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UK data show recession suicide risk

Research sheds light on changing suicide patterns, conditions that raise risk

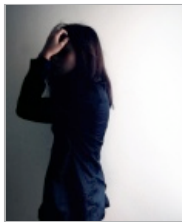


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An analysis of suicide incidence over the past 150 years in England and Wales shows that although rates have fallen dramatically, the risk tends to rise in periods of economic recession and high unemployment.

"[This] has implications in relation to the current and future economic crises," write the authors, Kyla Thomas and David Gunnell of the University of Bristol, UK. "It is important that prompt preventative action is taken to offset the impact of the current economic recession on suicide."

The study¹, published in this month's edition of the *International Journal of Epidemiology*, confirms results of other research showing that suicide risk rose for adults during the Great Depression in the 1930s. It also suggests that young people should no longer be considered a low-risk population.

Thomas and Gunnell looked into patterns and methods of suicide among men and women over 15 years of age using national data from 1861, the earliest date of available mortality records, through to 2007. To compare rates between time periods their statistical analysis took into account differences in the population, age, and sex.

The lowest rates were recorded during the 21st century. Suicides were on the rise from the mid-19th century through to the early 20th century for men and to the mid-1960s for women — in spite of general improvements in health and living standards during that period. There is a paradox in recent years too, as suicide rates are falling despite persisting poverty, according to David Goldberg of King's College in London. "It is clear that other factors have to be considered [to explain the patterns]," he writes in a commentary².

The link between unemployment and depression is well-established, says Goldberg, with a four-fold rise in the risk of committing suicide documented as early as one month after someone loses their job. This then soars with unemployment lasting more than one year.

During the Great Depression, unemployment was higher than in other periods of economic recession and this meant that men — the main wage earners at the time — were at a particularly high risk of suicide. But there is also evidence of a link between self harm and other economic crises, according to Goldberg.

"In the recessions of 1980–81 and 1990–91, there were increases [in suicide] following economic downturns with a lag of ~1 year before rates reached their maximum," he explains. "Male unemployment rates were at a low of 5% in 1980, but reached 12.4% in 1983, beginning to fall in 1984."

For women, these periods of less severe economic hardship made little difference on suicide rates, which have been on the decline since the 1960s, according to the research.

"The epidemiology of suicide in England and Wales has changed markedly over the past 146 years," write the authors. Although rates are consistently higher among men, the male-female ratio has changed over time, possibly because of how suicide methods differed in acceptability and lethality.

Age patterns also varied by sex and between periods, with young men falling into the high-incidence category after the 1990s for the first time since records began.

"For many years, medical students were taught that the risk of suicide increased with age," comments Goldberg. "What the figures now show is that rates are beginning to converge—the authors stress that the 25- to 34-year-age group is now at greatest risk."

The study shows that gassing became a popular method of committing suicide at the end of the 19th century. "The rapid rise in gas suicide deaths in the 1920s highlights how quickly a new method of suicide can be established in a population when it is easily available," write Thomas and Gunnell.

Suicide rates began to decrease after the mid-1900s after gas supplies became safer at home and cars were fitted with catalytic converters, the authors add — and this shows the benefits of prevention. "Although method restriction is a useful public health tool, it is also important to focus on strategies that limit method substitution and the introduction of novel suicide methods."

In an editorial³ published today in *The Lancet*, Niall Boyce argues for the need to harness the internet as a new tool for suicide prevention, countering concerns that the increasing use of online media has predominantly negative impacts on suicide risk and mental illness.

References and link

1. Thomas K and Gunnell D. Suicide in England and Wales 1861–2007: a time-trends analysis. *Int J Epidemiol* 2010, **39**:1464–1475. doi: [10.1093/ije/dyq094](https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyq094)
2. Goldberg D. Commentary: Thomas & Gunnell's paper. *Int J Epidemiol* 2010, **39**:1–2. doi: [10.1093/ije/dyq160](https://doi.org/10.1093/ije/dyq160)
3. Boyce N. Pilots of the future: suicide prevention and the internet. *The Lancet* 2010, **376**:1889–90. doi: [10.1016/S0140-6736\(10\)62199-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(10)62199-X)
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