Relationship between the Economy, Unemployment and Suicide

Prepared by the Suicide Prevention Resource Center
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Background

Recent economic turmoil, increased unemployment and record foreclosure rates have spurred media inquiries about whether these changes will lead to increased suicides. SPRC conducted a literature review of relevant research published in the past two decades. The review shows that a strong relationship exists between unemployment, the economy, and suicide. A common "chain of adversity" can begin with job loss and move toward depression through financial strain and loss of personal control. In fact, this chain leads to myriad financial, social, health and mental health outcomes—all of them negative. The most common (but by no means the only) mental health outcome is depression, which significantly increases suicide risk. The associated financial outcomes (such as mortgage foreclosures and loss of retirement security) have not been researched with respect to suicide. However, the potential link is that for vulnerable individuals, losses (whether real or anticipated) that result in humiliation, shame, or despair can trigger suicide attempts.

These talking points describe the complex interaction between economic cycles, unemployment, and suicide, and provide key messages that promote suicide prevention. We invite you to use these messages in responding to media queries and coverage, or for related suicide prevention activities. We also recommend providing media contacts with *At-a-Glance: Safe Reporting on Suicide*.

Talking Points

Unemployment is bad for your general health.

- Unemployment is associated with an array of poor health outcomes, including death by nearly all causes (except cancer and cardiovascular events). In the U.S., where a large portion of the population accesses healthcare through employment, this connection may be even stronger than in countries where government-financed healthcare is the norm.

Unemployment contributes to suicide risk, but does not "cause" suicides on its own.

- Employment status is but one of dozens of factors that interact dynamically within individuals, communities, and societies and affect the risk for suicide.
- Although unemployment is associated with increased rates of suicide, many individuals may have lower rates of employment because of mental health and/or substance abuse problems, which are also associated with increased suicide rates.

Unemployment causes financial strain and can lead to depression and other problems as individuals perceive a loss of personal control.

- Economic circumstances themselves are insufficient to cause a suicide; in fact, we do not know of any single factor that is sufficient on its own to "cause" a suicide. Stressors such as the loss of a job, a home, or retirement security can result in shame, humiliation or despair, and in that context, can precipitate suicide attempts in those who are already vulnerable or do not have sufficient resources to draw on for support. In most, but not all cases, mental health problems are among the factors that increase vulnerability.
- Unemployment (and resulting financial strain) is associated with depression, substance abuse problems and marital turmoil, all of which are independently linked to suicide risk.

We can expect a sharp downturn in the economy to increase suicide risk, especially among working-age adults and older adults whose retirement security is threatened.

- Widespread increases in unemployment, usually in the context of unstable or declining economic opportunity, are strongly linked with increases in suicide rates; the largest changes in the economic cycle generally produce the largest increases in suicides. These links between unemployment and suicide are especially strong for working-age men, but show up in other groups as well, including women. Suicide rates tend to decrease with rising optimism and opportunity.
- In times of economic instability, anxiety over the possibility of losing a job, home or retirement nest egg may affect the employed, as well.

Leaders and their organizations can take steps to lessen the impact of the economic downturn.

- Helpful messages should:
    - Temper sensational bad economic news with realism. In truth, we do not know how steep, deep, or long the downturn will be.
    - Encourage community-based organizations and groups to increase levels of all types of support to those most affected by the economy, with the goal of relieving financial strain.
    - Help those affected cope effectively, including seeking help from others.
- Organizations in the public and private sectors should help make key services more accessible, especially high-quality, comprehensive transition services for the unemployed and assistance for homeowners threatened by foreclosure.

Individuals in distress can take action to reduce their own levels of distress.

- Individuals can engage in activities that relieve anxiety and emotional distress and focus on managing areas in their lives where they still have some control. For instance, people can strengthen their connections with family members and friends, schedule regular times for healthy and relaxing activities, and seek re-employment training.
- Individuals who need additional help and support should seek the advice of a faith leader, doctor, or community health or mental health clinic.
- Individuals who feel they are in suicidal crisis (or are concerned about someone who is) should call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255).

Ordinary individuals can make a difference by becoming aware of the warning signs of suicide and helping those who may be in danger get help.

- Warning signs of suicide can be downloaded at http://www.sprc.org/featured_resources/bpr/PDF/AASWarningSigns_factsheet.pdf.
- The media can help spread the word about preventing suicide. When reporting on suicide, the media should follow nationally recognized recommendations developed through work of the Annenberg Public Policy Center and leading experts (http://www.afsp.org/media or http://www.sprc.org/library/at_a_glance.pdf), since some types of reporting can contribute to copycat suicides and contagion.

This is an important time to advance our work on the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention.

- Public and private organizations at all levels have a role in preventing suicide—suicide prevention is "everyone's business." For suicide prevention ideas, read the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (http://mentalhealth.samhsa.gov/publications/allpubs/SMA01-3517/).