

One in five suicides is associated with unemployment

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Every year, around 45,000 people take their own lives because they are out of work or someone close to them is affected by unemployment, as a study by the University of Zurich now reveals. It includes data of 63 countries and demonstrates that during the 2008 economic crisis the number of all suicides associated with unemployment was nine times higher than previously believed.

Unemployment can drive people to suicide. Numerous studies have demonstrated that there is a relationship between [unemployment](#) and poor health and that (the threat of) losing a job and prolonged unemployment can constitute a serious situation for those affected as well as their relatives. The debate on this fateful association was reignited by the 2008 [economic crisis](#) and the subsequent austerity policies in many countries. While many studies have merely focused on crisis years and examined single countries or one world region, now, for the first time, Carlos Nordt, Ingeborg Warnke, Erich Seifritz and Wolfram Kawohl from the University of Zurich's Psychiatric Hospital have been able to draw a larger picture for four regions in the world from 2000 to 2011. "Every year, around one in five [suicides](#) is associated with

unemployment," says first author Carlos Nordt.

The study has just been published in the journal *The Lancet Psychiatry*.

All four regions of the world affected

Every year, almost a million people die by suicide worldwide. In order to find out how many suicides are associated with unemployment, the UZH researchers included data from 63 countries between 2000 and 2011 in their study. The countries were divided into four regions: North and South America, northern and western Europe, southern and eastern Europe, and Non-Americas and non-Europe. No data was available from China or India. "Despite country-specific particularities, we found a similarly strong association between unemployment and suicide rates in all four regions," summarises sociologist Nordt. Moreover, a changing unemployment rate affected both sex as well as different age groups equally.

One in five suicides a year was associated with unemployment. And: "After the crisis year in 2008, the number of suicides increased short-term by 5,000 cases," says Nordt. Other studies had already estimated this figure. What was not known, however, was that around 46,000 suicides overall were associated with unemployment that year: "Therefore, suicides associated with unemployment totaled a nine-fold higher number of deaths than excess suicides attributed to the most recent economic crisis," explains Nordt.

People already react to a crisis beforehand

The impact of a change in unemployment on suicide was stronger in countries with a lower rather than with a higher pre-crisis unemployment rate. Therefore, according to the researchers, investments in programs that integrate people in the [job market](#) and promote a healthy work climate are also essential in countries with comparably

lower unemployment rates. Interestingly, the study also shows that the rise in the suicide rate preceded the [unemployment rate](#) by around six months. "The development on the job market was obviously anticipated and the uncertainty regarding the development of the economic situation already seems to have negative consequences," concludes psychiatrist and senior author Wolfram Kawohl. Mounting pressure at the workplace - such as through restructurings - can thus encourage suicides. "Training for specialists such as those in the human resources department is needed to recognize this increased suicide risk in people both in and out of work more effectively and to help deal with the problem," recommends Kawohl.

It is well known that particularly vulnerable individuals have a greater risk of dying by suicide. Such factors (e.g. mental disorders), however, could not be included in this study due to a lack of available data.

A wider social environment is affected

It is also important to recognize that the problems caused by unemployment do not just have an impact on those directly affected: The results regarding suicide and unemployment show that people over the age of 65 - i.e. people who are often no longer active on the job market - are also affected. Consequently, as Kawohl advocates: "Fears among the population in the run-up to economic changes should already be taken seriously and suitable interventions developed and promoted to prevent suicides".

More information: Carlos Nordt, Ingeborg Warnke, Erich Seifritz, Wolfram Kawohl. Modelling suicide and unemployment: a longitudinal analysis covering 63 countries, 2000-2011. *The Lancet Psychiatry*. online February 11, 2015. [dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(14\)00118-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)00118-7)

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