What the Golden Gate Is (Finally) Doing About Suicides

After years of pressure from victims' families, the installation of $217 million in steel netting is almost complete.


By John Branch Photographs by Jim Wilson

John Branch lives on the Marin County side of the Golden Gate Bridge and has closely followed the long fight for a suicide barrier. Jim Wilson has made more than a dozen visits to the bridge since early 2022.

Nov. 5, 2023

It was May 27, 1937, the opening day for a stunning new suspension bridge across a gap in the California coastline known as the Golden Gate. Before cars were allowed on the crossing, an estimated 200,000 people celebrated between the bridge's four-foot-high rails, more than 200 feet above the water.

Doris Madden, 11, was there with her parents. It was one of her favorite days of her childhood, a story she told until the end of her life.

About 78 years later, in 2015, Madden's 15-year-old grandson, Jesse Madden-Fong, was dropped off at his high school in San Francisco.

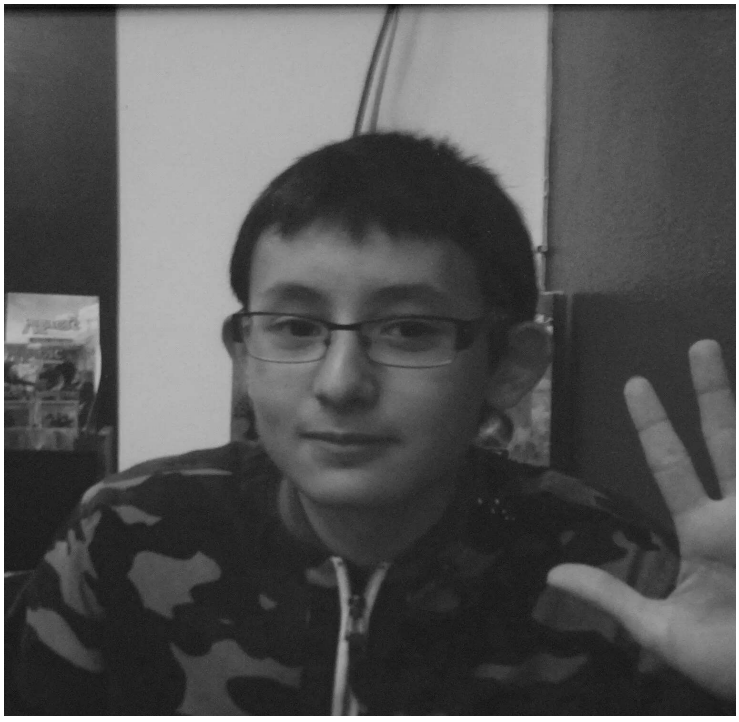
Jesse did not go to class. An hour later, he was on the Golden Gate Bridge, walking alone. The family was told that Jesse had shrugged off his backpack and went over the rail. He left no explanation, no clues, for why he had jumped.

Jesse's mother confirmed her son's identity with the coroner through the boy's new corduroy pants. An urn of Jesse's ashes sits on the mantel of his family's San Francisco home.

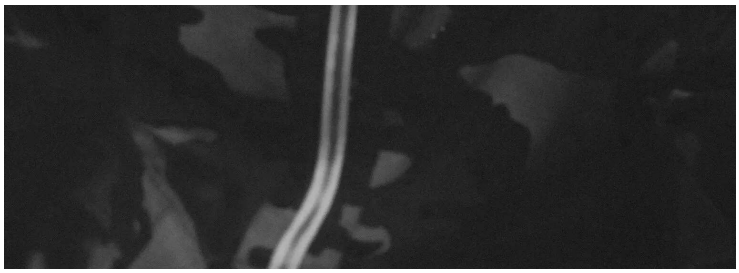
"My mother loved the bridge," said Pat Madden, Jesse's mother and Doris's daughter. "I'm really glad she passed away two years before Jesse."

His was one of 33 confirmed suicides from the bridge that year, a typical number.

For nearly 87 years, it was so easy.

Pat Madden.



Jesse Madden-Fong.

‘It’s About Damn Time’

The Golden Gate Bridge is a rare blend of form and function, a massive structure that somehow adds to nature’s beauty instead of detracting from it.

It stands as one of the world’s engineering marvels and a symbol of Depression-era American muscle. It tickles with its delicate, sweeping lines and harp-string vertical cables, playing hide-and-seek with the ever-shifting light and fog.

Connecting a sophisticated city and an untamed beyond, it is less a gate than an aperture. Everyone views something different through it.

Some see endless possibilities. Some just see the end.

About 2,000 people are known to have died by jumping off the bridge. The count has never been precise, and the true tally is certainly higher, perhaps substantially so, since not all jumps are witnessed and not all bodies are found. At least three cases included a homicide; parents have tossed children over the rail and then jumped in after them.

Such tragedies, officials hope, are mostly in the past. Workers are nearly finished installing 3 ½ miles of stainless steel nets — creating what officials call a “suicide deterrent system” — strung on both sides of the bridge, end to end.

Construction cost $217 million and the system has taken longer to build than the bridge itself did.

The nets are nearly invisible from a distance, blending into the steelwork. They cannot be seen from the 40 million vehicles that cross the bridge each year.

But they are visible to anyone standing at the rail. They hang about 20 feet down and stretch about 20 feet out. They are stitched between 369 new struts, 50 feet apart, painted International Orange like the rest of the bridge.

These are not the soft, springy nets of a circus act. They are taut, marine-grade stainless steel nets meant to withstand the Golden Gate’s combination of rain, wind, salt and fog.

Installed 20 feet below the sidewalk, more than three miles of stainless steel nets have been strung to deter people from jumping — and to catch those who still do.

“We want the message to be that it’s going to hurt, and also jumping off the bridge is illegal,” Denis Mulligan, the general manager of the organization that oversees the bridge, said.

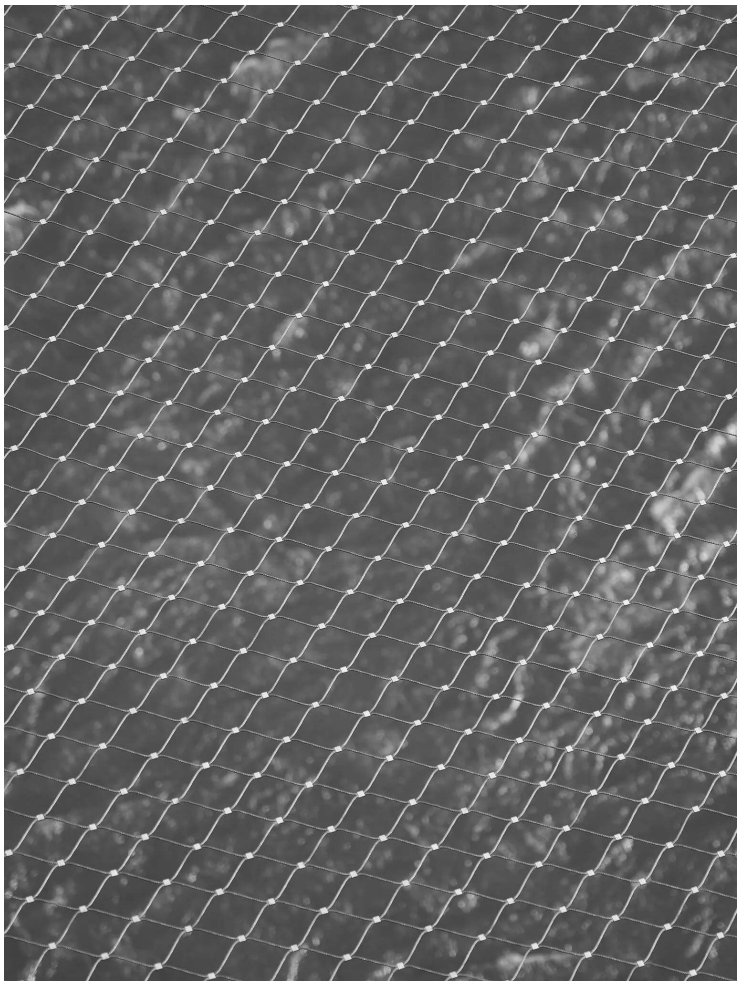
The nets have already shown themselves to be a deterrent, but not a perfect solution.

Several people have jumped into them. Some have been rescued from there, but “a handful” had “jumped into the net and then jumped to their death,” Mulligan said.

He declined to say how many. It will take a year or two of data to fully understand the system’s effectiveness, he said.

In the decade beginning in 2011, bridge officials said, there were 335 confirmed suicides, or an average of 33.5 per year. In 2022, as the first nets were being strung, there were 22. Through October this year, as more nets have been added, there were 13.

“If we save 30 lives a year, and not 31, it’s worth it for those 30 people who we saved,” Mulligan said. “And that’s every year. To greatly reduce the number of people dying in the community is a worthy goal. And to achieve that is success.”



The four-millimeter stainless steel nets are designed to withstand the harsh elements.

Stretched between new steel struts, the nets line both sides, below public sidewalks.

The completion of the system, and the focused two-decade drive to get it done after decades of failed campaigns, has produced a range of emotions.

- “It’s satisfying,” said Manuel Gamboa, who has been a persistent proponent of the nets since his 18-year-old son Kyle drove 100 miles to the bridge one school morning in 2013, stopped his truck in the middle of the bridge, turned on the flashers and leaped over the rail.
- “Part of me is just exhausted that it took this long,” said Paul Muller, president and co-founder the Bridge Rail Foundation, a nonprofit founded in 2006 with a mission of ending suicides at the bridge.
- “I’m glad I’m still alive to see it,” said Dr. Mel Blaustein, a San Francisco psychiatrist who helped push the mission to build a barrier 20 years ago, when he was in his 60s.
- “I’m excited — it will be a good tool to have,” said Lt. Michael Bailey of the Bridge Patrol, which uses surveillance to spot potential jumpers, intervening close to 200 times per year, officials said.
- “It’s about damn time,” said Ken Holmes, the former coroner in Marin County, across the bridge from San Francisco, whose office was responsible for examining the recovered bodies of jumpers.
- “I am relieved,” said Pat Madden, the mother of Jesse. “You just want to spare other people from what you’re going through.”

A Low Railing

The first confirmed suicide from the Golden Gate Bridge happened about 10 weeks after its opening. Harold Wobber, a 47-year-old World War I veteran, reportedly said, “This is as far as I go,” and jumped.

More followed — dozens a year, hundreds a decade. The unique majesty that draws tourists from all over the world made the bridge a premier destination for death.

“There’s a certain magnetic appeal around a suicide site that draws other desperate souls to it,” said John Bateson, a longtime director of a Bay Area suicide prevention center and the author of “The Final Leap,” a 2012 book about suicides at the Golden Gate Bridge. “And the Golden Gate Bridge exerts a larger magnetic pull than anywhere else because of its natural beauty, because of its tragic history.”

Studies have shown that many people will drive across other bridges, like the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge, to jump from the Golden Gate — but not the reverse.

Among other reasons that someone looking to jump might choose the bridge is a near guarantee of death (about 1 in 50 have survived) and a belief that loved ones will be spared the horror of discovering the body.

But there was always something more practical: The railing is just four feet high.

Almost anyone could get over it, whether after long consideration or in a moment of impulse. Some run and hurdle the rail. Others swing a leg up and over it. One elderly man brought a step stool.

“Fundamental to suicide prevention is restricting easy access to lethal means,” said Muller, the Bridge Rail Foundation co-founder. “And the Golden Gate Bridge has provided easy access.”

The bridge's sidewalks have long been closed to pedestrians at night, so most jumps have happened during the day and are often witnessed by drivers, pedestrians and boaters.

Bridge lore has it that the original design called for the railing to be 5 ½ feet tall, but it was lowered either by the chief engineer, Joseph Strauss, (a short man whose statue stands near the Golden Gate Bridge Welcome Center and gift shop) or the architect Irving Morrow, whose credited contributions include many of the bridge's hallmarks, such as its paint color and Art Deco flourishes.

Mulligan, the bridge general manager who spent a decade as its top engineer, said that he had never discovered such plans. But the California Highway Patrol first asked for a higher railing in 1939 to deter jumpers.

That it took so much time and heartache to seriously address the issue is a source of great debate and consternation.

Bureaucratic Indifference

Those in charge of most famous tall structures, from the Eiffel Tower to the Empire State Building, moved quickly to keep people from jumping from them, often after a few deaths. In New York in 2021, access to the Vessel, a 150-foot sculpture composed of spiraling stairs, was shut down after three suicides within one year. It reopened and closed again after a fourth later that year.

Not at the Golden Gate Bridge. Jumping off the bridge was always an option, even a dark joke.

“I grew up in San Francisco,” Mulligan said. “I grew up hearing people say, ‘Well, why don’t you just go jump off the bridge?’ That was what people said. They obviously didn’t understand suicide or mental health.”

Such nonchalance was reflected in the 19-member board of directors for the Golden Gate Bridge, Highway and Transportation District, which oversees the operation of the bridge and a regional bus and ferry system.

“One of the directors actually told me that the solution would be building a diving board on the bridge — to show the callousness I’ve seen people have,” said Dr. Blaustein, a former president of the Northern California Psychiatric Society and longtime medical director of a psychiatric unit a few miles from the bridge.

For decades, decision makers ducked behind concerns over aesthetics, costs and effectiveness.

The middle of the bridge is about 220 feet above the water. The fall takes four seconds, and only about 1 out of 50 have survived.

Clouding serious consideration were long-held misperceptions about suicide — mainly, that people prevented from jumping from the bridge would simply take their lives a different way.

A 1978 study by Richard Seiden, at the University of California, Berkeley, tracked 515 people who, between 1937 and 1971, had gone to the bridge intending to jump and had been persuaded not to. It found that 94 percent were still alive or had died of natural causes.

“Suicidal behavior is crisis-oriented and acute in nature,” Seiden concluded.

The Bridge Patrol is on the front lines of those crises. Created as an antiterrorism force after the Sept. 11 attacks, officers spend much of their energy preventing suicides. Using surveillance and roving patrols, and often assisted by ironworkers, painters and others doing work on the bridge, they try to spot the potential jumpers among millions of bridge visitors every

year.

A planned jump is stopped every other day, on average, bridge officials said.

A large part of the Bridge Patrol's role is to intervene in possible suicide attempts through surveillance and patrols. Such interventions happen every other day, on average, officials said. But not everyone can be stopped.

Lieutenant Bailey, a 14-year patrol veteran, does not count the lives he saves, because then he would have to count the jumps he witnessed and could not stop.

"It's hard not to let it affect you," he said. "We're all humans out here, with normal feelings like anybody else."

Holmes, the Marin County coroner, never knew the victims. He just examined the bodies.

He had worked for the county since 1975, but never appreciated the death toll from the bridge until the early 1990s, when the U.S. Coast Guard moved operations to Marin County from the San Francisco side of the strait. That meant that his office became responsible for examining the bodies of jumpers, mostly retrieved by the Coast Guard.

Holmes knew that a four-second fall is not a peaceful way to die. It shatters bones and rips apart organs. Those who somehow survive the impact usually drown.

It was not the bodies that moved him.

"It was the enormity of the numbers — oh, my God," said Holmes, now retired. "It's not one every few months or anything like that. It was two or three every single month. One year we had 44 — 44! Even my investigators at the time were saying, 'Did you have any idea?' And of course I didn't."

Holmes compiled statistics specifically for Golden Gate jumpers, something not done before. Over 15 years, he found that three-quarters of them were men. The average age was under 40. About 85 percent lived in the Bay Area, and more than 7 percent were from out of state. The most common occupation was student, followed by teacher.

Holmes began appearing regularly at bridge-district board meetings to plead that something be done, joining a small, shifting carousel of researchers, psychiatrists and grieving families.

A Movement Takes Shape

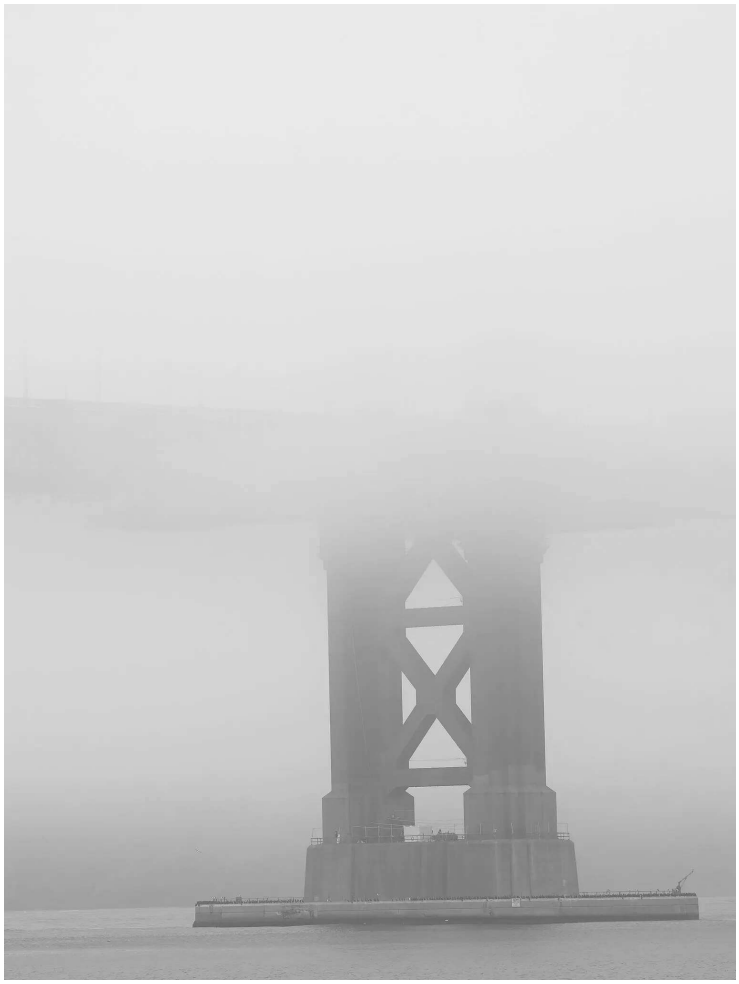
True momentum for the effort came in the early 2000s. A 2003 New Yorker story by Tad Friend, titled “Jumpers,” cast a bright light on the bridge’s dark history. The San Francisco Chronicle followed in 2005 with an unblinking, weeklong series called “Lethal Beauty.”

There were documentaries, including “The Bridge” in 2006, that controversially showed people plummeting into the water.

That same year, a man named David Hull turned his grief into a mission, cofounding the Bridge Rail Foundation. Hull’s 26-year-old daughter had driven two hours from Santa Cruz to jump from the bridge.

The Bridge Rail Foundation organized other families in a common effort. It wrote op-eds and monthly newsletters. It made short films to spread on social media. It created a traveling exhibit of hundreds of shoes worn by the jumpers, including World War I-era boots to represent Wobber, who died by the bridge’s first known suicide.

Adding the nets has taken seven years, three years longer than it took to build the bridge.



Part of the appeal of nets is that they do not change the aesthetic appeal of the bridge.

Mostly, the group focused not on cold data, but on the warmth of humanity and empathy.

“In the beginning, researchers felt that empirical evidence was strong enough that, naturally, it’s going to convince anybody to erect a barrier,” said Bateson, the author. “And, in fact, the emotion was missing from those early arguments.”

Growing numbers of families joined the fight. They crowded meetings. They held photographs of their lost loved ones. They carried the little bag of belongings returned by the coroner — phones, wallets and notes that had been discovered in pockets, left on the rail, found in abandoned cars.

In 2005, finally moved, the bridge board agreed to build a barrier if the money came from outside sources. So began the slow churn of American bureaucracy.

There were environmental studies and engineering tests to ensure that the bridge could withstand any structural changes.

After all the talk of raising the rails, along came an idea borrowed from a successful suicide prevention system at a tall cathedral in Bern, Switzerland.

The nets were a compromise. The Bridge Rail Foundation was so named because it envisioned a higher rail. But to appease opponents who thought that high rails or fencing would mar the bridge’s iconic look or block the views for everyone else, nets became the chosen prevention method in 2008.

Then began years of political wrangling for money. By 2014, with an estimated cost of $76 million for the project, money was committed. There was a call for construction bids. Estimates came in much higher than expected and soon rose again, toward $200 million.

Hopes ebbed and flowed. More families joined the push. More money was found.

“Every month it was delayed, more people were lost,” Madden said.

Manuel and Kymberlyrenee Gamboa showed up to nearly every bridge district meeting for 10 years, driving the same 100-mile route to the bridge that their son had traveled, to plead for faster action.

“I said, ‘I’m going to be here at every meeting until something is done,’” Manuel Gamboa said. “‘It’s not your fault that he chose this bridge. But it is your fault that you don’t have something in place to try to prevent these people from coming here.’”

The nets were expected to take four years to complete. It will be nearly seven. The bridge district is embroiled in legal squabbles with the contractor.

But they are nearly finished, and emotions are mixed. Exhaustion. Satisfaction. Peace.

“On the one hand, it’s been 20 years for me,” said Muller, the Bridge Rail Foundation president. “On the other hand, it’s been 87. Which is staggering.”

True costs are impossible to calculate, even beyond the 2,000 or more who have died. Left behind are family members and friends, all the bridge patrollers, the accidental witnesses, the emergency medical workers, the body retrievers, the coroners.

How many have been forever changed by suicides on the Golden Gate Bridge?

Pat Madden is just one. Her mother loved the bridge. Not only did 11-year-old Doris attend the opening in 1937, but 61-year-old Doris was there for the massive pedestrian celebration of the bridge’s 50th anniversary, in 1987.

The Golden Gate Bridge is a globally famous symbol of San Francisco and California. Not everyone sees beauty in it.

Madden thought she loved the bridge, too. But since Jesse's death, she has avoided crossing it or going places in the city where she knows it might come into view.

"I remember when my husband and I went to back-to-school night early in Jesse's freshman year," she said. "I remember being in his English classroom, and it was evening and the bridge was lit up. And I said to my husband, 'Look, what a beautiful view the students have.'"

She paused.

"It was in full view for Jesse that whole year," she said.

Jesse, like so many others, was drawn to the bridge. There was nothing between life and death but a four-foot rail.

If you are having thoughts of suicide, call or text 988 to reach the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline or go to SpeakingOfSuicide.com/resources for a list of additional resources.

John Branch is a sports reporter. He won the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for feature writing for "Snow Fall," a story about a deadly avalanche in Washington State, and is the author of three books, including "Sidecountry," a collection of New York Times stories, in 2021. More about John Branch

Jim Wilson is a New York Times photographer based in San Francisco. He has been a member of The Times's photo department since 1980. More about Jim Wilson