

Suicide rates soar in Greece as economic cuts bite

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(Medical Xpress)—The effect of economic cuts on debt ravaged Greece included a dramatic rise in the number of men committing suicide, according to new research.

The research, by Dr Nikolaos Antonakakis and Professor Alan Collins at the University of Portsmouth, is the first to examine the direct impact of fiscal austerity on [suicide rates](#) in any country.

The two economists are now calling for governments and agencies to find ways of stopping people being broken by harsh economic cuts.

The research is published in the journal *Social Science and Medicine*.

According to the research, every one per cent fall in government spending in Greece leads to a 0.43 per cent rise in suicides among men. Put simply, 551 men committed [suicide](#) between 2009 and 2010 in Greece solely due to fiscal austerity.

Dr Antonakakis said: "We were surprised, this is a huge number, but the results were very clear – more men commit suicide as economic conditions worsen.

"Interestingly, the effects of fiscal austerity and economic growth are gender-specific, with no obvious rise in the number of women committing suicide."

Men aged 45-89 are the most likely to commit suicide in response to harsh economic cuts because they are most likely to suffer drastic cuts to their salaries and pensions.

Surprisingly, the study – which examined suicides and the economy over more than four decades – also found an increase in [alcohol consumption](#) and divorce helped reduce suicide rates among the over-45s.

Dr Antonakakis, a Senior Lecturer in Portsmouth Business School and an Assistant Professor in Vienna University of Economics and Business, said: "Despite its legal obligation to assess the health effects of EU policies, the Directorate-General for Health and Consumer Protection of the European Commission has been rather passive in terms of assessing the impact of the troika's push for austerity, and has rather limited EU commentary to advise how health ministries should cut their budgets.

"Only recently has the European Commission begun measures to release structural funds to support access to health care for those otherwise without cover.

"Euro zone leaders should put greater emphasis on stimulating debt-stricken economies to mitigate or even eliminate the negative effects of fiscal consolidation and austerity on suicides."

The authors are also calling for specialised suicide prevention programmes to be set up in Greece to help the most distressed and vulnerable.

The researchers studied the number of suicides in Greece from 1968-2011.

The results provide the most comprehensive and up to date picture of the effect of the economic downturn on Greece, which received its first

bailout of €110 billion in 2010 with strict conditions including tough austerity measures; privatisation of government assets; and dramatic changes to the country's industries and government. The effects of these measures include soaring unemployment rates and a sharp decline in growth.

The researchers found:

- As growth fell and unemployment rose, suicides among men rose by between 1.4 and 2.2 per cent, respectively;
- Negative [economic growth](#) and rising unemployment lead to significantly increased likelihood of younger men, aged 25-44, committing suicide, with a one per cent increase in unemployment leading to a 3.5 per cent rise in suicides among this age group, though migration and receiving money from family members who had migrated is found to reduce suicides among both the youth and female population.
- A decline in fertility rates of women aged 25-64 leads to an increase in suicides rates among men. This may be because fertility rate usually serves as proxy for the degree of social integration and a decline in fertility can be interpreted as an increase in social disintegration and exclusion;
- And that alcohol consumption and divorce reduce the suicide risk among men aged 45 and older.

The outlook for Greece in the short to medium term does not look encouraging, Dr Antonakakis said.

"The situation in Greece is improving and the country recently returned to the bond markets to get self-financed for the first time since it needed international rescue loans in 2010. However, the road is still very steep. Unemployment is at 27 per cent, and among youth, it is 60 per cent, and the country's debt is still at an unsustainable 170 per cent, which cannot

be self-served."

The researchers are calling for more research to discover if the effects of fiscal austerity found in Greece apply also to other countries.

More information: *Social Science and Medicine*, "The Impact of Fiscal Austerity on Suicide: On the Empirics of a Modern Greek Tragedy."
Nikolaos Antonakakis and Alan Collins (in press)

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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