

2008 economic crisis could be to blame for thousands of excess suicides worldwide

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In a paper published today in *BMJ*, researchers are suggesting that the 2008 global economic crisis could be to blame for the increase in suicide rates in European and American countries, particularly among males and in countries with higher levels of job losses.

In 2008, the International Labour Organization estimated that the number of jobless worldwide would reach approximately 212 million by 2009, an increase of 34 million compared with 2007. The World Health Organization raised concerns of the crisis' impact on [global health](#) and called for action to monitor and protect health, in particular amongst the poor and vulnerable.

Available studies only report data from a limited number of countries and there have been no systematic investigations into the broader international pattern or the sex/age groups and regions most affected.

In this study, the first to look at international trends in [suicide](#), researchers from the universities of Hong Kong, Oxford and Bristol used the latest available data from 54 countries to assess changes in suicide rates following the 2008 crisis, as well as differential effects by sex, age, country and employment change.

Data were used from the World Health Organization (WHO) mortality database, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the International Monetary Fund's World Economic Outlook database. Unemployment was used as the main economic indicator.

The researchers assessed time trends and estimated the expected numbers of suicides using former trends. They used the year 2000 as the starting point because suicide rates in some countries in the 1990s were affected by the recession in the early 1990s and the Asian economic crisis in the late 1990s. The main analysis focused on suicide rates in 2009.

Different age categories were used to determine whether the impact of the global economic crisis varied amongst ages: 15-24 (just entering labour market), 25-44 (early years of employment), 45-64 (later employment) and 65+ (post retirement).

In 2009, there was a 37% rise in unemployment and 3% falls in GDP per capita, reflecting the onset of the economic crisis in 2008. All European groups experienced rises in unemployment in 2009 and 2010.

Unemployment rates started rising in USA and Canada in 2008 followed by dramatic increases in 2009-10.

In 2009, the overall male suicide rate rose 3.3%, with an excess of 5000 male suicides in all countries studied. These increases were mainly seen in the 27 European countries (4.2%) and 18 American countries (6.4%) studied. The largest increase in Europe was seen in 15-24 year old men and in 45-64 year old men in America. There was no change in suicide in European females and a small increase was seen in American females.

Also in 2009, new EU member states (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Romania and Slovenia) showed the largest increase in male [suicide rates](#) (13.3%) within Europe. USA and Canada showed an 8.9% increase and Caribbean and Central American countries showed a 6.4% increase in male suicides compared with a smaller increase in South American countries.

Rises seemed to be associated with the magnitude of increases in unemployment, particularly for males and in countries with low pre-crisis unemployment levels.

The researchers say that this study documents a "marked rise in suicide following the 2008 global economic crisis". The increases mainly occurred in men, with 5000 estimated excess suicides in 2009 compared with those expected based on previous trends.

The study adds to other evidence suggesting that the 2008 [global economic crisis](#) caused subsequent rises in suicide in affected countries. Several recent studies have shown an increased prevalence of depression or anxiety after the economic crisis, particularly in people who experienced unstable employment or financial problems. This is consistent with the documented increases in suicide during past recessions, such as the Great Depression in the 1930s.

The researchers say that their findings are "likely to be an underestimate of the true global impact of the economic crisis on suicide" as data were unavailable for a number of countries. Also, increases in suicide are likely to be the tip of the iceberg of recession-related emotional distress: for every suicide approximately 30-40 people make suicide attempts and for every suicide attempt about ten people experience suicidal thoughts. In the 20 European countries with available data for 2010, their analysis indicated an even larger increase in male suicide in 2010 (10.8%) than in 2009.

The researchers conclude that "urgent action is needed to prevent the [economic crisis](#) from further increasing suicides" and that [labour market](#) programmes may "help offset the impact of recession on suicide".

More information: Impact of 2008 global economic crisis on suicide: time trend study in 54 countries, *BMJ*, 2013.

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