

One fifth of world suicides linked to unemployment

By Barry Mason
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Previous studies have shown that there is a correlation between unemployment and suicide. However, data on the direct effect of unemployment on suicide was not so readily available. A new study by Dr. Carlos Nordt of Zurich University's Psychiatric Hospital and published on the *Lancet* Psychiatry web site in February sets out to address this situation.

The study aims to "enhance knowledge of the specific effect of unemployment on suicide by analysing global public data classified according to world regions."

It concludes that around 45,000 people commit suicide each year because they have become unemployed. It shows that for the year 2008, the beginning of the economic crisis, suicides associated with unemployment were nine times greater than previously thought.

The study covers 63 countries in four regions of the world over the years 2000 to 2011. Researchers used this time period to be able to contrast the period of relative economic stability (2000-2007) with that of economic crisis (2008-2011). The regions were the Americas, including the US and Mexico; northern and Western Europe, including France, Germany and the UK; Southern and Eastern Europe, including Greece, Italy and Romania; and non-American and non-European regions, including Australia, Japan and South Africa.

The study uses data on suicide deaths from the World Health Organisation (WHO) mortality database and economic data from the International Monetary Fund's world economic outlook database.

It notes that, as with previous economic crises, "current data from Europe, the USA and Asia suggest an association between the 2008 economic crisis, rising unemployment rates and increased rates of death by

suicide."

The study uses different statistical tools in an attempt to isolate the specific effects of unemployment on suicide rates. Among its findings are that the figures of an increasing unemployment rate lag behind figures of an increase in suicide by six months. Such a time lag points to an increase in stress, insecurity and a deterioration of mental health as workers are earmarked for possible redundancy. The threat of unemployment needs to be included in the suicide figures, explain the authors. The study concludes that "suicide due to unemployment might be severely underestimated if studies focus only (on) the time period of the economic crisis."

Another finding is that the suicide risk associated with unemployment was greater in those countries with a lower unemployment rate. The finding points to the isolating impact of unemployment and its associated feelings of worthlessness in countries where unemployment is not generally widespread.

It is not just the person being made unemployed that is affected by increasing levels of unemployment. Loss of a job also affects the risk of suicide of other members of the family. Men and women are equally at risk of suicide after losing their jobs.

Over the period 2000 to 2011, the relative risk of suicide after becoming unemployed increased by about a quarter. A fifth of nearly a quarter of a million suicides each year in the 63 countries, across the four regions, resulted from people being made unemployed.

Roger Webb and Navneet Kapur of the Centre for Suicide Prevention at the University of Manchester added in a commentary in the *Lancet* that suicide cases linked to the economic downturn were "only the tip of the iceberg of a wider range of social and psychological problems. Many affected individuals who remain in

work ... encounter serious psychological stressors due to pernicious economic strains other than unemployment, including falling income, zero-hour contracting, job insecurity, bankruptcy, debt and home repossession... [We] require a better understanding of other psychological manifestations of economic adversity, including non-fatal self-harm, stress and anxiety, low mood, hopelessness, alcohol problems, anger, familial conflict and relationship breakdown.”

The paper concludes with a call for the need to focus on suicide prevention work. It notes that “the interaction of fiscal austerity with economic shocks and weak social protection seems to escalate health and social crises, at least in Europe.”

The austerity measures imposed on Greece by the European Union have had a devastating impact on health, including mental health. The *BMJ Open*, an online journal, published a report in May 2014 on suicide levels in Greece. It noted: “In 30 years the highest months of suicide in Greece occurred in 2012. The passage of new austerity measures in June 2011 marked the beginning of significant, abrupt and sustained increases in total suicides. Suicides by men in Greece also underwent a significant, abrupt and sustained increase in October 2008 when the Greek recession began...”

A report published in 2013 showed unemployment has a disproportionately harder impact on those who already have mental health problems. The report, published on the online science journal *Plos One*, was based on research done by Kings College London’s Institute of Psychiatry. It collected data from 27 countries across Europe on 20,000 people before and after the 2008 economic crisis.

An examination of the research published on the Institute of Psychiatry” web site explained, “In 2006, unemployment was at 7.1 percent for people without mental health problems, compared to 12.7 percent for people with mental health problems. In 2010, this rose to 9.8 percent and 18.2 percent respectively, corresponding to an increase of 5.5 percent for people with mental health problems vs. 2.7 percent increase for people without mental health problems.”