom genuinely desire to end their lives and they seldom feel helpless to the point of wishing to end their struggle.

Other forms of employee suicide frequently involve employees overwhelmed by emotion impulsively ending their lives. Some protests showed these traits too. In one incident, two women visibly overcome when they were fired without income owed them were on the verge of killing themselves with fruit knives in front of the firm's office.<sup>37</sup> Frequently, however, protesting employees weigh the benefits the publicity surrounding suicides might bring to their struggle, even setting modest objectives like "to get the employer to reply [to employee questions]" ["想廠裡給一個說法"].<sup>38</sup> This is not the mindset of someone genuinely seeking to commit suicide.

Reported motive	Number of suicide incidents	% of suicide protests*
Loss of employment OR Withheld income	22	81%
Loss of employment 70% of suicides involving loss of employment were tied to protests	14	52%
End of employment [i.e., downsizing, firing, end of fixed term employment]	6	22%
Business closure 100% of these incidents involved withheld income	4	15%
Business moving	4	15%
Withheld income 93% of suicides involving withheld income were tied to protests	13	48%

\* The figures here represent the frequency with which specific motives were mentioned in the set of 27 incidents of suicide protests; the percentages exceed 100% since there were multiple motives behind some suicides

<sup>36</sup> - 洪寧. 2017. "山東工人自殺抗議工傷不賠 家屬維權反被抓." 大紀元, September 23. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/17/9/23/n9660774.htm>).

<sup>37</sup> - 2013. "深圳兩女工持刀 "自殺" 討欠薪." 羊城晚報, January 24. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([http://chinatown.com.au/news\\_46124.html](http://chinatown.com.au/news_46124.html)).

<sup>38</sup> - 2014. "劳动纠纷引发数名员工选择跳楼事件." 市人力资源局, May 15. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://wz.timegdg.com/info.php?id=1012671>).

### 6.1.5. The struggle is collective

Employment disputes highlighted in the preceding section underline a further trait of suicide protests. The protests frequently respond to policies or business choices with consequences for groups of people, and they are seldom protests of a single employee.



The employee who filmed his suicide to protest his employer refusing to reimburse his doctors' expenses inspired protests which the police dispelled with one hundred police officers. Yet the suicide victim died by himself and never mobilized others directly.

This is not the norm for suicide protests. Only 15% of the 27 suicide protests were conducted by single employees on their own. Besides the employee who filmed himself before jumping from a building, the other lone wolf incidents included:

- One employee fighting for withheld income went to a second story window and shouted his intention to jump. One hundred of his peers stopped working to observe him till the employer offered him ¥ 4,000 they owed him. Police then put him in prison for disrupting the enterprise [“擾亂單位秩序”].<sup>39</sup>
- The chef of the dining service of one electronics supplier knifed himself in the firm's office. He survived but wished to end his life to protest the loss of dignity he felt when his superiors in the dining service assaulted him in retribution for his reporting food hygiene issues to management and police refused to prosecute the assaulters.<sup>40</sup>
- On the verge of going out of business, one electronics supplier let their employees work three months with little time off and then refused to pay

them. When employees went on strike, one person split off from the group to climb to the roof to show his willingness to jump.<sup>41</sup>

Beyond these exceptions, when suicide is used in employment protests, people do it together, often splintering off from other forms of protest. Thus, when employees use suicide in protests, they often benefit from the support of others and link their efforts to a wider struggle by their peers who support them. This distinguishes them from other suicide incidents and likely contributes to the low incidence of completed suicides in suicide protests.

## 6.2. Utilitarian suicide

The distinct and even self-interested objectives of suicide's use in protests might bring some to consider these suicides utilitarian. We believe this does not sufficiently consider the emotive element of these protests. The evidence suggests employees resort to suicide in protests when they are struggling for entitlements required by governments. When employees fight for benefits following a firm's decision to downsize or move or fight to receive income owed them for previous work, they fight for a sense of dignity and entitlement which is not reducible to simple self-interest. It is worth noting, too, the entitlements which inspire protests were defined by the government before the disputes emerge.

There is, however, evidence of a more utilitarian use of suicide. We highlight this form of employee suicide despite their limited occurrence, since the risk of utilitarian suicide introduces some complexity to discussions of the policy reforms we might propose to define entitlements for survivors of suicide [see Sections 4.4.1 to 4.4.3]. It is therefore useful to appraise the scope of this form of employee suicide.

ERI found reports of the following two incidents:

- The employee of one electronics supplier liked to

<sup>39</sup> - 2014. “讨要工资扬言跳楼 扰乱秩序受处罚。” 城北派出所西门桥社区网上警务室, November 18. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.hanchuan.gov.cn/news/20141118/n963140359.html>).

<sup>40</sup> - Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.ihome99.com/forum-530-thread-98661470829491888-1-1.html>).

<sup>41</sup> - K. H. 2015. “中天信电子员工欲跳楼讨薪 官方回应运作正常。” 博闻社, December, 21. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([https://bowenpress.com/news/bowen\\_49919.html](https://bowenpress.com/news/bowen_49919.html)).

buy things online. Due to her limited income and knowledge of household financial management, she frequently found herself with insufficient funds by the end of the month. Then on November 11th, a day when Chinese websites offer reduced prices, she found herself with only ¥ 100. So she went to her employer to request her income a month in advance. When they refused, she climbed on to the roof of the building, hoping to pressure the employer to comply.<sup>42</sup>

- One employer hired someone only to see him climb to the roof of the building before the beginning of his first shift. Once firefighters were on scene, the employee told them he expected the employer to give him ¥ 500 or he would not climb down. To resolve the incident quickly, the employer forfeited the ¥ 500 and ended the employee's employment. In the process, firefighters recognized this person from their suicide intervention the week before. Following up on firefighters' suspicions, news reporters went through photos and reported they could identify this person in multiple incidents.<sup>43</sup>

These incidents represent a genuinely utilitarian form of suicide. There is insufficient evidence to determine whether psychological issues contribute to incidents like these, though the second incident resembles simple extortion. Both were efforts to pressure employers to give benefits beyond government requirements. Yet they serve to remind us how publicity or entitlements tied to employee suicides might provoke utilitarianism. Still, utilitarian suicides represent under 2% of the suicides reviewed in this study and involved negligible sums.

### 6.3. Illness

A second, seldom seen type of suicide merits some discussion. Only one of the suicides covered by this study is explicitly linked to psychosis. The employee of one electronics supplier tried to end her life by cutting her wrists. She survived, and when questioned on her

<sup>42</sup> - 2014. “女员工因网购缺钱以跳楼威胁公司预支工资”. 腾讯网, November 12. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://news.qq.com/a/20141112/003218.htm>).

<sup>43</sup> - 匡湘鄂. 2015. “男子要跳楼 消防员发现他一周前刚“跳过.” 今日惠州网, September 12. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([http://www.huizhou.cn/news/newsc\\_counties/newsc\\_chy/201509/t20150912\\_1046169.htm](http://www.huizhou.cn/news/newsc_counties/newsc_chy/201509/t20150912_1046169.htm)).

motive, she mentioned confused thoughts [“胡思亂想”]. She continued multiple times to commit suicide until she succeeded.

Reports of her suicide mentioned the pressures of her life. What distinguishes this suicide from others in the electronics sector, however, is the victim's history of psychological illness which included multiple hospitalizations. She even explicitly referred to her condition, telling her mother her life was worthless since she could not recover from her illness [“自己的精神病治不好，活著也沒意思，不如死了算了”].<sup>44</sup>

Few employee suicides fit this mould, but it is a noteworthy type. Employers who see one of their employees commit suicide frequently deny responsibility. Employers who offer restitution to survivors sometimes even consciously describe the restitution in terms of goodwill to avoid the perception they recognize some responsibility for the suicide.

The number of suicides and the analysis of internet sources limits the conclusions possible using these sources. It is nonetheless noteworthy: The low number of suicides linked to psychosis runs counter to some employers' narrative that employee suicides reflect the extreme decisions of employees suffering from illness and not a response to stresses of the work environment.

## 6.4. Hostility on the job

Of the 89 suicides where there is explicit reference to a motivation, 17% referred to employees ending their lives following hostility they experienced in the work environment.

### 6.4.1.A triggering event

Internet sources frequently link suicide to hostility, noting that suicides follow conflicts with supervisors. In one incident, the employee scolded by her supervisor did not clock in to the shop floor the next morning and ended her life by jumping from the dormitories before

<sup>44</sup> - 邬国全, 周再奔. 2015. “江西一中年妇女与夫长期分居自杀身亡.” 人民网, September 29. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://legal.people.com.cn/n/2015/0929/c188502-27648218.html>).

lunch.<sup>45</sup> Even if other issues contribute to the suicide, the short time between a supervisor scolding someone and their suicide implies the hostility somehow triggered the employee's crisis.

Shouting is common in Chinese electronics suppliers. So the simple presence of supervisors who shout is not sufficient to define why suicides might occur in one supplier versus others. In some incidents, however, observers associate suicide more obvious, out-of-the-norm events. One electronics supplier, tied to multiple suicides, struggled to meet a shipping timeline due to problems with their equipment. The firm suffered serious losses when they did not finish the order on time. The subsequent scolding of one of the employees ended in the employee jumping from a building.<sup>46</sup>

#### 6.4.2. Signs of the wider environment

In some of these incidents, the internet offers conflicting comments on the motive. In one incident, peers suggested supervisors frequently criticized one employee, implying the history of hostility contributed to the outcome. They further pointed out the employee committed suicide around 2:00 in the morning, only one hour after supervisors criticized him again. Security personnel contested this, suggesting the employee never jumped to commit suicide but fell from the dormitories while trying to avoid detection for something he stole.<sup>47</sup>

Even with the motive of the suicide contested, however, it is noteworthy this employer is tied to multiple suicides. Supervisor hostility is one of the more consistent themes of employee discussions of these suicides. Some highlighted that the firm fines employees for sitting or talking on the job. Others commented, supervisors

were “without ethics and incompetent” [“無德無能”].<sup>48</sup> Still others referred to supervisors frequently shouting, with one person terming the firm's management “thug” management [“土匪管理”].<sup>49</sup> These comments suggest genuine and persistent tensions between employees and security personnel, and this environment does nothing to prevent suicides.

Even when it is not possible to confirm comments on the internet, the vehemence of employees' opinions is a non-negligible sign of employee perceptions. In references to one suicide, employees questioned whether security personnel “forced” [“逼死”] the victim to suicide. One internet post refers to security personnel raping employees and suggests the employer rehired the rapists when they were freed by the authorities. Other posts mention security personnel from the firm frequently hitting employees.<sup>50</sup> Others commenting on other suicides tied to this employer question why the firm permits security personnel to hit employees.<sup>51</sup>

These comments suggest tensions and hostility in the work environment beyond the suicides. This type of environment could reflect or itself contribute to more extreme forms of hostility. If this environment indeed contributes to employee suicides, we could use signs of hostile work environments to appraise the risk of suicide.

## 6.5. Suicide and overtime

### 6.5.1. Sensitizing extreme responses

One of the first things to notice in internet references to suicide is the few explicit references to long hours. Some discussions suggest long hours contributed to

<sup>45</sup> - 2015. “厚街一电子厂女工跳楼身亡。” 安丰网。 Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.anfone.net/social/DWNGZDDZC/2015-4/2648179.html>).

<sup>46</sup> - Bj. 2015. “深圳德昌电机工人跳楼身亡 家属进厂被拒。” 公民, March 13. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://xgmyd.com/archives/15015>).

<sup>47</sup> - 2009. “男子在工厂里跳楼自杀。” Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://zxb3000000.blog.163.com/blog/static/135116796200911271120137/>).

<sup>48</sup> - 2009. “12月26日凌晨东莞伟易达男子被管理员侮辱至跳楼自尽。” Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-460-50429-1.shtml>).

<sup>49</sup> - 2009. “东莞血汗工厂实录(49:寮步伟易达公司之二).” Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-460-58209-1.shtml>).

<sup>50</sup> - 2011. “伯恩光学（惠州）有限公司跳楼事件。” Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/282468436.html?qbl=related\\_question\\_1&word=%BB%DD%D6%DD%D7%F2%CD%ED%C%C%F8%C2%A5%CA%C2%BC%FE](https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/282468436.html?qbl=related_question_1&word=%BB%DD%D6%DD%D7%F2%CD%ED%C%C%F8%C2%A5%CA%C2%BC%FE)).

<sup>51</sup> - 2013. “惠阳伯恩光学跳楼事件真正原因是什么。” 百度. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/585009858.html>).

employees' stress or clouded their judgment. In one of these incidents, doctors recommended a young employee undergo a procedure costing over ¥ 1,000 to prevent possible problems with her cervix. When she ended her life, some associated her suicide with the stress of her condition or the expense of the procedure she needed. Her mother, however, who worked with her daughter, pointed a finger to overtime. Though the employer denied the long hours, the victim kept comprehensive notes of when she clocked in and out of work, and these records showed her working four or more hours of overtime on top of eight hour shifts, sometimes through the weekend.<sup>52</sup>

Two other suicides tied to overtime were not triggered by overtime itself. But when employees requested permission to resign and were denied, they committed suicide [see Section 5.9]. These incidents suggest the stress of long hours renders employees more likely to go to extremes when triggered by the stress of illness or the implied loss of one month's income.

### 6.5.2. Overtime versus time off

Excessive overtime is common in the Chinese electronics sector. So the limited number of explicit references to overtime in mentions of suicide is noteworthy. Employees' desire to maximize their income likely contributes to this tendency. Chinese employees consistently prefer to work in excess of restrictions on overtime to the point that employers who enforce tighter restrictions on hours find employee recruitment more difficult. Some employers even use restrictions on overtime to drive employees to resign, permitting them to side-step expensive bonuses the government would require if they were firing employees or downsizing.

Commonly, employees prefer long hours to maximize their income. We see this reflected in how unskilled employees frequently prefer jobs that offer higher monthly incomes over jobs offering higher hourly incomes but fewer hours. It is noteworthy, however, that employees who prefer long hours commonly want time off from time to time to fulfil family duties, to recover

<sup>52</sup> - 李平, 杨小旻 and 刘媚. 2010. "17岁女工跳楼身亡 自杀前曾去诊所看病." 广东打工网, August 20. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([http://gddgw.com/shownews.asp?news\\_id=5089](http://gddgw.com/shownews.asp?news_id=5089)).

from illness or simply to rest. And employees frequently refer to the difficulty of getting permission for time off when they discuss employment conditions.

In the context of long hours, managing requests for time off is a point of tension. Employees who do not get permission for time off sometimes simply do not show up for work. And with employees routinely working long hours for extended periods of time, the number of employees who might skip work poses some risk to production. This is why Chinese electronics employers frequently institute rules and fines to incentivize employees to seek permission for time off.

A further point of context, most Chinese electronics suppliers consider overtime mandatory. So most requests for time off represent a request to work less overtime, not a request to work under forty hours per week. This context is needed to interpret the references to working hours we find in internet references to employee suicide.

### 6.5.3. Requests for time off denied

Stories of employee suicide linked to requests for time off resemble the following: One electronics supplier struggles to keep enough people in production before Chinese New Year. To cope with this, they restrict the number of employees they give "permission" to resign and fine employees who resign without permission. Refused her request for time off, one employee got into an argument with her supervisor and then jumped from a building.<sup>53</sup> In a second incident, the employee requested time off to visit family. Rushing to finish orders, the employer refused to give her permission to resign. Feeling despondent, the employee committed suicide before she had finished one month of employment with the firm.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> - 2012. "东莞石碣镇 台达电子 不出两月两名女工跳楼让人深思!" 新浪博客, December 22. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog\\_5f83feb40100vh76.html](http://blog.sina.com.cn/s/blog_5f83feb40100vh76.html)).

<sup>54</sup> - Tsukayama, Hayley. 2012. "Worker commits suicide at Apple supplier Foxlink, report says." The Washington Post, October 11. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/worker-commits-suicide-at-apple-supplier-foxlink-report-says/2012/10/11/66d3c2d8-13ce-11e2-be82-c3411b7680a9\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.731b14b4c57c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/technology/worker-commits-suicide-at-apple-supplier-foxlink-report-says/2012/10/11/66d3c2d8-13ce-11e2-be82-c3411b7680a9_story.html?utm_term=.731b14b4c57c)).

In other incidents, requests for time off get denied and set off a longer series of events which end in suicide. In one incident, when supervisors did not give her time off, one employee did not show up to work. When she returned to work, supervisors shouted and insulted her, and the employer decided to fire her while fining her which prompted her to commit suicide.<sup>55</sup> More recently, one employee struggling to get permission for time off convinced her employer to give her three days off. Under pressure on the production line, however, her supervisor telephoned her to return to work sooner. People with knowledge of the incident then report, someone from management said something to the employee when she returned to work. Upset, she rushed off the line before the end of her shift, returned to the dormitories and committed suicide.<sup>56</sup>

Noteworthy tendencies emerge from these sources: Suicides linked to denied requests for time off frequently intersect with other issues. The tension between production schedules and employees' desire for leisure and rest contribute to hostility from supervisors. Fines and firings connected to employees missing work contribute to insecurities which might intensify employees' sense of crisis. However connected to other issues though, denied requests for time off seem to trigger the crisis of some suicides.

## 6.6. The question of work pressure

Seven percent of the suicides where internet sources suggest the motive include references to "work pressure". This term could refer to hostility in the work environment, long hours or something else, but the term is frequently used in internet sources without more explicit comment. In one incident, survivors mention their loved one discussing the pressure they felt on the job before committing suicide despite having submitted

<sup>55</sup> - 刘辉龙. 2013. "辞职遭拒绝男子跳楼亡 工厂与富士康关系紧密." 搜狐, February 1. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://news.focus.cn/dg/2013-02-01/2828436.html>).

<sup>56</sup> - 2017. "震惊! 网曝紫阳一花季少女在广州工厂坠楼身亡!" 天涯社区. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://bbs.tianya.cn/post-free-5712466-1.shtml>).

a request to resign.<sup>57</sup> Without further evidence, it is impossible to determine the degree to which these incidents intersect with hostility, long hours or whether they reflect distinct concerns about work intensity or something else.

## 6.7. Dating and marriage

Employee suicides where internet references explicitly link the motive to the victim's difficulties with dating or marriage show some trends. First and foremost, differences emerge between the incidents involving women and men.

### 6.7.1. Hurt women, lonely men and violent men

Though police never confirmed the motive, people suspected one electronics employee jumped from the dormitory where she lived following arguments with her boyfriend.<sup>58</sup> Other incidents include a woman who was dating the supervisor of the electronics firm where she worked when she discovered he was married. Before jumping from the dormitory, she shouted allegations of the supervisor raping her.<sup>59</sup> One employee ended her life when her spouse scorned her efforts to reconcile and refused even to see her.<sup>60</sup>

A theme of these incidents is women committing suicide over conflicts they experienced with men they were either together with or who left them. This theme might not be obvious from so few incidents, but it is more visible when next to employee suicides by men.

In one incident, two men poisoned themselves in

<sup>57</sup> - 2012. "离职前一日 小伙厂内坠楼." 搜狐, June 8. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://roll.sohu.com/20120608/n345034181.shtml>).

<sup>58</sup> - 2016. "女子穿睡衣跳下身亡图、穿睡衣的好处的大盘点." 看看网, September 2. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.168kk.com/fashion/2016/0902/350864.html>).

<sup>59</sup> - 张朋杰. 2007. "痴情打工妹寻情郎未果跳楼身亡." 温州网, January 8. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://news.66wz.com/system/2007/01/08/100239539.shtml>).

<sup>60</sup> - 2014. "一痴情女在乐清虹桥大明电子公司跳楼自杀?" 乐清城市网, August 17. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://bbs.21yq.com/forum.php?mod=viewthread&tid=868655>).

the dormitories, depressed when they could not find girlfriends on the internet.<sup>61</sup> Theirs was a suicide of loneliness, distinct from the experience of women left by former boyfriends or spouses.

Incidents involving men, however, were more frequently violent, involving murder and suicide. In one incident, a married man pursued an affair with a peer in the electronics firm where they worked. She rejected him, and when she announced her decision to get married with another man, he killed her with a knife and then committed suicide by jumping from a building.<sup>62</sup> In a second incident, a man rejected by his girlfriend killed her and then jumped to end his own life.<sup>63</sup> This series of events is seen in other incidents as well.<sup>64</sup>

### 6.7.2. The question of employment conditions

The number of suicides included in this study is limited, so the typology presented here is not comprehensive enough to include the full diversity of employee suicides. For one thing, violence is not limited to men. The cook of one electronics firm killed one of the women she worked with over income differences and then returned to work. When police went looking for the victim, the murderer's spouse poisoned himself, writing a suicide note to try to free his wife from responsibility for the murder she committed.<sup>65</sup>

The incident not only highlights extremes, but highlights how employment conditions might contribute to events like these. Murderers should shoulder responsibility for their violence. It is still worth noting, however, the

incident stemmed from tensions linked to income differences in the firm, which echoes other findings of this study [see Section 6.3.2]. The murderer and victim were both cooks, working in the kitchen side by side. The employer, however, showed preference for the victim, frequently sending her to buy groceries. With this duty, the victim received hundreds of yuan more per month in income. Witnesses testified that the murderer's conflict with the victim stemmed from their frequent fights over the income differences tied to this division of duties.

This is a reminder of the power of employment conditions to intensify or lessen tensions on the shop floor. Even where it only concerns difficulties dating or maintaining a marriage, we should consider the possibility that employment decisions concerning gender, housing and marriage or other policies might influence the risk and frequency of suicide and other violence. Employers' discrimination against one or the other gender could contribute to dating difficulties by skewing the gender proportions of the workforce. Employers who subsidize dormitories while refusing to consider more flexible housing options will pressure couples to live apart, possibly undermining their longer term commitments. Policies to promote short-term employment contribute to employees' anonymity and short-term thinking which undermines the possibility of employees building longer term friendships.

## 6.8. Economic pressure

### 6.8.1. Loss of employment

Economic pressure is explicitly referenced in the motive of some employee suicides. More frequently, in 22% of employee suicides where there is some mention of motive, economic pressure is implicit in the form of employees losing their jobs.

Unemployment is known to contribute to the risk of suicide. Studies confirm this in both non-Chinese<sup>66</sup> and

<sup>61</sup> - 王晓易. 2010. “3名农民工二代相约集体自杀.” 网易, May 21. Retrieved May 8, 2018. ([http://news.163.com/10/0521/11/6771C42U000146BD\\_2.html](http://news.163.com/10/0521/11/6771C42U000146BD_2.html)).

<sup>62</sup> - 2014. “宿迁男子追女孩未果将其刺死 自己跳楼身亡.” 新浪江苏, April 9. Retrieved May 8, 2018. (<http://jiangsu.sina.com.cn/news/b/2014-04-09/100597531.html>).

<sup>63</sup> - 陈乐伟, 刘颖. 2015. “男子捅死19岁女友后跳楼.” 腾讯网, January 2. Retrieved May 8, 2018. (<http://new.qq.com/cmsn/20150102/20150102002481>).

<sup>64</sup> - 2014. “宿迁男子追女孩未果将其刺死 自己跳楼身亡.” 新浪江苏, April 9. Retrieved May 8, 2018. (<http://jiangsu.sina.com.cn/news/b/2014-04-09/100597531.html>).

<sup>65</sup> - 2016. “女子杀人抛尸后正常上班 丈夫留遗书自杀揽罪责.” 今日悉尼. Retrieved May 8, 2018. (<https://www.sydneytoday.com/content-1138522>).

<sup>66</sup> - Blakely, T. A., Collings, S. C. D. & J. Atkinson. 2003. “Unemployment and suicide. Evidence for a causal association?” *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 57: 594-600.



ethnic Chinese<sup>67</sup> groups. Some suggest unemployment contributes to depression which then provokes suicide, while others note that unemployment is linked to a higher risk of suicide independent of depression levels.<sup>68</sup>

It is worth noting, however, in the Chinese context, a surprising 72% of suicide incidents where employees lost or risked losing their jobs were tied to the use of suicide in protests, and few if any of these protests ended in someone dying. This highlights the difficulty of judging when the loss of a job is sufficient to drive employees to end their lives. Some of these incidents might reflect less a tendency to depression and more employee struggles for entitlements tied to their unemployment.

This tendency is possibly specific to the Chinese context where mobility is the norm. The Chinese electronics sector relies on Chinese citizens who move between provinces to find employment. Frequently, Chinese electronics employees return to the countryside of their home province for Spring festivities, and then seek new jobs when they return to the cities. In this environment where employees expect to move and employers frequently need to recruit new people to fill empty positions, employees might find the loss of employment less stressful.

### 6.8.2. Injuries, fines and employers' responsibilities

In some reported incidents, economic pressure and its link to suicide is more explicit. Not surprisingly, some employees commit suicide despondent over debts. Sometimes there is evidence of the employer's contribution to the crisis which triggered the suicide. This is most obvious when the debt stems from expenses employees incurred from injuries they suffered on the job.

The protest section [see Section 5.1.3] mentions one

<sup>67</sup> - Chen, H. et al. 2006. "Suicide in Hong Kong: a case control psychological autopsy study" *Psychological Medicine* 36(6): 815-825.

<sup>68</sup> - Chen, H. et al. 2006. "Suicide in Hong Kong: a case control psychological autopsy study" *Psychological Medicine* 36(6): 815-825.

employee who committed suicide when his employer denied him reimbursement for expenses he incurred in connection with work injuries.<sup>69</sup> The Chinese courts awarded a second employee who ended her life a settlement of over ¥ 20,000 to cover expenses tied to her injuries on the job. But the employer refused to respect the settlement and fired her, justifying the decision with the end of her fixed term of employment.<sup>70</sup>

The previous section on hostility [see Section 5.4.1] refers to one incident where the employee committed suicide when the employer held him responsible for economic losses they suffered when they did not get shipments out on time.<sup>71</sup> The events described on the internet give no specifics. Yet experience suggests that when the firm held the employee "responsible" for their losses, they expected to deduct some portion of the employee's income to offset their losses. Thus, economic pressure combined with the hostility likely triggered this employee's suicide.

One incident crosses the line between owners and employees. The entrepreneur involved hoped to borrow money to invest in new business, but he needed a registered resident of the region to sign a guarantee for the money. He convinced his driver to sign for the money, but the business went sour, and the owner fled. The driver then found himself fending off debtors intruding into his home, following him everywhere to pressure him to collect millions of yuan. Feeling there were no options left to him ["我也沒辦法，只有死！"], he committed suicide.<sup>72</sup>

### 6.8.3. Suicides with no connection to employment

<sup>69</sup> - 洪寧. 2017. "山東工人自殺抗議工傷不賠 家屬維權反被抓." *大纪元*, September 23. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.epochtimes.com/b5/17/9/23/n9660774.htm>).

<sup>70</sup> - 王伟, 赵学民. 2016. "受伤被辞女工想不开自杀." *中山日报*, May 12. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.zsnews.cn/news/2016/05/12/2861190.shtml>).

<sup>71</sup> - 2015. "深圳德昌电机工人跳楼身亡 家属进厂被拒." *公民*, March 13. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://xgmyd.com/archives/15015>).

<sup>72</sup> - 劉子珩. 2016. "河南男子欠款70萬自殺 當地民間借貸野蠻生長." *新华网*, August 15. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<https://kknews.cc/zh-hk/society/nkjqa3.html>).

In other incidents, it is more obvious the employer holds no responsibility for employee suicides. This includes the employee of one firm's R and D center who committed suicide when he lost money he invested in stocks.<sup>73</sup> Elsewhere, a university student could not stop himself from betting. Stuck in a cycle of addiction, he used the identities of over 20 of his fellow students to borrow close to ¥ 600,000. He found a job in the electronics sector over the winter to try to pay off the interest on his debt. When he could not, he committed suicide.<sup>74</sup>

#### 6.8.4. Economic pressure and the question of dignity

Incidents where economic pressure contributes to suicides sometimes do not involve extreme sums. In one previously mentioned suicide [see Section 5.5.1], someone committed suicide stressed by the need for a doctor's intervention costing ¥ 1,000. Even if long hours contributed to the suicide, it is worth noting even modest expenses sometimes push employees over the edge to crisis. When her doctor discussed her condition with her, he questioned her concerning her sex life, questions to which she replied awkwardly.<sup>75</sup> So it is possible the emotions she felt were not limited to the issue of how much the doctor's intervention might cost. One of the protests reviewed in this study more explicitly suggests employees might consider suicide when economic pressure is combined with deeper questions of dignity and self-respect. In this incident, the employer discovered goods were missing from their storehouse. They decided to cover their losses by fining storehouse employees the cost of the missing goods. This prompted four storehouse employees to climb

<sup>73</sup> - 2008. “华为员工跳楼自杀事件调查.” 中国劳工通讯, March 2. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.clb.org.hk/schi/content/%E5%8D%8E%E4%B8%BA%E5%91%98%E5%B7%A5%E8%B7%B3%E6%A5%BC%E8%87%AA%E6%9D%80%E4%BA%8B%E4%BB%B6%E8%B0%83%E6%9F%A5>).

<sup>74</sup> - 2016. “因赌球借‘校园贷’60多万 河南大学生欠巨债跳楼亡.” 中国新闻网, March 20. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.hi.chinanews.com.cn/hnnew/2016-03-20/410115.html>).

<sup>75</sup> - 李平, 杨小旻 and 刘媚. 2010. “17岁女工跳楼身亡 自杀前曾去诊所看病.” 广东打工网, August 20. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([http://gdgdw.com/shownews.asp?news\\_id=5089](http://gdgdw.com/shownews.asp?news_id=5089)).

the building and consider jumping to protest the fine of ¥ 500 per person. At the time, the fine represented only one fourth of their monthly income. And when he described the motive of the suicide protest to reporters, one of the employees highlighted his concern for dignity when he suggested the protesting employees might lose the respect of their peers if they conceded to the fine [“在同事面前抬不起頭”].<sup>76</sup>

## 6.9. Requests to resign

If some employees find the loss of employment stressful, others commit suicide in response to restrictions on their freedom to resign. In this study, internet sources included only four suicides, 5% of references to suicide motives, where employees' difficulties resigning were linked to their suicide. In these incidents, employers did not prevent employees from walking away from the premises. They simply refused to give employees income owed to them for previous work, sometimes justifying this decision with the use of fines.

In the Chinese electronics sector, most employers do not require security deposits from employees. So most of the time, employees who walk away without “permission” lose approximately one month's income. Some employers lengthen the income period to withhold more money from employees who resign without their blessing to better influence the timing and number of employees who quit, but the money involved in these incidents is still limited. In this sense, when Chinese electronics suppliers refuse to give employees “permission” to resign, their influence is limited. Employees frequently resign despite the pressure to forfeit one month's income.

Still, suicides involving requests to resign represent their own type, distinct from other forms of economic pressure. When employers refuse to give employees permission to resign, they undermine employees' sense of control over their own lives. This could intensify the mix of emotions tied to thoughts of suicide and could drive employee suicide independently of economic pressures. In one reported incident, when students

<sup>76</sup> - 2012. “四名仓管员上演跳楼秀’跳楼秀’ ”.) 凤凰网, March 9. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([http://news.ifeng.com/gundong/detail\\_2012\\_03/09/13081674\\_0.shtml](http://news.ifeng.com/gundong/detail_2012_03/09/13081674_0.shtml)).

forced to complete internships in electronics firms reported thoughts of suicide, they were not stressed by their limited income but responding more to the restrictions on their freedom and choice.<sup>77</sup>

We see the mix of elements contributing to suicide in the few incidents of this sort mentioned on the internet. In one incident, the employee requested time off to rest from long hours of overtime which frequently included working through the night. Denied time off, the employee decided to resign from his job. The employer refused to give permission, which led to conflict between the employee and supervisor. The following morning, the employee jumped from his dormitory.<sup>78</sup>

There is less information concerning the second incident where the employee is suspected of committing suicide when he did not get permission to resign. It is worth noting, however, employees of the firm mention gruelling schedules of 11 hours a day with a day off only once per month.<sup>79</sup>

In a more serious incident, the employer enticed new hires with promises of monthly incomes of over ¥ 3,000. Once on the job, employees discovered the firm's crushing system of fines which kept employees' income to only ¥ 1,000 per month despite long hours. In response, three women, including one employee who joined the firm two months before she turned 16 years old, submitted their request to resign. The firm refused, and in the ensuing dispute, suggested they were going to fine the women. In protest, one of the women turned off the electricity to the production line, a dispute which ended with the employer announcing their intention to fine the employee ¥ 400. This provoked a fight between the employees and the assistant director, with one of the women getting thrown into a wall. The next morning,

the three women climbed to the top of the building and spent hours there, set to jump, before police convinced them to come down.<sup>80</sup>

Though the incidents cited here do not offer sufficient evidence for strong conclusions, they suggest that some employees, often tired from excessive overtime, request time off or seek to resign. When their request for rest or freedom is denied, they consider suicide, stressed beyond the concern they will lose one month's income by walking away without "permission".

## 6.10. The simplified typology

With the preceding analysis, we simplify the typology of employee suicides to highlight the most prominent types of employee suicide and their key elements:

### Protests

The use of suicide in protests seldom ends in completed suicides. Most of the time, these protests involve groups of employees trying to use publicity to pressure employers to respect their rights in disputes where employers either withhold employees' income or employees lose their jobs.

### Hostility

Employees sometimes commit suicide when supervisors scold them or otherwise disrespect them. Sometimes hostility is the trigger for suicide. Sometimes it is linked to a wider sequence of events, possibly involving disputes over productivity, fines, time off or employees' requests to resign. Some evidence suggests the hostility behind some suicides is linked to tensions between supervisors and the wider workforce.

### Forced overtime

Overtime is seldom explicitly mentioned in suicide motives. Evidence nonetheless suggests long hours render employees more susceptible to extreme decisions under pressure and could contribute to employees feeling overwhelmed when employers refuse them permission to

<sup>77</sup> - Cai Yiwen. 2018. "Students Fight Back Against Forced Factory Labor." Sixth tone, January 25. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.sixthtone.com/news/1001615/students-fight-back-against-forced-factory-labor>).

<sup>78</sup> - 2013. "辞职遭拒绝男子跳楼亡 工厂与富士康关系紧密." 搜狐, February 1. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://news.focus.cn/dg/2013-02-01/2828436.html>).

<sup>79</sup> - 2013. "蘋果大陸供應商涉剝削工人." 自由亚洲电台, November 28. Retrieved May 8, 2018 ([https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/worker-11282013100508.html/story\\_main?encoding=traditional](https://www.rfa.org/cantonese/news/worker-11282013100508.html/story_main?encoding=traditional)).

<sup>80</sup> - 2011. "黄江镇振翔电子厂蓄意侵吞工人工资, 3女工辞工无果跳楼." 红石头论坛, April 14. Retrieved May 8, 2018 (<http://www.hst1966.net/showtopic.aspx?forumid=5&forumpage=1&topicid=2849&go=prev>).

resign. More frequently, employees commit suicide when employers deny their requests for time off.

**Work pressure**

A non-negligible number of employee suicides refer to work pressures, but these references include little context to define the source of pressure. So existing evidence is not sufficient to determine whether employees committing suicide use the term to refer to hostility, overtime, work intensity or something else.

**Dating and marriage**

Some suicides intersect with difficulties employees encounter in dating and marriage. Signs of gendered differences emerge in the review of these suicides. Women were more likely to commit suicide when they encountered difficulties with men they were involved with. Men were more likely to kill a woman they were interested in and then commit suicide themselves. Employment conditions influence some of the more extreme incidents, though the influence is less direct.

**Economic pressure**

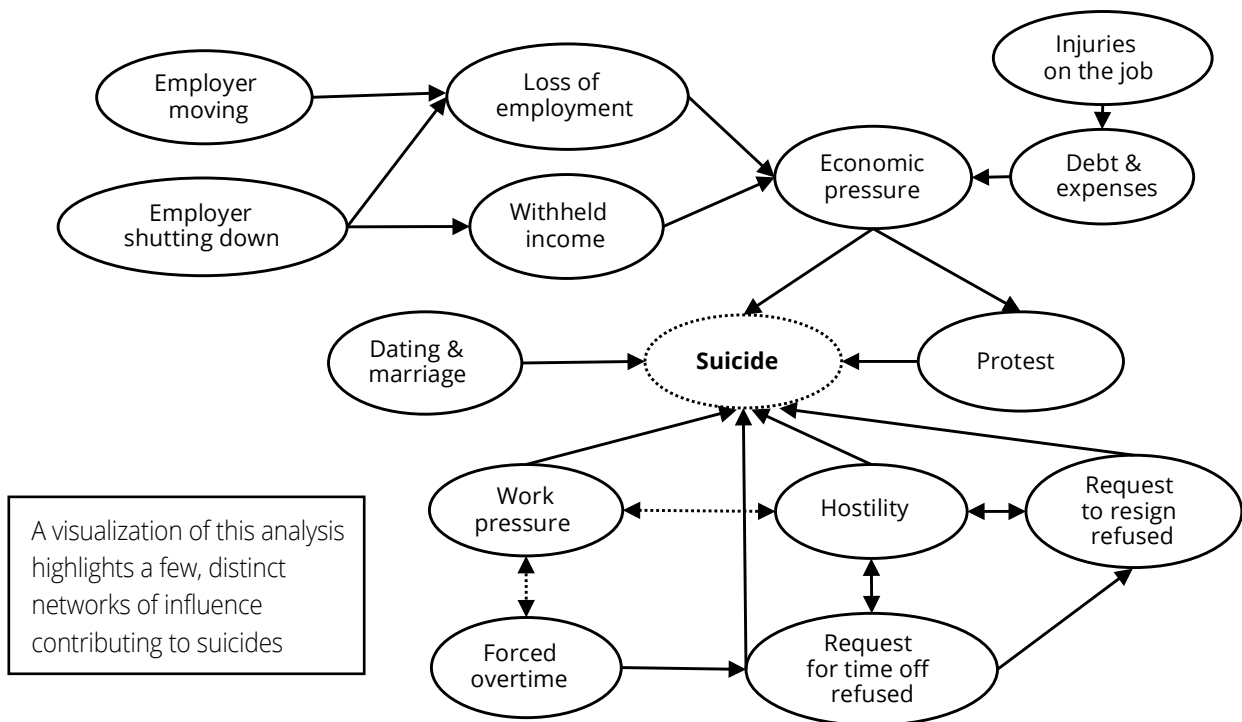
Most prominently, employees dismissed or expecting to lose their jobs sometimes consider suicide. However, in the Chinese context where job mobility is the norm, most of these incidents involve employees using suicide in protests to recover withheld income or other entitlements. Beyond this, injured employees sometimes commit suicide when they feel overwhelmed

by employers' refusing to reimburse them for expenses they incurred from job injuries. Some employees commit suicide under the pressure of more serious debts unconnected from their employment. Others consider suicide, triggered by modest expenses or fines when the money is tied to their dignity or other emotions.

**Freedom to resign**

When employers refuse employees permission to resign, they likely undermine employees' sense of control which contributes to some employees responding with the extreme of suicide even when, most of the time, the only method employers use to prevent employees from walking away is withholding one month's worth of their income. It is this emotive element which distinguishes these suicides from other forms of economic pressure.

Multiple issues intersect with economic pressure, contributing to suicides or the use of suicides in protest. Suicides tied to employees' difficulties with dating and marriage represent a distinct trigger for suicide, independent of others, though less is known of these incidents. Likewise, work pressure is a less well known conduit to suicide, though we hypothesize links to hostility and overtime. Overtime, requests for time off, requests to resign and hostility form their own, distinct network of influences on suicide, with suicide incidents in this network frequently involving multiple influences.



# 7. Seeking precision in the link to employment conditions

## 7.1. Note on the methodology

### 7.1.1. The survey

The previous sections use internet sources to identify and analyze the hidden trend of suicides in the Chinese electronics sector outside of Supplier F. These sources offer useful perspective on the types of suicide which commonly occur. However, censorship influences which suicides come to public light. Even the best internet sources discuss suicides with limited depth, and the credibility of some internet sources is open to question. So even though internet sources link suicide to employment conditions, we need to extend our view of the issue beyond internet sources to explore these links convincingly.

This section now shifts methodology. One of ERI's services is to conduct on-site surveys of employment conditions. Despite some minor differences, the content of the surveys is mostly consistent, which is useful to identify differences between suppliers. ERI commonly selects over 100 employees per supplier to conduct the survey, choosing them from the full employee list provided by suppliers to ensure they represent employees of the firm under review. We conduct these surveys in conjunction with more open-ended discussions with employees and management which helps verify the survey results.

It is worth noting, the suppliers included in this survey were not a random selection of electronics suppliers in mainland China. Multiple and sometimes competing incentives might influence which suppliers will work with ERI to conduct this type of survey. So it is not our intention to suggest that the results here "represent" the Chinese electronics sector in the sense that, if we find 22% of surveyed suppliers experienced employee suicides, this is sufficient to conclude that 22% of all Chinese electronics suppliers experience employee suicides.

Nonetheless, the surveys were designed to explore employee perceptions of employment conditions. Everything we know of the issues which might influence surveys of this kind suggests that, if anything, the selection of suppliers will be skewed to over-represent suppliers with better employment conditions. Suppliers with more serious problems exert themselves to hide problems and would likely never consent to independent surveys of their employees. Secondly, when ERI conducted the surveys, no one involved envisioned the findings on suicide. The electronics firms that invited ERI to survey their suppliers were not conscious of the issue, something ERI verified when presenting survey findings to them. ERI's sensitivity to the issue of suicide only emerged over time in response to the repetition of unexpected findings. Even suppliers were unlikely to expect the survey to uncover incidents of suicide and even less likely to think suicide would become the subject of study. In this sense, we feel confident the selection of suppliers for the survey does not independently over or under-select suppliers where suicides were known to occur.

To the point, ERI did not design these surveys to study suicide. However, one of the survey's questions requests employees to note whether they ever experienced or witnessed some kind of accident in the firm. It is through this question that ERI discovered 14 out of 64 electronics suppliers we surveyed, 22%, reported suicides. To better ensure the soundness of the results, ERI selected the 2015 to 2017 survey results of 44 of the 64 electronics suppliers, including 11 reported suicides, for deeper analysis. The surveys we left out were either:

- Older surveys, so including them would add needless complexity to the analysis since we would need to consider the possible influence of time on the results.
- Surveys we were confident, through multiple levels of analysis, did not reflect employees' honest views

of the employer.

- Surveys which were missing key questions we wished to include in the following analysis.

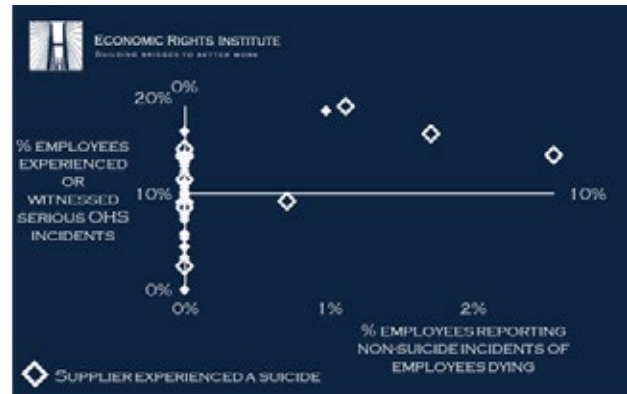
The surveys were not designed with suicide in mind, so even where survey replies mentioned suicides, they offered little to no context for these incidents. Still, the consistent methodology did identify suicides in some suppliers and provided rich data on employment conditions. This offers the unique opportunity to identify differences between suppliers where employees committed suicide and suppliers where no one did. The results confirm some of the hypotheses derived from the review of internet sources. They offer insight on some issues, but they likewise raise new questions we hope will guide future efforts.

## 7.2. Setting the context

### 7.2.1. Suicide through the lens of occupational safety and health systems

One of the survey's noteworthy findings is the intersection of suicide with wider occupational safety and health (OSH) systems. Of the nine suppliers where over 14% of surveyed employees reported either experiencing themselves or witnessing serious OSH incidents, seven experienced suicides.

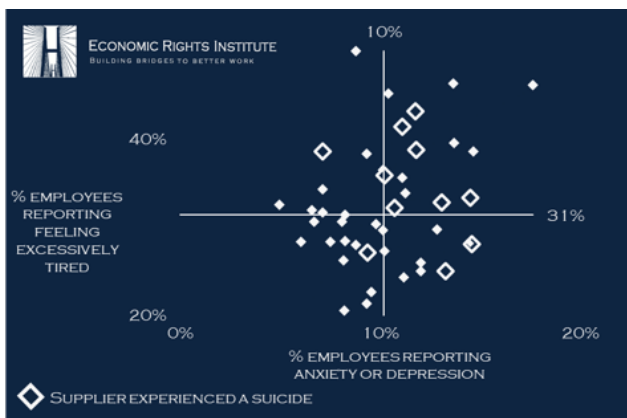
There were likewise five suppliers where employees died from non-suicide incidents. These included diverse events like employees dying on the job, shipment trucks running into people in the street and employees dying of excessive drinking in the dormitories. Still, employees from four of the five suppliers where employees died from incidents disconnected from suicide independently reported employees committing suicide. This is not enough evidence to suggest why suicide seems linked to signs of less effective OSH systems. It is nonetheless suggestive that employment conditions and employers' choices contribute to lower or higher risks of suicide.



### 7.2.2. The wider phenomenon of depression

Suicide is extreme, and few people ever commit suicide. So people tend to consider suicide something outside the norm. The mindset of the person committing suicide distinguishes itself by the extremity of the choice. If few people ever choose suicide, there is a tendency to presume people committing suicide were influenced by something outside of most people's experience. Some might highlight how people who commit suicide experienced either uncommon or extreme stress in their life. Others might suggest people who committed suicide were more susceptible to common stresses other people cope with without incident.

One of the findings of this study is that nine out of 11 suicides occurred in the 50% of suppliers where 10% or more of the workforce self-reported anxiety or depression. This finding shows that the incidence of suicides is linked to influences common to the wider workforce.



### 7.2.3. The counter-intuitive trends of overtime

The figure of the preceding section is noteworthy for showing eight out of 11 suicides occurred in the 50% of suppliers where employees were more likely to feel excessively tired. Long hours is not the only thing which might result in employees' feeling tired. In the electronics sector, employers require some employees to spend long hours on their feet to improve their short-term productivity. Employees tend to resign from these positions before the longer term effects of being on one's feet for long hours reduces productivity. Employers and employees both recognize that people find working on their feet difficult and tiring. Other forms of exertion or repetitive movements could contribute to employees feeling tired too.

To distinguish the effects of overtime from other forms of exertion, we might consider how long employees spend on the job. However, this seemingly simple method is difficult in the context of Chinese employment conditions. When Chinese employees discuss their incomes, they commonly use references to gross monthly income. With this in mind, employers refer to gross monthly incomes to recruit new employees or keep more senior employees on the job. Employers find the concept of gross monthly income less sensitive too since it is not possible to determine whether the employer meets minimum income requirements if we only know employees' gross income. This is why employers hiding income levels below minimum requirements will give employees written receipts of gross income but resist putting the number of hours worked in writing. The number of hours employees work is even more sensitive since it directly identifies whether the employer meets overtime requirements.

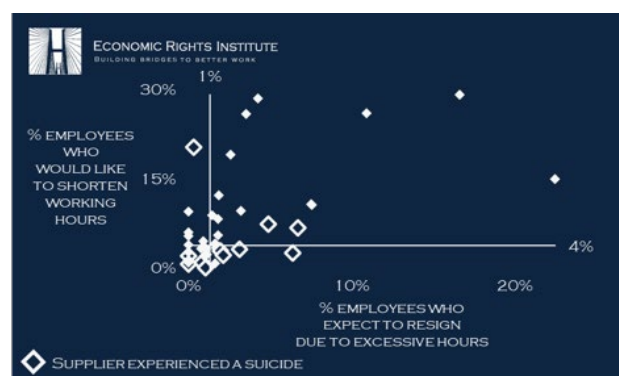
Employers nervous of the possible consequences of others knowing they do not meet requirements on employees' income or hours sometimes consciously instruct employees not to honestly report their hours. Even without employers' intervention, employees know the sensitivity of overtime, and this is enough to prompt some not to report their hours honestly. This produces "noise" in the replies to surveys designed to explicitly identify the hours employees work per week.

To sidestep this problem, we explore overtime less

directly. The ERI survey poses the more modest question, whether employees like their existing hours or would prefer more or fewer hours. Secondly, the survey's question on employees' likelihood to resign is designed to verify whether employees might resign over the issue of excessive hours. These questions do not directly identify the hours employees work. They identify when employees subjectively consider their hours excessive.

We should expect inconsistencies between employees' subjective judgment of their hours and, objectively, the number of hours they work. However, this method is likely better suited to study the risk of suicide. Well rested employees might not resist 70 hour workweeks but then consider even 60 hours too much when they become stressed or depressed. For the purposes of judging who is more likely to commit suicide, it is more useful to identify employees' subjective mindset; less useful to know the objective number of hours.

The first thing to notice from the figure below is the low proportion of employees who express concern for long hours. For 50% of suppliers, 1% or fewer employees disliked their existing hours to the point of wishing to resign. Likewise, in 50% of suppliers, 4% or fewer employees expressed the preference for shorter hours. The figure likewise suggests that for the surveyed suppliers, suicide is disconnected from overtime. Suicides were evenly distributed between suppliers with fewer or more employees suggesting they might resign over the issue of overtime. And surprisingly, the risk of suicide is lower for suppliers where more employees express the preference for shorter hours.

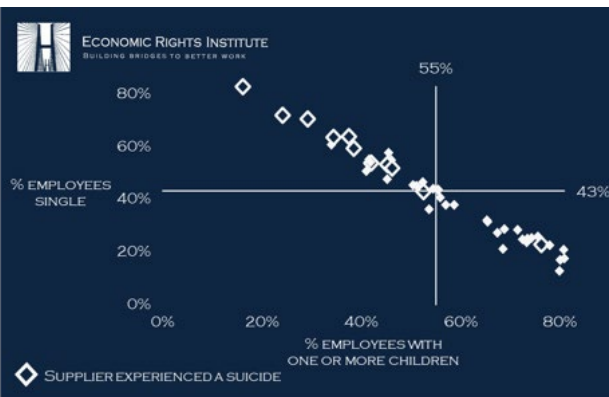


We need to keep in mind the limits of this methodology to interpret this finding. The evidence here suggests no link between overtime and the risk of suicide.

However, internet sources offered more incidents of suicide for study, and only 3% of those referred to overtime in discussion of the suicide motive. If this reflects the genuinely lower incidence of suicides tied to overtime, then it is quite possible the survey does not include suicides of this type. The survey, after all, includes only 11 suicides and is therefore likely to miss less common suicides. These findings nonetheless underline how understudied employee suicide is. Even in countries where concern for employee suicide moved the government to set guidelines to determine when employers might be considered responsible for suicides, the tendency is to focus on long hours, to the neglect of other elements of the work environment likely to contribute to suicide.<sup>81</sup>

**7.2.4. Youth and friendship**

It is worth noting, ten out of 11 suicides in the pool of 44 suppliers occurred in the 50% of suppliers where more of the workforce were single and without children. Possibly more striking, every one of the five suppliers with the highest proportion of single employees experienced one of their employees committing suicide.



It is difficult to interpret these results. They possibly point to the susceptibility of youth to the pressures contributing to suicide. They possibly suggest some of the suicides were linked to the dating dramas of single employees. Possibly supporting this thesis, a surprising finding shown below is that suicides were more frequent in suppliers where employees were more likely to find

<sup>81</sup> - Jobin, Paul and Tseng Yuhwei. 2014. “Le suicide comme karoshi ou l’ overdose de travail: Les suicides liés au travail au Japon, à Taiwan et en Chine” *Travailler*, 1(31): 45-88.

friends within the workforce. This is counter-intuitive in the sense that we might expect the support of friends softens the effects of depression to lower the risk of suicide.



When we distinguish between employees with friends in the workforce and those without, we see that friendship does offer some protection against anxiety and depression. Only 9% of employees with friends in the workforce report these symptoms, while 14% of those without friends do. Six of 11 suicides, however, occurred in suppliers where both employees with friends in the workforce and those without were more likely to report anxiety and depression.



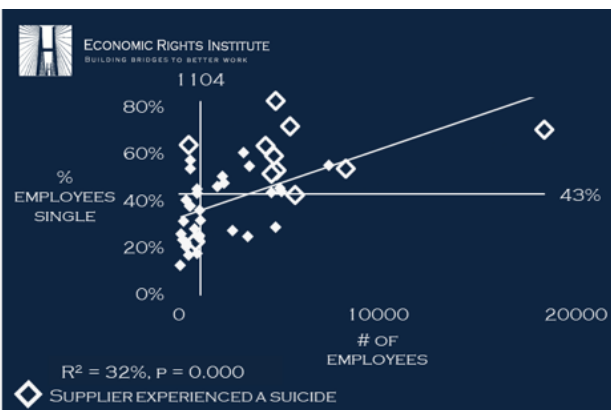
**7.2.5. The question of size**

The biggest site surveyed employed approximately 20,000 people. Nonetheless, the survey shows suppliers who employed more people were more likely to experience suicides. Nine out of 11 suicides occurred in the 14 suppliers with over 4,000 employees.

The survey did not provide sufficient findings to better



interpret the influence of supplier size on the risk of suicide. The figure below is worth highlighting, however. Suppliers who employ more people hire younger, more often single employees [ $R^2 = 32\%$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ]. Some studies suggest the risk of suicide is higher for Chinese youth under 24 years old.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, young people show more signs of susceptibility to the Werther effect, whereby exposure to one suicide incident contributes to the likelihood others will commit suicide.<sup>83</sup> To the extent bigger suppliers employ younger people, this could heighten their risk of suicide independent of the effects of the number of employees on the likelihood suppliers will see one of their employees commit suicide.



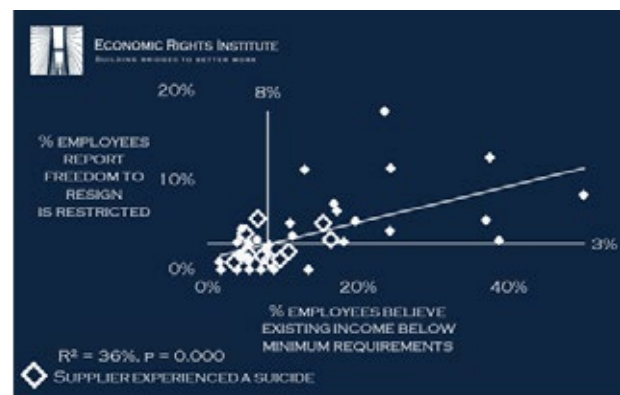
### 7.2.6. Where income is concerned, subjectivity counts

Discussions of employee suicides in the Chinese electronics sector frequently suggest links between suicide and low income. Efforts by Supplier F to stem the 2010 string of suicides centered not exclusively but prominently on the question of income. Some thought this, by itself, could lower the risk of suicide. Others suggested higher income could give employees the flexibility to refuse more overtime. By working fewer hours, employees could spend more time developing support networks of family and friends, thus lowering the risk of suicide.

<sup>82</sup> - Wang, Zhenkun et al. 2016. "Temporal Trends of Suicide Mortality in Mainland China: Results from the Age-Period-Cohort Framework," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 13(8): 784.

<sup>83</sup> - Davidson, L. E. 1989 "Suicide cluster and youth." Pp. 83-99 in *Suicide among youth*, edited by C. R. Pfeffer. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press.

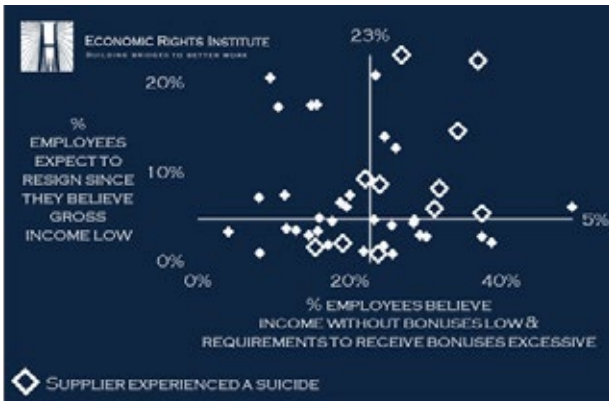
We highlight here the complexities of the issue. The figure below confirms the link we expect between low incomes and restrictions on freedom of employment. When more employees suspect their income is below the minimum required by the government, more employees report the employer uses security deposits or other methods to prevent employees from freely resigning [ $R^2 = 36\%$ ]. This is not surprising in the sense that employers offering lower incomes likely struggle with employee retention. And when this pressure is not resolved by offering incentives to keep employees on the job, employers will more likely resort to coercion to reduce the effects of poor employee retention on production.



It is surprising, however, to see little evidence that suicides occur more frequently in suppliers with these problems. Indeed, the worst performers, suppliers where more employees believe their income does not meet minimum requirements and where more employees report restrictions of their freedom to resign, experience fewer suicides. This is possibly counter to the review of internet records which suggest some suicides were triggered when employees were refused permission to resign [see Section 5.9]. The survey evidence is not conclusive here, however. Suicides mentioning requests to resign represented only 5% of the suicides recorded by internet sources. It is therefore possible, even likely, that the suicides covered by the survey do not include suicides prominently figuring this motive.

Interestingly, multiple internet sources suggest economic pressures heighten the risk of suicide [see Section 5.8]. The survey evidence, however, suggests suicides were less likely in suppliers where employees believe their income did not meet minimum requirements. Other survey indices, however, suggest the risk of suicide rises

when employees more subjectively believe their income is too low. The figure below highlights suppliers where more employees expected to resign when they thought their gross monthly income is too low and suppliers where more employees find it too difficult to meet the requirements for bonuses which could improve their monthly income. Most striking, of the ten poorest performers on both indices, the figure's top right corner, seven of the firms experienced employee suicides.



It is counter-intuitive to see that employees who believe their income does not meet minimum requirements were not always the ones to express the belief that their income is too low. This simply highlights the diversity of employees' experience within the electronics sector. How well government requirements keep up with the rising cost of living in different cities could contribute to this effect. Likewise, older or less skilled employees with fewer employment options might feel content in lower income jobs, while employees with higher hopes or more confidence in their employment options might feel offended by income levels others consider privileged.

One possible conclusion from this is: Government directives to revise minimum income requirements might not be sufficient to lower the risk of suicides. Higher minimum requirements might improve the poorest employment conditions or support low skilled employees to pull themselves out of poverty. But if the risk of suicide is not tied in a simple sense to objectively lower incomes, minimum requirements might improve the conditions of the poorest and still miss the needs of employees more likely to commit suicide. Only systems which give employees opportunities to voice and resolve their needs beyond minimum requirements will likely develop the diversity of solutions more likely to reduce the risk of suicide.

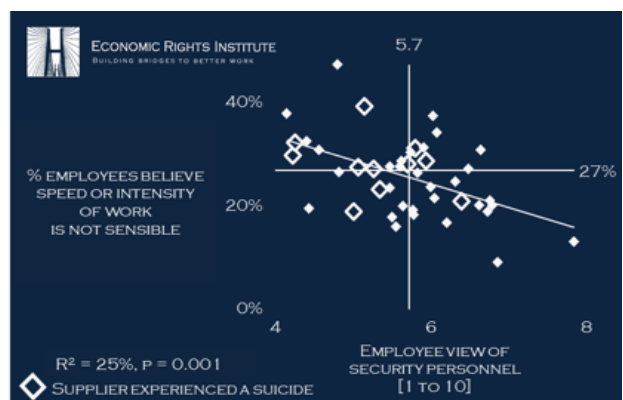
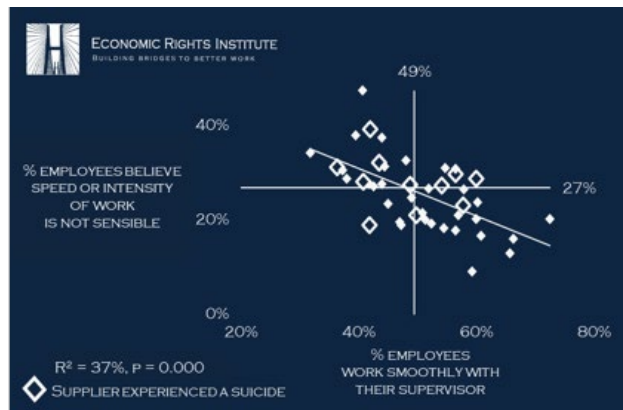
### 7.3. Exploring the link to employment conditions

#### 7.3.1. Speed and intensity on the job

With long hours showing no obvious synchronicity with employee suicides, we look elsewhere for issues which could contribute to suicide. Internet sources note the links of some incidents to "work pressure," so we considered the possible role of the speed and intensity of work.

The survey did not include concrete indices of productivity, production objectives or other references which directly refer to the speed or intensity of work. Even if it did, it is difficult to build indices which could be interpreted consistently between different jobs and product lines. The survey did usefully include questions to judge whether employees subjectively believe the speed or intensity of their work is "sensible". Eight out of 11 suicides occurred in the 50% of suppliers where more employees believe the speed or intensity of their job is not sensible.

The figures below highlight further points of interest. Employee perceptions of work speed and intensity



strongly intersect with employees' self-reports of whether they work well with their supervisor [ $R^2 = 37\%$ ] and how employees score security personnel on a gradation of 1 to 10, with 1 being the poorest score and 10 being the best [ $R^2 = 25\%$ ]. Employees' views of supervisors and security personnel were less directly linked to the number of suicides. However, their link to work speed and intensity implies their possible connection with other influences on suicide.

**7.3.2. Supervisors and income differences**

Intertwined with the speed and intensity of work, how smoothly employees work with their supervisors is linked to income differences between employees and whether employees consider the differences justified. The figure below to the left shows, when fewer employees work smoothly with their supervisors, more employees think income differences between employees within the firm do not fairly reflect employees' contributions on the job [ $R^2 = 10\%$ ]. ERI's interviews with employees suggest the source of this phenomenon. When supervisors distribute work, they decide who will work jobs which require less exertion or jobs more likely to receive bonuses. Likewise, supervisors sometimes decide the recipients of bonuses or promotions. In this role, supervisors directly influence income differences between employees. And when supervisors use their authority to foster preferences not rooted in differences of skill, effort or seniority, employee resentment builds.

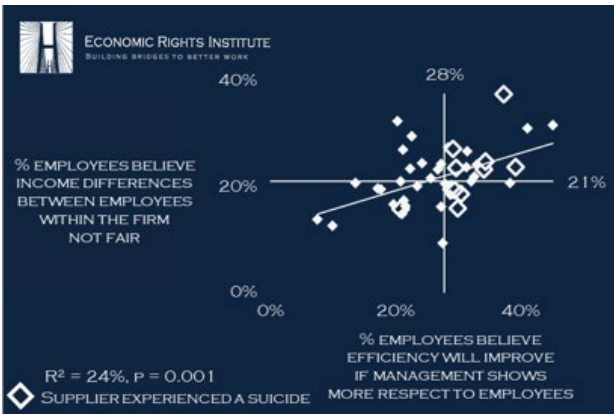
The figure below to the right is worth noting too. The link between supervisors and employee perceptions of income differences is stronger when we consider the minority of employees in outright conflict with their supervisors [ $R^2 = 18\%$ ]. This highlights how employment conditions and decisions by the employer influence employees' perceptions and how these effects might influence some employees more strongly.



The incidence of suicide is not obviously higher for suppliers where employees report problems with their supervisors or income differences. However, the figure below shows income differences contribute to employees' anxiety and depression [ $R^2 = 14\%$ ] which is



linked to the risk of suicide. The figure below further highlights the link between employee perceptions of income differences within the firm and whether the employer respects employees [R<sup>2</sup> = 24%]. Alarming, ten out of 11 suicides were committed in the 50% of suppliers where more employees believe the firm does not respect employees to the point that it interferes with efficiency on the job.



**7.3.3. Discipline, security personnel and violence**

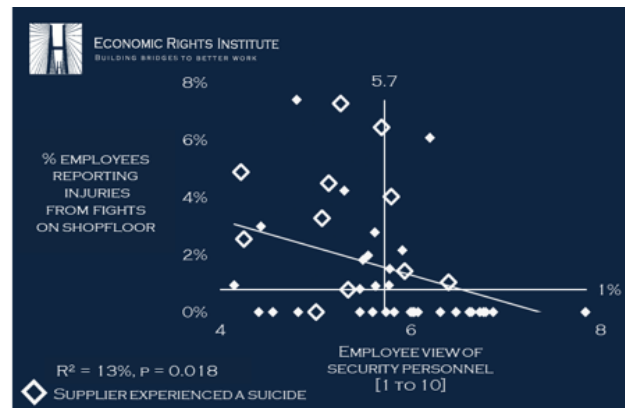
While supervisors' role is obviously intertwined with the work environment, some might consider security personnel less tied to employment conditions. Security personnel's role is sometimes limited to the vicinity surrounding the work environment like the dining service and dormitories. But even if security personnel monitor entry and exit to the work environment to prevent theft, they seldom directly oversee employees on the shop floor.

There is nonetheless evidence to suggest security personnel mirror and extend the forces of the wider work environment. Section 6.3.1 shows that employees criticize security personnel more when they find the speed and intensity of work excessive. We hypothesize that this is intertwined with employers' guiding philosophy. Employers more willing to listen to and respect their employees' limits will expect security personnel to respect limits to their role. Employers who prefer to incentivize employees through discipline and punishment will more likely permit if not promote security personnel to use their authority more rigidly, prompting more criticism by employees.

The survey offers some signs of this connection between criticisms of security personnel and employers' preference for punitive discipline. The figure below shows that employees' views of security personnel follow the number of employees who believe the employer does not sufficiently consider employees' experience when resolving disputes or enforcing fines [R<sup>2</sup> = 20%].



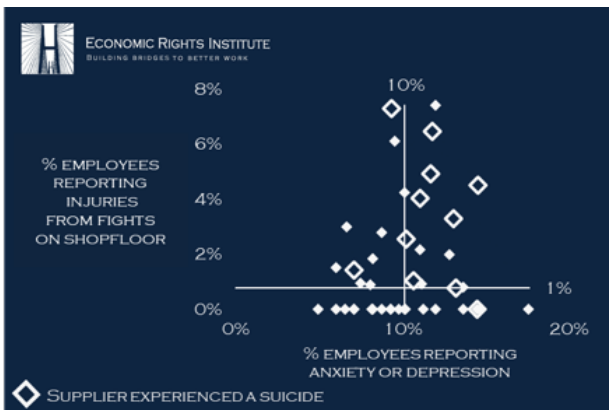
The antagonism of more punitive work environments reflected in tensions between employees and security personnel is tied to the problem of violence, shown in the figure below. In 52% of surveyed suppliers, one or more employees experienced or observed someone suffer injuries from fistfights on the job.



Some of the incidents were minor scuffles between employees. Other incidents were more serious. In interviews with ERI, employees mentioned knife fights, security personnel hiring thugs to attack employees in the dormitories, employees jumping supervisors in the street in revenge for perceived wrongs and even murder. The hypothesis that antagonism in the work environment is linked to the risk of suicide becomes even stronger when we see ten out of 11 suicides occurred in the 50% of suppliers where there were

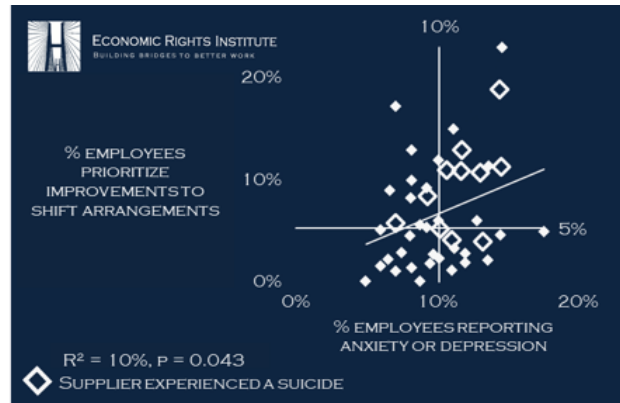
reports of injuries from fistfights. And of the ten suppliers with the highest proportion of employees reporting injuries from fistfights, six experienced employee suicides.

With this in mind, it is difficult not to conclude violence is the symptom of employment conditions which contribute to employee depression, highlighted in the figure below. Suppliers where employees report violence were not more likely to see more employees suffering from anxiety and depression. Yet eight out of 11 suicides occurred in the minority of suppliers where employees reported both injuries from fistfights and higher levels of anxiety and depression.



### 7.3.4. The question of shift work

One less prominent issue pertinent to the hours employees work is connected to the risk of suicide. One of the survey's questions requested employees to note the issues in the work environment they would prioritize for improvements. The options included common concerns for income, hours, and supervisors. One of the options, "shift arrangements," referred to the common practice of Chinese electronics suppliers scheduling employees in multiple shifts to keep production running through the night. Nine out of 11 suicides occurred in the 50% of suppliers where employees were more likely to express the desire for some improvement to shift arrangements.



The figure here sheds some light on the connection. Suppliers where more employees express problems with shift work see more employees reporting anxiety or depression [ $R^2 = 10\%$ ]. This finding is consistent with studies that link shift work to the risk of depression, including studies of the new trend of employee suicides in Japan<sup>84</sup> and one study of employees in the Asian electronics sector which linked shift work to depression and explicit thoughts of suicide.<sup>85</sup> Other studies of suicide by Chinese youth in the countryside suggest sleep disorders contribute to the risk of suicide even controlling for the effects of psychology.<sup>86</sup>

Still, the present study could not deepen discussion of this issue since the survey did not include the specifics needed to determine where employees see problems in shift work. Shift arrangements could refer to how frequently employees switch between shifts (e.g., once per month or every other month), how well time off is synchronized with employees transitioning between shifts or something else. Still, the results here suggest the need for future studies to explore the possible connection between shift work and the incidence of suicide.

84 - Jobin, Paul and Tseng Yuhwei. 2014. "Le suicide comme karoshi ou l' overdose de travail: Les suicides liés au travail au Japon, à Taiwan et en Chine" *Travailler*, 1(31): 45-88.

85 - Kang, Mo Yeol et al. 2017. "The relationship between shift work and mental health among electronics workers in South Korea: A cross-sectional study" *PLoS ONE* 12(11): e0188019.

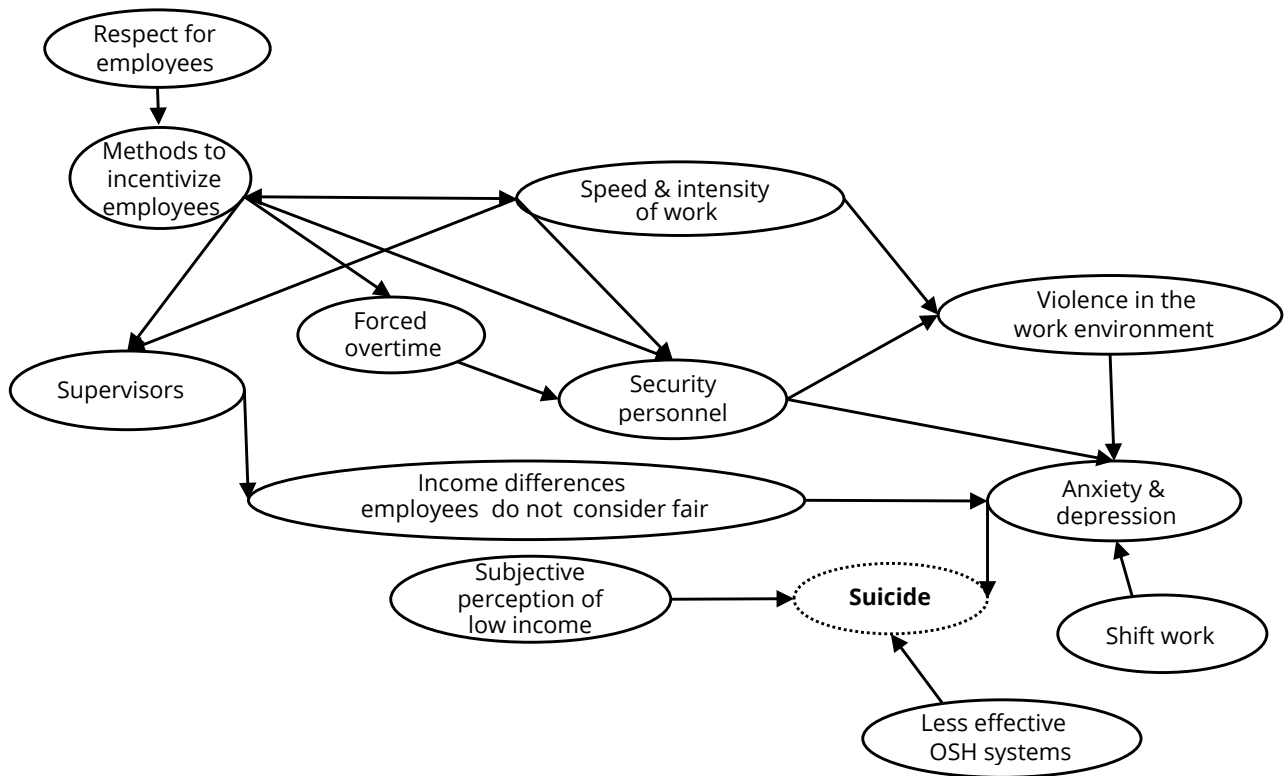
86 - Sun, Long et al. 2015. "Insomnia symptom, mental disorder and suicide: A case control study in Chinese rural youths" *Sleep and Biological Rhythms* 13: 181-188.

### 7.4. The results simplified

The findings here represent strong evidence that employment conditions contribute to the risk of suicides. In light of these findings, who will use national averages to dismiss suicides when they occur in employment settings where a suicide victim's peers widely express anxiety and depression? Who will suggest it is a coincidence the next time someone jumps from the dormitories when observers find the employer depends on punitive discipline to push productivity objectives which employees find excessive and believe is the source of disputes and violence on the shop floor and with security personnel? Who will not reconsider income differences that employees widely associate with management favouritism the next time someone suggests these income differences were the motive behind incidents of violence and suicide?

We need to deepen and verify this work. The survey reviewed in this section of the study only suggests which suppliers experienced a suicide. By not including information on the suicides themselves, the survey presented here is not sufficient to link specific suicides to employment conditions. It serves better to highlight trends in the electronics sector. And even for this purpose, it is noteworthy, the survey covers only 11 suicides and is likely to include only some types of suicide.

Still, the findings presented here should guide and, we hope, inspire new efforts. For reference, we simplify the influence of employment conditions on the risk of suicide suggested by the survey findings in a visualization here:



## 8. The experiment

### 8.1. Testing the hypotheses of previous sections

The first section of this study reviews suicides in the electronics sector recorded on the internet to explore the motives commonly suggested for the suicides [see Section 5]. The lessons of this review of internet sources then guides the analysis of comprehensive surveys of employment conditions in electronics suppliers to determine how employment conditions contribute to the risk of suicide by highlighting differences between suppliers where employees reported someone committed suicide versus suppliers with no known suicides [see Section 6]. The aspiration, however, is to use these efforts to support solutions and efforts to reduce the risk of suicide and prevent the needless loss of life.

This section uses the results of previous sections to test some of the hypothesized links between suicide and employment conditions. We first identified suppliers where the internet refers to multiple incidents of suicide. We selected four suppliers for fieldwork to test whether we could use public references to suicide to identify suppliers with genuinely higher risk of suicides and whether their employment conditions strengthen or undermine hypothesized links between employment conditions and the heightened risk of suicide.

Before beginning the fieldwork, we returned to the internet sources to see whether references to suicide included mention of high risk conditions in the selected suppliers. The findings of this step lent credibility to the method with internet sources citing conditions we consider high risk in every one of the selected suppliers. However, we could not presume the credibility of internet sources. And we did not restrict the timeline when looking for indices of risk. So references to suicide or risky conditions we found were sometimes from 2010 or older.

To verify more recent conditions, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 252 employees of the four selected suppliers from the end of 2017

to the beginning months of 2018. The interviews explored employees' experience of their employment and, where possible, employees' knowledge of and thoughts on suicides where they worked. Interviewers visited suppliers and spoke with observers likely to service employees of selected suppliers including personnel from neighbourhood stores, dormitories and employment recruiters. They then interviewed job applicants, existing and recently resigned employees from selected suppliers. Interviewees were selected for their willingness to discuss their employment conditions, and interviews were conducted off site when employees were not working.

In this context, not every interviewee replied to questions on every concern of interest. So interviewers prioritized questions to explore interviewees' direct experience and interests. In the sections below, when the text refers to the percent of interviewees who offered some response [e.g., 70% of interviewees knew of supervisors shouting], this percent is determined using the number of interviewees to who replied to the question. This does not include every interviewee of the supplier under discussion since interviewers did not pose every question to every interviewee.

The selected suppliers employ impressive numbers of people. The interviews we conducted could not represent the diversity of these workforces. Even beyond the number of interviews versus number of people employed, the method used to identify interviewees is likely to overlook some employees (e.g., employees dining and living within closed compounds, employees working extended night shifts). The methodology might even over-represent employees likely to criticize their employer (e.g., employees more respectful of their employers might heed instructions not to discuss their employment experience with outsiders while employees in the midst of tensions and disputes might use interviews to vent criticisms). Nonetheless, interview findings offer sufficient consistency and insight to serve their purpose of identifying key elements of the suppliers' conditions.

## 8.2. Selected suppliers

To keep perspective on differences between regions, we selected two suppliers in the south and two suppliers in the wider region surrounding Shanghai. To convince the electronics sector of this study's commitment to confront the issue of suicide without relying on the explosive but short-lived pressure of exposés, this report does not identify the suppliers we chose for fieldwork. We will refer to them with the following:

- Supplier H in Huizhou
- Supplier C in Changshu
- Supplier D's multiple sites in Dongguan
- Supplier S in Shanghai

With the exception of Supplier H, which is registered in Hong Kong, the other three suppliers invest in mainland China from Taiwan. They represent prominent suppliers of products including servers, computers, mobile telephones, telephone screens, cooling systems and other components.

### 8.2.1. Indices of suicide

The figure here presents the selected suppliers in terms of the number of suicides which occurred there and the motives suggested for the suicides by internet sources. For simplicity, we limit the references here to the sites where we conducted interviews to verify employment conditions.

We resisted the urge to present the number of suicides in terms of suicides per number of employees despite recognizing that firm size influences the likelihood that a firm will i. experience suicides and ii. see people discuss suicides or other terms of employment on the internet. The thinking behind this is that reporting the proportion of employees committing suicide gives the impression of precision. It is not credible, however, to presume internet sources include every incident of suicide. And with more comprehensive records, the proportion of suicides to the number of employees could look very different from the results here. Even if we resist coming to conclusions on the proportion of suicides, we still report the size of the workforce for reference.

### 8.2.2. Indices of employment conditions

Internet references to suicide were frequently linked to discussions by people who suggested they were employees or former employees of the firm under discussion and mentioned conditions we link to the heightened risk of suicide. These conditions included:

- tensions with security personnel, including incidents of violence;
- fistfights involving employees;
- incidents of serious injuries or illness;
- employees dying from causes other than suicide; and
- employees expressing concerns for shift work.

Furthermore, surveyed suppliers with younger

Supplier	# of employees	# of Suicide incidents	Denied time off	Fines or withheld income	Dispute with supervisor	Dating	Unknown
H	80,000	8 First reference in 2011	√	√	√		√
C	50,000	5 First reference in 2010					√
D	17,000	4 First reference in 2011	√	√	√		√
S	70,000	2 First reference in 2013				√	√



workforces were more likely to experience suicides [see Section 6.2.4]. This might reflect young people's susceptibility to stress. Or it might reflect the effects of something in the firm's business model which results both in the firm employing more young people and employees experiencing more of the stress which contributes to the risk of suicide. The evidence of the preceding sections is not sufficient to pinpoint the link between suicide and youth. For the purpose of appraising suppliers' risk of suicide, however, a reference to young employees is a sufficient sign of risk. So we recorded indices of risk coupled with references to young employees.

The following figure simplifies these findings of risk identified prior to interviews in the field:

Survey evidence suggests that the risk of suicide is linked to subjective perceptions of income, and we should not expect suppliers where the risk of suicide is higher to offer the lowest incomes [see Section 6.2.6].

Three of four suppliers reviewed here offer employees minimum monthly incomes in excess of government requirements. Supplier H is the most striking. Recruitment notices show the firm offering employees ¥ 500 over the minimum required in the region. This is possibly to ensure effective employee recruitment in the lower tier city of Huizhou, close neighbour of the more developed Shenzhen where the government expects firms to offer employees a monthly minimum of ¥ 2,130. Supplier S's offer is visibly over minimum requirements too, and interviews suggest the firm is committed even to improve its offer when the government revises its

Supplier	Indices of risk					
	Security personnel	Serious OSH issues	Employees die from non-suicide	Violence	Shift work	Youth
H	✓ Sexual assault					
C					✓ Extended night shifts	✓ 16 year old
D			✓ Drowning	✓ Sexual assault Prostitution	✓	✓ Student interns
S	✓ Security strikes employees, provokes riot	✓ Employees die from illness or unknown source	✓ Serious injuries from explosion	✓ Homicide		✓ 15 year old

### 8.3. Employment conditions

The following section presents the employment conditions of the selected suppliers introduced to us through interviews.

#### 8.3.1. Income offers exceed minimum requirements

requirements in 2018. Supplier D is more modest, with recruitment notices showing its minimum offer only ¥ 20 over wage requirements. They supplement this, however, with close to ¥ 400 in subsidized living expenses.

Supplier C is the most reserved. Recruitment notices show they meet but do not exceed minimum requirements. Of note, however, they use signing bonuses to recruit new employees despite the lesser minimum income offered. These bonuses sometimes

offer new employees the possibility of doubling or even tripling their minimum monthly income once they complete their first one to two months of employment.

These findings echo the results of the previous section which suggest the risk of suicide is not linked to employers who do not respect the government's income requirements [see Section 6.2.6].

### 8.3.2. Little to no time off during business spikes

The four suppliers show some sensitivity to restrictions on long hours. The Chinese government requires employers to give employees a day off every week and prohibits extending daily shifts in excess of three hours. The suppliers here commonly consider shifts to include ten to 11 hours on the job and sometimes give employees a day off every week. Though this might sound excessive to people used to 40 hour workweeks, lower skilled employees in the Chinese electronics sector commonly consider the requirement of a day off every week a new phenomenon. We believe this reflects a newer trend of stronger enforcement of restrictions on working hours in the Chinese electronics sector.

This trend is limited, however, and interviews uncover numerous signs of struggle over enforcement. In Supplier H, some employees work 11 hour shifts while others reported 13 hour shifts. Interviewees even suggest the firm forces employees to work overtime without pay when they do not successfully meet their daily objectives [see Section 7.3.5]. Some of Supplier C's employees report 12 hour shifts, and when overtime exceeds some monthly limit, interviewees believe the firm shifts some of their overtime premiums to the following month. This disguises overtime from observers and reduces employees' likelihood to resign [see Section 7.3.9].

When production needs rise, interviewees report Supplier C and Supplier S might give employees only a day or two off from work every month. Employees from Supplier H and Supplier D sometimes work through the month without a day off. This highlights suppliers' unwillingness to enforce Chinese restrictions prohibiting overtime in excess of 36 hours per month.

### 8.3.3. Employers' use of overtime and coercion to resist requests for time off

Employees express mixed, conflicting feelings where overtime is concerned. Interviewees commonly feel tired from long hours. Most, however, still prioritize the opportunity to improve their income. The trends of employee retention highlight this.

Interviewees mentioned Supplier H shutting down one of its divisions when its business slowed. Supplier H hoped to convince employees to move to its other divisions, but some employees resisted this shift of employment. Fired or downsized employees should be eligible for benefits. When their overtime dried up, however, hundreds of employees resigned, relinquishing their eligibility for some benefits and permitting Supplier H to downsize without following the more restrictive requirements for firing or downsizing.

Employees from Supplier C and Supplier S suggest living expenses drive these decisions. Without overtime premiums from long hours, the cost of rent and food compels employees to seek employment elsewhere, even if they enjoy the opportunities for rest and leisure that come with fewer hours on the job. Highlighting this, interviewees tell the story of Supplier C using overtime to discipline employees. When supervisors wish to punish employees, they simply reduce their overtime, pressuring employees to follow instructions to ensure their income is sufficient to meet their needs.

Supplier C is the only one of the four suppliers listed here whose minimum income does not exceed minimum requirements of the region. They subsidize employees' living expenses, but unless they mention these subsidies explicitly in written terms of employment, they reserve flexibility to revise or rescind these subsidies by not including them in employees' "income". This intensifies the economic pressure on employees who work less overtime. However, the use of overtime to discipline employees is not without consequences. The risk to employees' livelihood contributes to tensions in the work environment, and it is possibly no coincidence Supplier C experienced a riot when some employees collectively protested the firm's reduction of their overtime [see Section 7.3.8].

These stories highlight employees' desire for overtime despite the long hours, and this is counter to the notion of forced overtime. More direct coercion is exposed, however, when employees request time off. Even when employees prefer overtime, they sometimes need time off to rest or resolve responsibilities outside of work. And when employees work 70 or more hours per week, a request for time off amounts to a short-term rejection of overtime in excess of government restrictions. In the Chinese electronics sector, however, employers find these requests disruptive and use diverse methods to resist them.

Interviewees report that Supplier H supervisors were strict enough that they refused to give employees time off to visit doctors in connection with symptoms of work illnesses [see Section 7.3.10]. Interviewees from Supplier H knew that if they request time off or refuse overtime too often, the firm will reduce their hours to 40 hours per week, effectively forcing employees to resign. One interviewee from Supplier C told the story of a supervisor shouting to tell someone who felt sick that they needed to come to work even if they found it difficult to get out of bed. Other interviewees reported Supplier C requiring employees to come to work despite their having a fever. Employees who persist in their requests for time off might see their benefits reduced, find themselves fired for refusing excessive overtime or suffer the consequences of supervisors' prejudice till they feel forced to resign. Interviewees from Supplier S suggested the firm seldom gives employees permission for time off and when employees use illness to justify their request, the firm keeps no records of the illness to better circumvent government requirements to give employees time off with benefits for illness. Even 16 to 18 year old students employed by Supplier D were sometimes told explicitly they could not request time off, even though the Chinese system prohibits students from working overtime.

#### 8.3.4. The incentives and coercion behind night shifts

The fieldwork provides new perspective to explore issues identified in the preceding sections where previous findings were limited. ERI's survey links the risk of suicide to employee criticisms of shift work [see Section 6.3.4]. Yet the survey design did not include

questions to define employee criticisms of shift work more precisely. Supplier C employees were out-spoken on the issue, however.

Employees of other suppliers move between shifts every month or two. Supplier C, however, extends some employees' time on the night shift by months or even years. Some employees prefer extended night shifts. Recruitment notices show that Supplier H is uncommon in not offering benefits to employees who work the night shift. Most employers in the electronics sector do, however. And Supplier C publicizes the highest premium for night shifts of the four suppliers, paying an additional ¥15 per night to employees who work nights. This incentivizes employees to prefer night shifts. Of note, however, some interviewees preferred extended night shifts not for the premium but to minimize the effects of shift work on their circadian rhythm.

Offering the opportunity to work extended night shifts to employees poses no risk for workers' rights. The problem is, interviewees suggest Supplier C supervisors extend some employees' night shifts without their consent. In this context, employees who find the night shift too stressful might feel coerced to work nights despite the deleterious effects they feel from night shifts. Furthermore, they might feel pushed beyond their limits, pressured by the thought that if they refuse to work nights despite their supervisors' arrangements, they risk their supervisors' ire or might get fired.

#### 8.3.5. Repetitive movement and the risks of overwork

Supplier C employees tell stories of experienced employees who were upset with new recruits for working too slowly to the point that some disputes ended in fistfights. Experienced employees likewise criticized the firm for expecting them to meet their objectives even when equipment problems slowed down production.

Supplier D requires some employees to complete intensely repetitive motions. One interviewee mentioned plugging in multiple components every five seconds, keeping her in continuous motion. Young students fill these jobs in "internships" next to full time employees, though they resist the speed of work where

possible, afraid that whenever they complete their objectives, the firm will simply expect more from them.

Interviewees suggest Supplier H is more severe in its discipline. They comment on the difficulties of spending long hours continuously looping through repetitive, simple motions that Supplier H requires some employees to complete every three seconds. Evidence suggests Supplier H pushes employees' bodily limits with these requirements. Interviewees tell numerous stories of new recruits resigning within their first week when they find it impossible to keep up with the speed of production. Supplier H reportedly tries to minimize the losses they incur from this poor employee retention by refusing to give new recruits income owed them for time on the job if they resign before the end of their first week. Employees who keep their jobs report the firm still forces them to work overtime off the books when they do not complete their objectives. For some interviewees, this occurs frequently which suggests Supplier H sets objectives which exceed the limits of employees' productivity during recognized working hours. Further evidence of employees' feeling pushed beyond their limits is how interviewees explicitly link production requirements to employees dying, with the most recent incident occurring in the summer of 2017. They further note that when someone dies, Supplier H softens their overtime requirements, giving employees a day off every week. But under the pressure of the business cycle, they soon resume previous routines.

Like Supplier H employees, interviewees from Supplier S felt their work took its toll on their bodies, something they could not endure long. Some felt numb from their work, while others expected they could work only a few months before they would need to resign. It is possibly no coincidence that, reminiscent of Supplier H, interviewees reported multiple incidents of employees dying suddenly. However, where Supplier H reportedly responded to some of these incidents by giving employees more time off, Supplier S interviewees suggested the firm developed hiring requirements to identify and deny employment to new recruits with blood pressure or weight issues [see Section 7.3.10].

### 8.3.6. Multiple methods of discipline

Electronics firms use diverse methods to pressure

employees to perform and meet requirements that test the limits of their bodies. Supplier S looks like they use more positive methods. Most interviewees suggest the firm does not fine employees. They incentivize employees through a signing bonus they might forfeit if they infringe enterprise rules [see Section 7.3.1]. However, even Supplier S supervisors criticized their peers' use of violence to discipline employees [see Section 7.3.7].

Like Supplier S, Supplier C interviewees report that the firm does not discipline employees through fines but incentivizes employees with signing bonuses. However, they comment that supervisors frequently punish employees by refusing to give them overtime, using the pressure of living expenses and the risk of being forced to resign to coerce employees to comply.

Supplier D interviewees report that the firm fines employees from ¥ 15 for a warning to ¥ 500 for more serious infringements. Likewise, Supplier H employees suggest that the firm fines employees who infringe enterprise rules even for minor infringements including sloppily worn uniforms. One telling sign of the mindset behind the fines is that Supplier H reportedly coerces employees to work overtime off the books when they do not finish their objectives [see Section 7.3.5]. But if employees clock out of their shift too soon, the firm will refuse to pay them for their overtime on the books. Highlighting the punitive mindset behind Supplier H's system of fines, interviewees suggest that supervisors sometimes fine employees for errors on the job without bothering to notify the employee of the error or how to correct it. Employees must themselves identify the fines on their monthly income receipts.

### 8.3.7. Pressure, discipline and tensions with supervisors

We expect the pressure of production objectives and punitive forms of discipline to reflect and contribute to tensions between employees and their direct supervisors [see Section 6.3.1].

The evidence from interviews suggests that Supplier H's speed of work and employee discipline is unforgiving. So it is not surprising that internet sources suggest some of the suicides in Supplier H were linked to tension

between employees and supervisors. However, none of the Supplier H interviewees in this study reported conflicts with their own supervisor. Interviewees report that Supplier H recruits a non-negligible proportion of its new employees through more senior employees. The result is that employees exert more influence on enterprise decisions through their network of family and friends. We hypothesize that this might offer some employees protection from the worst forms of punishment. However, this kind of networking is frequently connected to perceptions of favouritism. And evidence suggests, when favouritism contributes to income differences between employees, it heightens the risk of suicide [see Sections 5.7.2 and 6.3.2].

Internet sources suggest some Supplier D suicides were tied to tension between employees and supervisors. Interviewees there were more likely to report conflicts with their supervisors, including shouting and fistfights. They explicitly linked these issues to the speed of production, with supervisors shouting to push employees to work more quickly and employees resisting these instructions, afraid complying would intensify the pressure on them. One interviewee told the story of a supervisor who provoked multiple fistfights with employees working under her. Though the evidence is not sufficient for definitive conclusions, the story suggests some diversity in supervisors' methods, with some supervisors likely showing employees more respect while others showing more disrespect.

The problem looks more serious for Supplier S, where 70% of interviewees mentioned supervisors shouting. One supervisor justified his shouting with the suggestion that employees only listen when supervisors shout. The tensions went beyond shouting, with interviewees reporting two supervisors once hitting one employee and police intervening in multiple incidents. Some supervisors criticized the willingness of other supervisors to hit employees. One interviewee even suggested supervisors use their networks within management to sidestep punishment for hitting employees. No longer afraid the firm would fire them for this conduct, supervisors were more likely to use violence to discipline employees.

Indices of tensions were highest for Supplier C. Ten percent of Supplier C interviewees felt they were in

conflict with their own supervisors. Of the four suppliers, Supplier C had the highest proportion of interviewees reporting supervisors shouting and fistfights involving employees of the firm. Interviewees' stories further highlighted struggles on the shop floor. One interviewee slept on the job till his supervisor consented to move him to a different division. Other interviewees tried to frighten supervisors with the risk of a fistfight to ensure supervisors spoke to them with more respect. In this environment, it is no surprise that interviewees reported a strike by employees to protest supervisors' disrespect.

### 8.3.8. The wider effects of hostile work environments

Tensions and disputes from the shop floor spill out to the wider environment. We expect employers who rely more on coercive discipline and ignore tensions on the shop floor will experience more incidents of conflict with, but not limited to, security personnel [see Section 6.3.3].

Interviewees from Supplier D suggest security inspections frequently provoke tensions between employees and security, with disputes sometimes ending in security personnel hitting employees. Interviewees believed employees do not defend themselves if hit since they expect the firm to fine or fire someone who strikes security officers even if they do so to defend themselves. Highlighting the resentment which builds in this environment, however, one interviewee told the story of someone who sought revenge on the security officer who hit him by mobilizing a group to jump the security officer in the street. More alarmingly, interviewees reported a group of three employees murdered one of their peers in the dormitories in the summer of 2017.

Internet sources include references to sexual assault by Supplier H security officers, with one internet post suggesting the firm rehired security officers when they left prison in connection with one of these incidents. Interviewees from Supplier H told fewer stories of security personnel, but they reported three homicides involving employees of the firm. In one incident, one employee's spouse murdered the supervisor having an affair with his wife.

Supplier S interviewees were less inclined to criticize the



Employee bleeding from injuries he suffered when two security officers hit him

firm's security. However, frequent security inspections become the source of conflict for some. One interviewee remembered one security officer who went to prison for killing one of the firm's employees. This is consistent with the tone of internet sources which refer to the firm's security officers hitting employees and multiple references of employees rioting to protest security personnel hitting employees.

Supplier C interviewees noted that the firm gives security officers the authority to fire employees. Interviewees remembered one incident of one employee stripping off their clothing to protest security officers' conduct in inspections. Other interviewees reported fights between security officers and employees which intensified when other employees joined the fight for the opportunity to vent their own resentment. Tensions were not limited to hostility between employees and management. During the editing of this report, Supplier C interviewees sent news of one employee who knifed his girlfriend, a fellow Supplier C employee hired by recruiters, and then observed her bleeding and unconscious in the street while security personnel telephoned for police without applying first aid. But the most serious incident covered by this study, confirmed by multiple interviewees, grew from tensions in 2017 when Supplier C security intervened to rein in protests by employees who felt excluded from overtime. The incident devolved into full blown conflict between hundreds of employees on one side and police on the other, with employees and police officers dying from injuries before the incident ended.

### 8.3.9. Hyper flexibility versus efforts to prevent employees from resigning

Supplier C and Supplier S institute fewer restrictions on

employees' freedom to resign. Supplier C supervisors sometimes resist requests to resign, purposefully moving slowly to complete the firm's required process for employees to receive permission to resign. But interviewees suggest this is more the exception, not the rule. The firm's policy is to require employees to give only one week's notice of their decision to resign.

Some interviewees criticized Supplier S for forcing employees who resign to wait a month or more to receive income owed them. For highly mobile citizens who will likely find rents in the region prohibitively expensive once they move out of the dormitories, this requirement is burdensome. But interviewees were confident Supplier S would give employees everything owed them, even if they did so on their own schedule.

There is some context to this willingness to let employees resign, however. According to interviewees, Supplier C and Supplier S offer signing bonuses for which new recruits become eligible once they finish their first or second month of employment. Frequently, the signing bonuses exceed employees' monthly income. This potent incentive is difficult to resist, so new recruits try to hold their jobs long enough to receive the bonus, resign, and then seek a new job with the firm to become eligible for a new signing bonus. The firms embolden this cycle of short-term employment by requiring employees who resign to wait only two or three months before the firms will consider them for a new job and a new signing bonus.

With Supplier C and Supplier S instituting these systems in neighbouring cities, a symbiosis emerged in which employees work two to three months to secure the bonus with one firm and then resign and move to the other firm where they work two to three months to secure the second bonus. When they resign the second time, they return to the first firm to apply for a new job, knowing they fulfilled the required waiting period. This model of employment permits Supplier C and Supplier S to circumvent longer term responsibilities to employees while ensuring their flexibility to downsize or recruit, whenever they see fit [see Section 7.3.14].

Supplier H's and Supplier D's employment conditions look more within the norms of the Chinese electronics sector. Like other electronics suppliers, they suffer

from poor employee retention. They possibly welcome employees resigning in moments when they need to downsize. The difficulty is, of course, that employees do not always resign when it is convenient for the employer. So to meet their objectives, Supplier H interviewees reported the firm refuses to give new recruits income owed them for their time on the job if they resign before the end of their first week [see Section 7.3.5]. Interviewees from Supplier D likewise reported policies which serve to restrict employees' freedom to resign. In months when employees work longer hours, when the firm is under pressure to meet its objectives with its existing workforce, interviewees suggest Supplier D will withhold employees' overtime premiums [see Section 7.3.2]. This not only serves to hide excessive hours from observers. It reduces employees' flexibility to resign by heightening the risk employees will lose more of their income and overtime premiums if they resign without permission.

Supplier H and Supplier D further restrict the number of employees "permitted" to resign. Interviewees knew of explicit rules permitting only one or two employees per line to resign every month. The intention of these rules is to prevent the sudden exodus of employees from one line, which could undermine the line's productivity.

These rules not only restrict employees' freedom

of employment. In the Chinese context, where the government represses employees' efforts to form enduring unions, employees still explore opportunities for collective influence. One method is when employees collectively submit requests to resign. Employers know they will suffer losses if employees on one line decide to resign together and the line therefore does not meet its objectives. This gives employees weight to pressure for improvements when they think it is worth the risks of quitting. But by limiting the number of employees per line permitted to resign, employers cut off this modest impetus for the resolution of collective issues.

When employees walk away without "permission," electronics suppliers commonly refuse to give employees their income for work they performed since the end of the previous income period. To limit their losses, employees time their requests to resign to coincide with when they get paid. But the longer the time between the end of the income period and the day when employees receive income for the period in question, the more employees risk losing. Employers who struggle with employee retention frequently extend this waiting time to pressure employees to resign only with their permission. The length of the waiting period thus shows the degree to which suppliers use coercion to reduce the likelihood of employees' resigning without permission.

Supplier	Income counted from the	Employees receive their income on the:	Minimum income employees risk losing when resigning without permission
H	1st to the 30th of the month	25th of the following month	25 days
C	17th to the 16th of the month	5th of the following month	19 days
D	26th to the 25th of the month	12th of the following month	17 days
S	26th to the 25th of the month	5th of the following month	10 days

### 8.3.10. The tension between productivity, short-term employment and occupational safety and health systems

Interviewees from Supplier C believed there is little risk of injuries or illness in the firm. However, interviewees showed little knowledge or interest in OSH issues, so it is difficult to come to firm conclusions concerning OSH risks there. The few interviewees conscious of the use of solvents in the work environment were not sure of the possible risks of the solvents. And employees thought Supplier C's trainings were seldom effective since they were delivered with little sensitivity to new recruits' mindset or competence. So, reportedly, most employees spent the time of their trainings connecting with friends through their mobile phones, and they remembered little of the content.

Some interviewees criticized Supplier D for sometimes not providing dressings for minor cuts. More positively, they noted the firm's investment in new sensors to prevent injuries of employees using pressing equipment. Still, employees believe people die every year in the firm, whether by suicide or not. In 2017, a student employed by the #7 division drowned while swimming in a neighbouring river. Alarmingly, this is not the first such incident. Internet sources refer to multiple students drowning in 2016.

Supplier H interviewees reported suffering diminished eyesight from long hours inspecting phone screens for blemishes. In the polishing workshop, employees frequently experienced skin problems from the dust, and a number of interviewees reported supervisors sometimes refused to give employees time off to check this condition with doctors. More disturbingly, some interviewees suggested that despite otherwise restricting employees' freedom to resign [see Section 7.3.9], the firm quickly supports employees' requests to resign when they show symptoms of illness. This might suggest Supplier H is trying to circumvent responsibility for illnesses linked to their work environment.

Some evidence suggests Supplier H might undermine OSH systems through its use of discipline to ensure employees' productivity. Interviewees reported not

using protective equipment to work more quickly and with fewer errors. Supplier H reportedly lets employees work without protective equipment, like gloves in the polishing workshop, since they know following proper OSH requirements slows production. Interviewees further report that Supplier H punishes employees for errors on the line with stiff fines even when the errors stem directly from the difficulty of meeting the firm's objectives when using protective equipment. The risks of the firm's productivity requirements look even more worrisome when we remember reports of multiple employees dying from what their peers term "overwork" [see Section 7.3.5].

Like Supplier C, Supplier S employees use solvents in the work environment. Disquietingly, interviewees thought the solvents pose no risks to them though they mentioned solvents like ethanol, known for the risk of deleterious effects on foetuses and the risk of explosions and fires.

Numerous interviewees from Supplier S expected to resign within a few months once they secured their signing bonus, so they felt less exposed to OSH risks. Employees with this mindset might expose themselves to needless risks if they dismiss the need for protective equipment. Even if employees resigned within three months, they still risk the effects of chronic exposure to toxins in the work environment if they were repetitively cycling through short terms of employment [see Section 7.3.14], though they would likely find it more difficult to hold employers responsible with their history of flexible employment. And while short-term employees cited fewer OSH issues, more senior employees tell ominous stories of multiple suicides [see Section 7.4.1] and incidents of employees dying [see Section 7.3.5].

### 8.3.11. Preferences for province of origin, youth and gender

Discrimination is rife in Chinese employment, though conclusive evidence is difficult to come by. Public recruitment notices sometimes show employment prejudices explicitly enough, listing the type of person expected for different roles. But with recruitment getting more difficult in recent years, employers softened some of their hiring restrictions. In this environment, employers who previously preferred to



hire exclusively young women now hire more men and women out of their twenties. Code of conduct efforts likewise sensitized some employers to the issue, prompting the emergence of more hidden forms of discrimination. Even with the limited scope of this study, we found evidence of common forms of discrimination.

In the Chinese context, discrimination against employees from some provinces is sometimes the norm. Supplier H relies on existing employees to introduce new recruits to the firm, which some believe strengthens networks of family and friends within the firm [see Section 7.3.7]. Chinese people frequently prefer networking and friendships with others from their own province of origin, so these networks likely strengthen the preference employees of some provinces might enjoy. However, Supplier H interviewees never explicitly mentioned preferences for employees from one or other province.

Supplier S employees directly expressed the view that supervisors' preference for people from their own province resulted in some employees enjoying better benefits and opportunities for promotion while others were excluded. Employees' perception of this form of discrimination is even more evident for Supplier C where the riot mentioned in Section 7.3.8 stemmed from employees of one region believing the firm preferred employees of other regions when they distributed overtime.

Still, the mindset which promotes the exclusion of, or preference for, people from one or other province is embedded in Chinese society, and the suppliers could credibly suggest they prefer to rid themselves of this kind of networking within the firm but struggle to find effective methods to do so.

Where gender and youth is concerned, however, we see a different story. Recruitment notices and interviews with recruiters confirm Supplier H will hire men but they prefer women. This preference to hire women does not entirely reflect a privileged position for women in the sense that it commonly comes with other conditions on women's employment. Interviews were not sufficient to thoroughly review Supplier H's gendered restrictions on employment. However, recruiters reportedly rejected one interviewee when he sought a short-term job, telling him the firm reserves short-term positions for women.

We could not confirm Supplier H's intention here, but wider experience suggests employers might prefer hiring younger women for shorter terms of employment to reduce the risk they will become responsible for women employees expecting to give birth.

Recruitment notices highlight Supplier C's preference for women too. They publicized policies not to hire men 36 years old or older, yet specified women up to 40 years old were welcome. Supplier D's gendered preferences were simpler. Recruitment notices explicitly recruited women 16 years or older, with no reference to opportunities for men. We should not interpret this to suggest the firm never hires men. It is more likely they simply consider some jobs better suited for women, reserving other jobs for men, and recruitment notices publicize employment opportunities through references to gender, not references to the jobs themselves.

Interviews did not provide evidence of Supplier S preferring to hire women. Recruiters were explicit, however, that they only consider new recruits 35 years old or younger. Recruiters further suggested in interviews that the firm will not hire women expecting to give birth.

### 8.3.12. Schools in the service of employers

The government promotes, even requires, students to complete internships where they might help employers in need. The Chinese system of internships includes numerous restrictions to better ensure students benefit from internships and prevent internships from undermining the employment security of longer term employees. Yet employers frequently flout these restrictions.

First, the government limits the number of students it permits employers to hire in proportion to the workforce. However, Supplier D interviewees believed that the firm's division #7 mostly hires students 18 years old and younger for internships of three to six months. Likewise, the government prohibits students from joining overtime and night shifts, but students from both Supplier C and Supplier D reported they perform both types of work.

Supplier D students report that they enjoy three

evenings per week without overtime. On these evenings “off,” internships require students to sit for one hour lectures led by instructors from their schools. However, none of the students we interviewed were studying subjects with obvious links to the repetitive motions students performed in their posts. Even if the lectures were closer to their course of study, in the context of grueling workweeks it is difficult to envision how young students could finish full shifts mostly spent on their feet and then follow the content of evening lectures sufficiently well to develop knowledge or skills for their desired professions.

Some interviewees suggested students were free to reject Supplier D’s offer of overtime, and one interviewee told the story of students who returned to their school when they no longer wished to complete the internship. Interviewees told other stories, too, with students reporting that Supplier D explicitly informed them they were not permitted to refuse overtime when they signed the terms of their internship [see Section 7.3.3].

Instructors’ role in internships is reportedly sometimes more pernicious. Some Supplier D interviewees reported their instructor requires the 70 students under his supervision to give him monthly “protection fees” of ¥ 100. Furthermore, the instructor reportedly told students the school would withhold their degrees if they did not fulfil their fee requirements. A recruitment officer from Supplier S suggested the firm sends students’ income to the schools directly and that some schools give students only 50% of their income, pocketing the rest in the guise of fees.

Beyond the question of extortion by instructors, these stories highlight the risk that schools might use their position to prevent students from finishing their degrees to coerce students to complete internships. This would seriously undermine students’ freedom to decide the terms of their employment. And with students a non-negligible proportion of Supplier D’s workforce, this undermines even full time employees’ efforts to improve their terms of employment. Numerous interviewees believed Supplier D struggles with recruitment since their job offer is less competitive in job seekers’ eyes, and this is why they prefer students to full time employees. In essence, without the intervention of “internships,” production requirements would pressure

the firm to improve its terms of employment to ensure they could hire the workforce they need.

### 8.3.13. Flexibility through the illicit recruitment services

Electronics employers struggle with how to preserve the flexibility of their workforce. The higher proportion of students on short internships hired by Supplier D gives them some flexibility. Interviews included evidence, however, that this is not sufficient. Supplier D reportedly commonly hires non-student employees directly for fixed terms of one or two years. Yet one of the more senior employees we interviewed suggested the firm does not sign new terms of employment when employees continue beyond the first term. Besides the loss of job security this involves, one of the risks this poses for employees is that it becomes more difficult for employees to defend their rights since the first step to suing in court is often for employees to prove their employment with a written agreement signed by both employer and employee.

Chinese employers who do not sign written employment agreements risk non-negligible fines and other punitive consequences. This is why it is common for suppliers to use outside recruiters to hire employees to preserve their flexibility.

Recruiters’ flexibility stems from a number of things. First and foremost, the evidence suggests recruiters frequently ignore Chinese requirements that they hire employees for minimum terms of two years. Supplier C’s recruiters reportedly sign employees for fixed terms of two months. Supplier H and Supplier S’s recruiters reportedly sign employees for three months.

Supplier S and Supplier C might offer some employees hired through recruiters the opportunity to shift to direct employment when they finish their first fixed term. But this system pushes the cost of inconsistent business on to employees. When business is good, the firms hire new recruits for consecutive terms. The first fixed term is signed with recruiters, so the second term is considered a first term with the “new” employer. This relieves pressure employers feel from requirements to offer employees non-fixed terms employment when employees continue their employment beyond two

continuous, fixed terms. When business is slow, neither the employer nor recruiter is committed to extend new recruits' employment if they only signed a fixed term commitment of a few months. This is despite explicit requirements for recruitment firms to adapt their services and fees to ensure they offer their employees a minimum of two years of job security.

By permitting their service providers to flout job security requirements, Supplier H, Supplier S and Supplier C directly profit from lower service fees. If recruiters were meeting their responsibilities to offer employees stronger job security, they would likely find themselves obliged to ensure employees receive some minimum income even during periods of slow business or when employees shift between recruitment services for different employers. With longer term commitments, recruiters might be more sensitive to the need to downsize depending on their business needs. But long term employment commitments would reduce their flexibility to dismiss employees and possibly incentivize some employees seeking seniority benefits. Likewise, longer term commitments would likely pressure recruiters to contribute more in social security benefits. These pressures would compel recruiters to revise client fees.

Lower service fees incentivize employers to use recruitment services more often, in tension with one more element of the government's effort to strengthen job security: the requirement that employers keep the proportion of the workforce hired by outside recruiters to 10% or less. Respectively, interviewees suggest Supplier S and Supplier C hire 80% and 100% of their workforce through recruiters, evidence of the extent to which they ignore government efforts to define the structure of employment.

Supplier S and Supplier C might suggest they respect the 10% rule since they sign employees directly if they extend their employment beyond the first term. However, this would require that they never hire new recruits in excess of 10% of the workforce in any two or three month period. This is not credible when considered in the context of employment trends surrounding Chinese New Year and the downsizing cycles common in the electronics sector. Highlighting this, one interviewee from Supplier S's recruitment

office mentioned they frequently recruit 1,000 new employees a day, and once, they even recruited 9,000 new employees in a day.

One of the risks of short-term employment through recruiters is the opportunities it gives employers to dodge their responsibilities. Supplier H interviewees believed that recruiters pocket illicit deductions from their income. One recruiter confirmed that Supplier H offers them ¥ 22 per hour for employees' time while employees receive only ¥ 18 or ¥ 20 from the recruiter. Recruiters naturally expect to profit from the services they offer. The issue is whether Supplier H is offering recruiters ¥ 22 per employee hour to simplify the combined sum of employees' income and service fees or whether recruiters deduct their fees directly from employees' income. Interviews could not confirm this point, but the risk of illicit fees is visible in Supplier H's recruitment model.

Supplier C interviewees told stories of recruiters withholding employees' bonuses. One of the more serious incidents involved one employee trying to commit suicide when her recruiter refused to give her signing bonus [see Section 7.4.1]. Supplier S interviewees reported too that recruiters sometimes denied employees bonuses promised them or otherwise pocketed illicit deductions from employees' income. Beyond this, they resisted requirements to contribute to social security. Interviewees suggested recruiters would register employees with the social security office, but not contribute financially unless employees were injured or sought to defend their rights in some dispute.

Supplier S's issues might be more serious. The government requires recruiters to register non-negligible sums of money with the government to receive the permit required to offer their services. The thinking behind these requirements is that the government could use this security deposit to settle disputes, even if the recruiter goes out of business. One interviewee in Supplier S's recruitment division suggested the firm requires recruiters to register ¥ 20,000,000 directly with Supplier S. Despite this, the interviewee reported Supplier S conducts business with some recruiters outside of formal financial accounts, with recruiters sending their people to count "piles" of money on site. These stories suggest the risk of corruption is high. The

interviewee further suggested recruitment firms were afraid of employees going to the police since police in the region frequently pressure recruitment firms for bribes.

Supplier H reportedly uses recruiters to hire “short-term” employees when business orders rise. However, the income offered short-term employees poses further problems. To ensure it is possible to hire sufficient numbers of new employees to meet production needs, recruiters and employees we interviewed report that Supplier H offers short-term employees the impressive looking fixed hourly income of ¥ 18 or ¥ 20. This figure is inclusive of overtime premiums, and it is likely high enough to meet or exceed minimum wage requirements of the region.

Problems emerge when we consider the hourly ¥ 18 or ¥ 20 next to the monthly ¥ 2,130 offered employees Supplier H hires directly. The Chinese government prohibits employers from offering different benefits to employees depending on whether the firm hires them directly or through recruiters. This prohibition is intended to prevent income differences from incentivizing employers to use recruiters to side step the responsibilities of more secure forms of direct employment.

To the point, the difference in Supplier H’s offer to short-term and direct employees looks designed to prioritize the firm’s flexibility. The higher fixed hourly income which includes overtime premiums ensures short-term employees suffer less when overtime dries up. Yet, with Supplier H’s recruiters committing to hire them only for three months, these employees will quickly find themselves unemployed if there is not sufficient overtime to keep them busy. The hourly income scheme thus gives Supplier H the incentive to recruit new employees with higher incomes when they urgently need more people without the longer term commitment to continue those benefits beyond a few months.

Supplier H’s direct employees should enjoy some security during the longer term of employment they sign for. But Supplier H does not offer senior employees the higher hourly income. So direct employees’ minimum income is not sufficient to meet their living expenses without overtime. This reduces the expense

of Supplier H’s longer term commitments and gives Supplier H the option to pressure senior employees to resign by cutting them off from overtime. If employees submit to this pressure by resigning before the end of their employment commitment, employees forfeit the seniority benefits they should otherwise expect when they finish their term [see Section 7.3.3], effectively preserving the employers’ flexibility and further reducing their expenses.

Like Supplier H, Supplier S incentivizes employees to seek jobs through recruiters. Employees become eligible for bonuses which frequently exceed their monthly income once they finish a month and a half on the job. Excited by the boost to their income, these bonuses incentivize job seekers to consent to short, fixed terms of employment.

#### 8.3.14. Bonuses and flexible employment

The origin of bonuses offered to employees when they finish short periods of employment is likely in the urgency of electronics firms’ recruitment needs. Buyers pressure electronics suppliers to minimize their costs when consumption is low, which compels suppliers to downsize whenever possible. Despite this, buyers expect their suppliers to respond quickly to meet production requirements when the business surges. To hire enough new employees on short notice, employers offered signing bonuses to better entice job seekers with the possibility of quick boosts in income.

Of note, there is evidence some buyers recognize that downsizing whenever possible comes with unintended consequences. Some interviewees thought one of the firm’s clients noticed quality issues rise when the proportion of new, less experienced employees rose. So they worked out agreements with suppliers like Supplier C to give employees additional bonuses amounting to two hours of daily overtime premiums to improve employee retention in moments like Chinese New Year, when employees would resign in non-negligible numbers without new incentives.

The use of signing bonuses is evolving, however, to incentivize flexible employment. We know employees view these signing bonuses seriously since a Supplier C employee committed homicide in revenge on the person

who stole his signing bonus [see Section 7.3.7]. The key issue is the following: When employers first, offer hefty bonuses to employees for finishing short periods of employment and then do not offer these incentives to more senior employees, employees figure out they will boost their income the most if they hold on to their jobs long enough to become eligible for the signing bonus, resign and then rejoin the firm to become eligible for the next bonus cycle.

Recruitment notices highlight how Supplier H incentivizes former employees to rejoin the firm with bonuses of ¥ 3,000 when they finish three months on the job. The effect of this incentive is most evident in the testimony of one interviewee who explicitly cited the bonus when describing the motive of his decision to join Supplier H, resign and rejoin. When interviewed, he expected to complete his fourth cycle of short-term employment for Supplier H.

Supplier S and Supplier C sometimes publicize even bigger bonuses to employees who finish a month or two of employment. They slow down the cycle of employment by requiring former employees to wait a few months before they will rehire them, depending on whether they resigned with or without the firm's blessing. This, however, does little to stem the incentives for short-term employment. In one of the most unexpected findings of this study, interviewees described the cycle whereby they seek jobs with Supplier S or Supplier C, finish three months there, resign and then move to the other firm where they likewise work three months before resigning and returning to the first employer.

This phenomenon of splintered employment is convenient for employers since the hefty bonuses ensure job seekers will come to them, and the short cycle gives employers flexibility to hire or downsize when needed. It sidesteps requirements that employers give employees the security of non-fixed terms of employment if they rehire employees beyond two continuous fixed terms. Splintered employment likewise implies serious difficulties for OSH monitoring, the prevention and resolution of employment disputes and a host of other issues.

The evolution of incentives for short-term employment

is something new to electronics firms' efforts to preserve their flexibility. The use of students and recruiters outlined in this study represent distortions of the Chinese system. Existing rules, if enforced, should prevent numerous problems. There is, however, no prohibition of bonuses for short-term employment. There is no requirement to offer seniority bonuses which could counter the incentives for splintered employment. Thus, existing rules will do little to steer the further evolution of these bonuses, and this implies serious risks and consequences for wider Chinese society.

### 8.3.15. The evolution of incentives and freedom of association

Employees welcome short-term signing bonuses, and in some sense the incentivizing of repetitive cycles of short-term employment is the electronics sector's effort to preserve flexibility while respecting but not following the government's effort to strengthen employment security.

Some observers will consider signing bonuses win-win outcomes. They fulfill business needs and seem well suited to Chinese employees' desire for higher incomes and their misgivings for long term commitments. Workers benefit from higher incomes. Yet the emergence of this form of flexible employment is dependent on the repression of workers' mobilizing to defend their collective interests.

When the Chinese government considers how to meet Chinese citizen's income needs, they rely sometimes on the tool of setting minimum income levels. The Chinese system of minimum wage requirements is sensitive to the needs of different regions, even cities in close proximity. This system is well suited to address the diversity of the living expenses of different regions, even if emerging evidence shows some regions beginning to converge.

Yet the Chinese system is not sensitive to differences between industries. Electronics firms spend millions to develop technology, build controlled environments and buy the equipment they need to produce their products. So electronics is quite different from more modest sectors where suppliers' profits depend more on efforts to minimize production employees' income. Electronics firms simply possess more resources to spend on

employees and still be competitive. This is obvious when we consider the phenomenon described here of electronics suppliers offering new employees bonuses that double their monthly income if they complete only one or two months of employment.

The emergence of these bonuses is dependent on the electronics sector's advantage in China. The government will resist revising wage requirements when it risks more modest contributors to the economy. This gives electronics suppliers room to experiment where they could not if minimum income requirements were revised to levels which better reflect their resources.

Employees in the Chinese electronics sector find minimum wage requirements do not provide them with sufficient income to meet their needs. They express strong opinions to the point of mobilizing strikes or even rioting on issues including hostility from supervisors and security personnel, overtime and productivity objectives. The mobility of Chinese citizens moving from the countryside to the cities to look for employment is often cited to highlight the limits of mobilizing efforts. But Chinese citizens' mobility, their willingness to move and look for employment elsewhere, gives them a distinctive tool to seek collective influence on employers. When employees resign in numbers, and they frequently do, they exert non-negligible pressure on employers. This is why Chinese employers restrict employees' freedom to resign.

In this context, it is simply not credible to suggest employees in the Chinese electronics sector would not be mobilizing, resigning and striking their way to concessions from employers were it not for the restrictive environment which obstructs the development of forums for dialogue which could bind the electronics sector to norms and requirements that better reflect its resources and options. Experience suggests, when given the choice, employees in the Chinese electronics sector prioritize getting higher incomes by revising minimum income levels and seniority benefits. Employees might lose their perspective in the pursuit of signing bonuses. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of how the emerging structure of employment depends on the repression of employees' freedom to use the resources available to them to incentivize employers to improve.

## 8.4. Putting the pieces together

This section returns to the issue of suicide to discuss whether or not the evidence on employment conditions supports the hypothesized links between employment conditions and suicide.

### 8.4.1. Employee memories: The risk of suicide verified

We could not verify the credibility of the internet references to suicide we used to select suppliers. And even if we could confirm the references were genuine, we should not presume suicides which occurred years before should signify the risk of suicide in 2017. So when we interviewed employees from the selected suppliers, interviews explored employees' knowledge and perceptions of suicide.

The results lend credibility to the risk of suicide hypothesized in previous sections. Interviewees reported 15 different incidents, including one or more suicides in 2016 or 2017 for every one of the selected suppliers. Two of the reported suicides occurred not long before the interviews. Interviewees from Supplier C directly witnessed events surrounding one employee who tried to commit suicide within two months of the interview. Interviewees from Supplier S knew of one employee who hung herself the month before interviews. These results suggest the methodology we developed using public reports of suicide, despite the limits of the sources, did effectively identify suppliers where the risk of suicide is higher.

It is worth noting that the interviews identified 15 suicides despite efforts to repress publicity surrounding employee suicides. Interviewees offered few specifics in connection with incidents. The timing and method of the suicides, however, sometimes confirmed the incidents were distinct from others mentioned on the internet.

Efforts to prevent the publicizing of suicides were not limited to the internet. Prominently, when suicides occur, interviewees suggest Supplier C disperses employees who might contribute to publicity and rumors. Reportedly, they send people to different

production lines or new dormitories. More surprisingly, interviewees report Supplier C identifies employees who witnessed suicides and offers them ¥ 20,000 to promptly resign from the firm.

This is one of the things contributing to the low number of Supplier C employees who knew of suicides, only 26%, the lowest score of the four suppliers we visited. Despite this, interviewees knew of four incidents occurring there, including two employees who committed suicide in 2016 and two incidents in 2017 of employees who tried to commit suicide but were convinced not to. One of the women intended to jump from a height when she discovered recruiters were refusing to give her the ¥ 5,000 signing bonus they promised her. The second 2017 incident occurred when one employee's boyfriend deserted her after they found out she was pregnant.

Forty-eight percent of Supplier D interviewees knew of suicides there. However, the only specific incidents they knew of occurred in 2016 when someone reportedly jumped from the dormitories during her night shift. The higher number of employees who knew of suicides likely reflects the longer memories of more senior employees. Interviewees had worked with Supplier D for an average of 1.1 years. Interviewees from the other employers reviewed here were less senior, so they were less likely to know of suicides which occurred before they joined the firm.

Supplier S interviewees had the lowest seniority, having spent an average of only six months with the firm. Despite this, 32% of interviewees knew of previous suicides. Incidents they mentioned included one person depressed over difficulties with his girlfriend who drowned himself. Two people died in a second incident when, interviewees suggest, police suspect one employee tried to drown herself and her boyfriend drowned trying to rescue her. Like at Supplier C, one Supplier S employee reportedly committed suicide following disputes over the signing bonus. And a fourth employee hung herself, her motive unknown, only in the month before our interviews.

A surprising 72% of Supplier H interviewees knew of previous suicides in the firm. A more recent suicide might contribute to employees' sensitivity to the issue of suicide. But interviewees were explicit that Supplier

H moves quickly to stop publicity surrounding incidents of employees dying when new incidents occur. And the evidence suggests employees' sensitivity to the issue stems from the number of suicides in Supplier H and employees' views of the work environment.

One interviewee who reportedly joined Supplier H for the first time in 2014 remembered five or six suicides in her first year of employment. Before concluding that this is evidence of new Supplier H incidents, we considered the possibility this interviewee's memory of the timing of the "2014" incidents is confused. Internet sources only refer to two Supplier H suicides in 2014, but there were four referenced for 2013. Still, other interviewees mentioned one employee ending her life in 2016 by jumping from the building where she worked and killing a security officer she hit below. We conclude with more confidence this incident is not in internet sources we collected.

Employees linked suicides and other incidents where Supplier H employees die [see Sections 7.3.5 and 7.3.8] to the high pressure environment. One employee expressed the spirit of working for Supplier H with the following: "You get income from Supplier H by giving your life. If you do not think your body is strong, it is best you do not come here. You will die." ["伯恩廠的工資真是拿命換的，感覺自己身體不好最好別來，會死人的"]].

## 8.5. Two models of the link to suicide motives

The findings of this report suggest two simple sets of tendencies associated with the risk of suicide. In the first model, suicides seem linked to tensions on the shop floor tied to forms of discipline designed to keep employees exerting themselves. The second model highlights different, yet still intertwined effects of flexible employment. Where employers prefer and incentivize employees to resign following short terms on the job, shop floor discipline evolves. Antagonism on the shop floor persists. Yet the risk of suicide seems to shift from the pressure of coercion on the job to employees' distress from recruiters who swindle them and, possibly, the effects of short-term employment on their lives off the line.

This study is too limited to confirm whether trends in the findings here genuinely represent the cluster effects of different types of employment on suicide. We should likewise keep in mind, new light on the unknowns of this study could shift how we interpret the findings presented here. Still, trends in the findings paint a portrait of distinct models of employment, and we highlight them here in the hopes of guiding future studies.

### 8.5.1. Stress and coercion

First, we consider the more direct link between employment conditions and the suggested motives of prior suicides in the selected suppliers.

Supplier H interviewees did not suggest why employees there committed suicide, but internet references to suicides in Supplier H referred to the following motives:

- Requests for time off denied
- Fines or withheld income
- Disputes with supervisors

Interviewees suggest Supplier H expects employees to work workweeks of 66 hours when business is slow or 90 hours per week during business spikes [see Section 7.3.2]. Interviews report supervisors sometimes deny employees time off even to visit doctors to check the symptoms of suspected work illnesses [see Section 7.3.10]. Employees willing to resign for time off find their exit obstructed by rules limiting the number of employees per line permitted to resign per month [see Section 7.3.9]. Likewise, Supplier H employees expect the firm will refuse them overtime if they persist in requests for time off, which employees widely consider Supplier H “forcing” them to resign, quite possibly while losing one month of income.

According to interviewees, Supplier H commonly fines employees, sometimes refusing to give employees’ the overtime premiums they owe [see Section 7.3.6], sometimes repetitively fining employees non-negligible sums for production errors closely linked to the speed the firm expects of employees on the line. Employees consider the speed of work difficult if not impossible to endure, something which they explicitly link to incidents of employees dying from “overwork”. The difficulty of

the work frequently convinces new employees to give up, with people resigning within their first week. So to reduce the expense of new employees who resign so soon, interviewees suggest Supplier H denies them their income for the week. Supplier H reportedly forces even more senior employees who find it difficult to meet their production objectives to work “off the books” without income, sometimes daily [see Section 7.3.5].

In this context, supervisors shout to get employees working more quickly [see Section 7.3.7]. Unsurprisingly, the high pressure environment contributes to tensions between employees, and interviewees told multiple stories of fights which ended in homicide [see Section 7.3.8].

Like Supplier H, reported suicides of Supplier D employees were linked to restrictions of time off, fines or withheld income and disputes with supervisors. It is worth noting, internet sources for two of the four suicides of the firm refer to the suicides occurring in the #7 division, where the firm employs the highest number of students.

In busier months, the firm’s employees might spend 11 hours on the production line daily without a day off [see Section 7.3.2], interviewees reported. The work is difficult, requiring cycles of repetitive motions only seconds long [see Section 7.3.5]. Some interviewees believe this contributes to the firm’s struggle to recruit and keep its employees. To resolve this issue without the expense of positive incentives, the firm limits the number of employees per line permitted to resign without deductions to their income [see Section 7.3.9]. And some of the firm’s divisions reportedly hire “mostly” students. The 16 to 18 year old students employed by the firm work beside longer term employees [see Section 7.3.12]. While some interviewees suggested students were free to refuse overtime, some students reported the firm explicitly told them they were not eligible for time off when they signed on for internships [see Section 7.3.3].

Students struggle with and resist the speed of their work [see Section 7.3.5]. So the firm seems to rely on coercive methods to police production. First, interviewees suggest they discipline employees through fines [see Section 7.3.6]. Students further reported more hidden



forms of coercion, including instructors from their schools telling them they risked losing their degrees if they did not give them monthly “protection fees” [see Section 7.3.12].

Additionally, Supplier D supervisors reportedly shout to keep employees moving, sometimes provoking fights between employees and supervisors [see Section 7.3.7]. We see the tensions of the firm’s punitive mindset beyond the shop floor, with employees suggesting it is not uncommon for security personnel to hit employees. Even when employees do not defend themselves on the shop floor, afraid of fines or the risk of getting dismissed, repression builds, and interviewees even report incidents of employees mobilizing assaults on security officers in the streets [see Section 7.3.8].

### 8.5.2. Illicit recruitment and flexibility

Neither internet sources nor interviews give much context for the motives behind Supplier C suicides. Interviewees mention, however, one incident where recruiters denied one employee the signing bonus they promised her, and the employee only stepped away from the ledge where she looked like she might jump when Supplier C offered to give her the signing bonus directly. The flexibility of Supplier C’s system of outside recruitment combined with its incentives for short-term employment is reportedly linked to illicit fees recruiters deduct from employees’ income more widely [see Sections 7.3.13 and 7.3.14]. Echoing the risks of this system, interviewees referred to a Supplier C employee who committed homicide in revenge for the theft of his signing bonus [see Section 7.3.7]. Supplier S relies on outside recruitment and bonuses like Supplier C’s model, and they too witnessed one of their employees driven to suicide following disputes over their signing bonus.

It is further worth noting, these two suppliers who so strongly incentivize short-term employment were likewise the ones to see employees committing suicide in distress over dating difficulties. More recently, Supplier C interviewees reported an attempted murder where a Supplier C employee knifed his girlfriend and then waited on the curb beside her unconscious body for police to arrive. The links between these kinds of incidents and employment conditions is more tenuous,

and the subject requires further study. However, we should expect short-term employment to be disruptive to employees’ lives beyond employment. Likewise, both firms restrict the gender and youth of their workforces [see Section 7.3.11]. To the extent employers the size of Supplier C and Supplier S limit their hiring of one gender, they might limit the proportion of women to men in the community and thereby contribute to difficulties employees experience in their leisure environment. Likewise, when employers limit their hiring efforts to incentivize only the youngest, most mobile job seekers, we should expect the possibility that it intensifies tensions employees experience off the job. First, short-term employment reduces the likelihood of employees forming friendships and longer term commitments with their peers. Secondly, when employers only hire employees without spouses and children, they will be less likely to develop incentives like housing options and overtime flexibility which employees seeking more secure, committed connections with their peers might need.

## 8.6. Concluding thoughts

The fieldwork findings suggest that employment conditions in the Chinese electronics sector contribute to suicides. This is true whether or not some victims of suicide experience stress or show sensitivities which were independent of their employment. And this is true whether or not these suicides could be considered within the “norm” of Chinese suicides.

We hope society will come to consensus: The employer who depends on coercion to keep employees in gruelling cycles of repetitive movement for 80 hours or more per week is responsible for the employee who commits suicide when her request for time off is denied. The employer who knowingly profits from recruitment services that flout government requirements to swindle employees is responsible for the employee who commits suicide distressed by broken recruitment promises. The employer who ignores or even promotes supervisors and security personnel to routinely assault employees’ dignity to the point of even hitting them is responsible for the employee who runs from a shouting supervisor to jump from a building. This mind-set is key to developing a system of accountability for employers

who ignore workers' rights to the point of provoking employee suicides.

Still, the responsibility to ensure employment conditions do not contribute to suicides should not sit entirely on employers' shoulders. If supervisors' aggravation often stems from the pressure of productivity requirements, Chinese suppliers struggle to meet their clients' requirements to minimize expenses while responding with lightning speed to fulfil enormous orders on ever shorter timelines. And even if their clients drive the momentum behind these trends, their clients' choices to some extent follow consumers' preferences.

We intend this report not only to document the findings of this study of employee suicide. We hope the findings will mobilize business, civil society, consumers and governments to work constructively together to design and enforce sensible limits to economic development to ensure the production of electronics does not require employment conditions that undermine some workers' will to live.

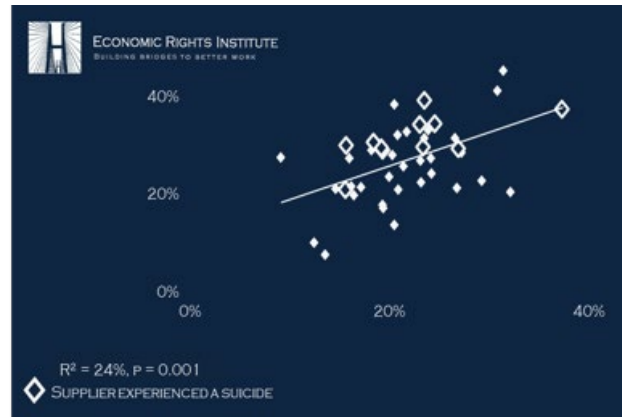
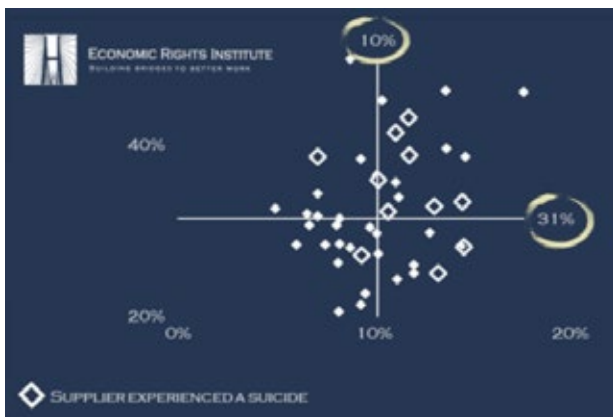
## 9. Appendix: A note on data visualizations

This report includes a number of data visualizations following one of the models below. For the model on the left, the figure uses two grey lines to highlight the 50th percentile of survey result for all suppliers, with the 50th percentile written in grey by the top and right of the figure (circled below for reference). In other words, the results of 50% of suppliers were over the 50th percentile score, and the results of 50% of suppliers were below it.

The figure on the right is a different visualization and uses a diagonal line cutting through all the data points to show the hypothesized link between two survey results. The bottom left of the figure notes the R2 and p figures to more precisely record the strength of the interconnection. In simple terms, the R2 is a percent which refers to how much the two elements in the figure vary together. The R2 of 24% in the figure below

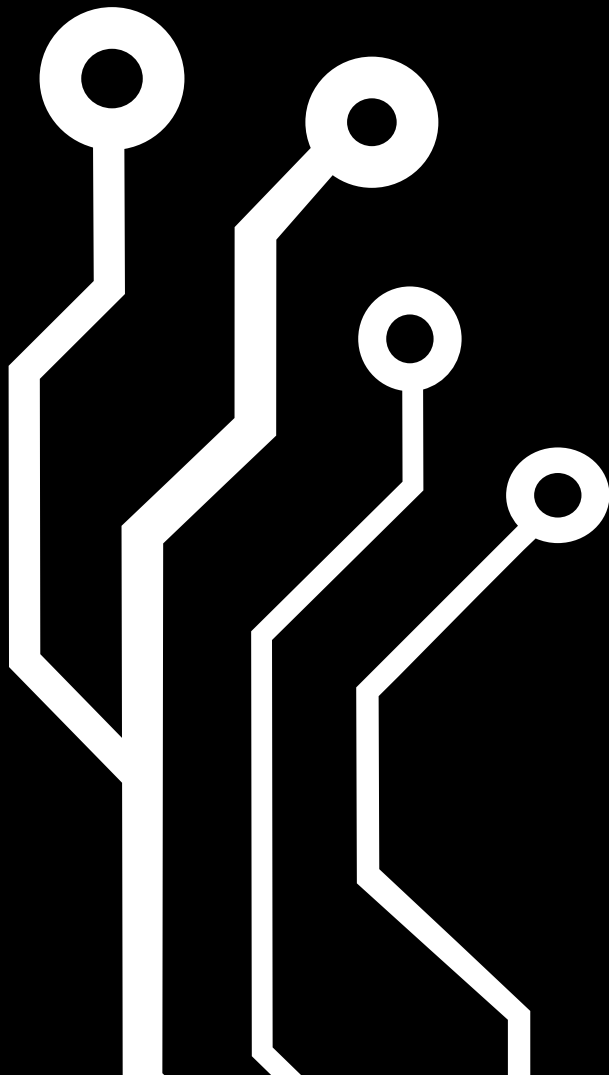
suggests that when considering the bigger trend of the combined data, when one element shifts 1 unit, there is a shift of 24% of 1 unit of the second element in the direction of the diagonal line.

The p figure is a test to determine whether the R2 is trustworthy. One simple method to interpret the p figure is the following: If we did the survey again, could we reproduce our conclusions or would the results look very different? The p of 0.001 in the data visualization on the right suggests that we would need to conduct the survey again 1,000 times to possibly reproduce the results of the first survey by coincidence. This is a good sign the first survey results were not coincidence. A p figure below 0.05 is commonly considered credible.



Data points with this unique colour (  ) represent suppliers where employees reported suicides.





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