

Unmet job expectations linked to a rise in suicide, deaths of despair

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Declines in blue-collar jobs may have left some working-class men

frustrated by unmet job expectations and more likely to suffer an early death by suicide or drug poisoning, according to a study led by sociologists at The University of Texas at Austin.

In the study, the researchers compared life outcomes of 11,680 men to the job expectations they held as [high school seniors](#) in the early 1980s. The study showed that men who expected to work in [jobs](#) that did not require a college degree but later faced declines in the job market were nearly three times as likely to suffer early deaths by [suicide](#) and drug poisoning as men who sought work that required a bachelor's degree.

The study, published in *JAMA Network Open*, is the first to link the rise in suicide and drug-poisoning deaths among men without a college degree to declines in working-class jobs.

"Work plays a major role in how individuals experience their communities, derive a sense of purpose, and thus develop a sense of psychological well-being," said lead author Chandra Muller, a sociology professor and researcher at the Population Research Center at UT Austin. "It's possible that occupational expectations developed in adolescence serve as a benchmark for perceptions of adult success and, when unmet, pose a risk of self-injury."

Early [death](#) from self-injury has risen dramatically in recent decades, especially among middle-age white men whose deaths by suicide and drug poisoning increased by 9 and 31 per 100,000 (respectively) between 1980 and 2013. At the same time, the [labor market](#) also experienced a discerning trend: the decline of well-paying jobs that do not require a [college degree](#).

Researchers from UT Austin, the University of Minnesota and the University of Wisconsin-Madison investigated the relationship between the two trends using data from the High School and Beyond cohort, a

nationally representative sample of 11,680 men who were surveyed throughout high school in the early 1980s, again in 1992 (when they were 28-30 years old), and again in 2015.

Between 1992 and 2015, less than 6% of the sample had died. The researchers compared suicide and drug poisoning deaths, which are forms of self-injury, to other causes of early adult deaths, such as heart attacks and cancer. They found that the men most likely to suffer a death by suicide or drug poisoning were those who as adolescents expected to earn enough to support a family through some type of semi-skilled labor that later declined when they reached adulthood, such as manufacturing, mechanics and carpentry.

The study showed that neither educational attainment nor the actual job worked increased risk for death by self-injury. Furthermore, unmet occupational expectations were not associated with a higher risk of an [early death](#) by natural or other causes. This comparison further strengthened their conclusions about a link between a decline of working-class jobs and deaths of despair.

"Our findings suggest closed pathways to sustaining working-class jobs may contribute to men's increasing rates of suicide and drug-poisoning mortality," Muller said. "The social, psychological and cultural ideals associated with certain occupations are important considerations in labor policy, such as minimum wage policies or job retraining programs, as strategies for suicide prevention."

More information: Chandra Muller et al, Association of Job Expectations Among High School Students With Early Death During Adulthood, *JAMA Network Open* (2020). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.27958](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.27958)

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