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The Effect of Unemployment on Suicide Risk



From Science to Practice

Using Research to Promote Safety and Prevent Suicide

Issue

Unemployment can be detrimental to mental health.¹ It is even associated with increased risk for suicide.² However, the relationship between unemployment and suicide is a complex one.³ While many published studies confirm a relationship, a handful have reported contradictory evidence (i.e., no association or a weak association), suggesting that individual factors (e.g., mental health) and contextual factors (e.g., availability and adequacy of unemployment benefits) also play a role.^{4,5,6,7} Clinicians can help by informing unemployed Veterans about employment services and offering additional screening during times of unemployment.

Key Findings

- Unemployment is a stronger risk factor for suicide among men than women.^{2,8}
- The age-adjusted suicide rate increases when the economy is in recession and more people are unemployed, and it falls when the economy is booming and more people have jobs.³
- Unemployment becomes a greater risk factor for suicide as a worker ages.³ However, studies conducted in other countries suggest that this correlation may be unique to the United States.⁹
- Unless it is part of a mass layoff, losing a job does not seem to immediately increase suicide risk.¹⁰ Instead, suicide risk increases the longer a person is unemployed, with risk likely peaking within the first five years following job loss.^{8,11}

Counterintuitively, one study found that suicide among men unemployed for more than two weeks increased during times of declining national unemployment and decreased during times of rising national unemployment.⁹ The researchers suggested that this may be because people who lose their jobs during times of high unemployment are less likely to blame themselves.⁹

- Job insecurity (the perceived threat and associated fear of losing one's job) is associated with higher odds of suicidal ideation.¹²
- People with mental health problems, who are predisposed to job insecurity, may be particularly at risk for suicide after losing their job.⁸
- The availability and adequacy of unemployment benefits appear to moderate the role of unemployment as a risk for suicide, as demonstrated by studies that compared both countries^{1,13} and states.⁵
- Perceived social support from both family and friends seems to protect unemployed people from experiencing suicidal ideation, particularly those who have been unemployed for more than a year.¹⁴

Implications

While unemployment is associated with suicide risk, some researchers point out that "unemployment rates themselves account for only a small fraction of all suicides, with other factors (such as divorce rates, alcohol regulation, and gun laws) being potentially more important."¹⁵ Unemployment among Veterans is also relatively low, compared with a decade ago.¹⁵ Nevertheless, it is important to appreciate the risk unemployment confers for suicide at the individual level.

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Ways You Can Help

- Inform the unemployed Veterans you encounter about the career and employment resources available to them at www.va.gov/careers-employment. Incorporating elements of outplacement, such as psychosocial support and assistance with formulating a job-search strategy, can also be helpful.¹
- Inform the unemployed Veterans you encounter about unemployment benefits they may be entitled to, which vary from state to state.⁵ More information is available at www.usa.gov/unemployment.
- Connect Veterans with Veterans Health Administration employment options and services, such as Compensated Work Therapy (www.va.gov/health/cwt) and the Homeless Veteran Community Employment Service (www.va.gov/homeless/for_homeless_veterans.asp).
- Ascertain whether the unemployed Veterans you encounter blame themselves or external circumstances for their job loss and assess their level of perceived social support.^{9,14} For those who blame themselves, cognitive behavioral therapy techniques may be helpful in getting them to change self-defeating thoughts.
- Screen Veterans who are unemployed for mental health conditions that may put them at increased risk for suicide and connect them with mental health care providers.

There is no single cause of suicide. It is often the result of a complex interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. To prevent Veteran suicide, we must maximize protective factors and minimize risk factors at all of these levels.

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