

Modelling suicide and unemployment: a longitudinal analysis covering 63 countries, 2000–11



Carlos Nordt, Ingeborg Warnke, Erich Seifritz, Wolfram Kawohl

Summary

Background As with previous economic downturns, there has been debate about an association between the 2008 economic crisis, rising unemployment, and suicide. Unemployment directly affects individuals' health and, unsurprisingly, studies have proposed an association between unemployment and suicide. However, a statistical model examining the relationship between unemployment and suicide by considering specific time trends among age-sex-country subgroups over wider world regions is still lacking. We aimed to enhance knowledge of the specific effect of unemployment on suicide by analysing global public data classified according to world regions.

Methods We retrospectively analysed public data for suicide, population, and economy from the WHO mortality database and the International Monetary Fund's world economic outlook database from 2000 to 2011. We selected 63 countries based on sample size and completeness of the respective data and extracted the information about four age groups and sex. To check stability of findings, we conducted an overall random coefficient model including all study countries and four additional models, each covering a different world region.

Findings Despite differences in the four world regions, the overall model, adjusted for the unemployment rate, showed that the annual relative risk of suicide decreased by 1.1% (95% CI 0.8–1.4) per year between 2000 and 2011. The best and most stable final model indicated that a higher suicide rate preceded a rise in unemployment (lagged by 6 months) and that the effect was non-linear with higher effects for lower baseline unemployment rates. In all world regions, the relative risk of suicide associated with unemployment was elevated by about 20–30% during the study period. Overall, 41 148 (95% CI 39 552–42 744) suicides were associated with unemployment in 2007 and 46 131 (44 292–47 970) in 2009, indicating 4983 excess suicides since the economic crisis in 2008.

Interpretation Suicides associated with unemployment totalled a nine-fold higher number of deaths than excess suicides attributed to the most recent economic crisis. Prevention strategies focused on the unemployed and on employment and its conditions are necessary not only in difficult times but also in times of stable economy.

Funding University of Zurich.

Introduction

Almost 1 million people around the world die by suicide every year,¹ constituting 2% of the global burden by the year 2020.² Because suicide is partly preventable (eg, by changes in physicians' education or by restricting access to lethal methods),³ several countries have adopted appropriate prevention strategies.^{1,4}

As in earlier economic downturns,^{5–8} the 2008 world economic crisis led to the re-emergence of the debate on the effect of the economy on suicide. Recessions, that is, decreases in the gross domestic product (GDP) over subsequent quarters, exhibit strong reductions in macroeconomic aggregates such as consumption, investment, industrial production, employment, exports, and imports.⁹ Accordingly, the 2008 economic crisis saw a 2% decline in world per capita GDP in 2009,⁹ and worldwide 31.8 million more people were unemployed in 2013 than in 2007.¹⁰ Whereas evidence suggests that all-cause mortality declines during recession, suicide does not.¹¹ In line with evidence on former crises, current data from Europe,^{12–16} the USA,^{13,17} and Asia¹⁸ suggest an association between the 2008 economic crisis, rising unemployment rates, and

increased rates of death by suicide. Men and those of working age seem to be particularly affected.^{5,8,12,13,19} The association between unemployment and poor health²⁰ or suicide probably emerges from its direct effects on the individual via mechanisms such as increased probability of depressive illness, financial strain, decreased affordability of mental health care, or disruption of present treatment regimes.²¹ Accordingly, governmental interventions to keep and reintegrate people in jobs might be a promising solution.⁸

However, the significance of the effect of unemployment on suicide has not been clearly shown.²² This absence of demonstration could be because of variability in research design or differing statistical models. Some studies have linked excess suicides to rising unemployment during the economic crisis by applying only a time indicator of 2007–09,^{13,16} although these studies considered linear long-term trends in the suicide rates. Previous evidence supports a time lag between the development of the economy and suicide related to awareness of job insecurity among other factors.^{6,14,18} Moreover, there are hints of a non-linear relationship between unemployment and suicide, and

Lancet Psychiatry 2015

Published Online
February 11, 2015
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(14\)00118-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)00118-7)

See Online/Comment
[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(14\)00129-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)00129-1)

Department of Psychiatry,
Psychotherapy and
Psychosomatics, Psychiatric
Hospital, University of Zurich,
Zurich, Switzerland
(C Nordt PhD, I Warnke PhD,
Prof E Seifritz MD, PD
W Kawohl MD)

Correspondence to:
Dr Carlos Nordt, Psychiatric
Hospital, University of Zurich,
Lenggstrasse 31, 8032 Zurich,
Switzerland
cnordt@bli.uzh.ch

	Americas			Northern and western Europe			Southern and eastern Europe			Non-Americans and non-Europe			Overall (all study countries)		
	Estimate	SE	p value	Estimate	SE	p value	Estimate	SE	p value	Estimate	SE	p value	Estimate	SE	p value
Intercept	-9.0245	0.1256	<0.0001	-8.4071	0.0931	<0.0001	-8.5809	0.1250	<0.0001	-9.6856	0.3669	<0.0001	-8.8106	0.1008	<0.0001
Sex (ref: men)															
Women	-1.5377	0.1062	<0.0001	-1.2490	0.0758	<0.0001	-1.5679	0.1060	<0.0001	-1.0595	0.3080	0.0008	-1.3827	0.0857	<0.0001
Time*	0.0072	0.0033	0.0295	-0.0243	0.0018	<0.0001	-0.0229	0.0021	<0.0001	0.0032	0.0040	0.4274	-0.0114	0.0015	<0.0001
Age, years (ref: 25-44)															
15-24	0.1350	0.1497	0.3691	-0.4411	0.1089	<0.0001	-0.5610	0.1500	0.0003	-0.2136	0.4341	0.6237	-0.2874	0.1214	0.0183
45-64	-0.0194	0.1501	0.8975	0.4159	0.1081	0.0002	0.5310	0.1488	0.0005	-0.0505	0.4325	0.9073	0.2361	0.1208	0.0512
≥65	-0.0607	0.1524	0.6909	0.3710	0.1066	0.0007	0.7758	0.1476	<0.0001	0.0323	0.4356	0.9410	0.2911	0.1212	0.0167
Unemployment rate†	0.1180	0.0166	<0.0001	0.1032	0.0158	<0.0001	0.0928	0.0161	<0.0001	0.2341	0.0528	<0.0001	0.1061	0.0109	<0.0001
D11‡	0.3485	0.0474	<0.0001	0.2456	0.0318	<0.0001	0.4589	0.0553	<0.0001	3.0719	0.4272	<0.0001	1.1275	0.0741	<0.0001
D21§	-0.0039	0.0021	0.061	-0.0046	0.0010	<0.0001	-0.0058	0.0016	0.0003	-0.0246	0.0086	0.0050	-0.0141	0.0020	<0.0001
D22¶	0.0010	0.0002	<0.0001	0.0003	0.0001	<0.0001	0.0005	0.0001	<0.0001	0.0011	0.0002	<0.0001	0.0009	0.0001	<0.0001
K||	0.0005	0.0001	0.0003	0.0019	0.0003	<0.0001	0.0026	0.0003	<0.0001	0.0110	0.0010	<0.0001	0.0036	0.0002	<0.0001
Data points (n)	1224	..	..	1424	..	..	1576	..	..	1248	..	..	5472	..	..
Subgroups (n)	120	..	..	128	..	..	144	..	..	112	..	..	504	..	..
Countries (n)	15	..	..	16	..	..	18	..	..	14	..	..	63	..	..
-2 log likelihood	10357	..	..	11872	..	..	14375	..	..	10639	..	..	48021	..	..
BIC	10410	..	..	11925	..	..	14430	..	..	10691	..	..	48089	..	..

D11—the variance of the intercept of subgroups, the variance of subgroup slopes (D22), and the covariance (D21). BIC=Bayesian information criterion. *Rescaled to 2000 (time=calendar year–2000). †Natural logarithm of the average of the current and following annual unemployment rate. ‡Variance of the subgroups' intercepts of random effects. §Subgroups' covariance of intercept and time random effects. ¶Variance of the subgroups' time random effects. ||Dispersions parameter of the negative binomial distribution.

Table 1: Final model estimates on suicide rate in four world regions and overall (non-linear, by 6 month time-lagged unemployment rate)

of an increased effect of rising unemployment in countries with low levels of unemployment before the crisis.¹³ Previous studies mainly examined one country^{7,12,18,19} or one world region^{5,8,14,16} rather than global data.¹³ Further, to better assess the long-term effect of the 2008 economic crisis, a statistical model should account for missing data of recent years.

We aimed to enhance knowledge of the specific effect of unemployment on suicide by analysing global public data classified according to world regions. Besides unemployment, we also considered other basic economic factors and the above-mentioned methodological issues.

Methods

Suicide and population data

In this longitudinal analysis, as was done in a recent study,¹³ we extracted data for annual sex-specific and age-specific suicide rates from the WHO mortality database. We then used International Classification of Diseases (ICD) codes (9th and 10th version) to extract suicide data (E950–E959 and X60–X84), selecting all countries with a mean number of more than 20 male suicides per year and covering at least the years 2004–09. Only Cuba had to be excluded, because it showed suicide data but no economic information. We replaced missing population data in the WHO mortality database with information from the UN population database. If population data were missing in both databases (which only concerned population data for 2011, for which 184 of 504 datapoints were not yet available), we replaced missing data within the age group and sex group of the respective country by linear extrapolation.

The 63 countries selected were split into four world geographic regions according to UN classifications:²³ Americas (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Suriname, Uruguay, the USA; N=15, roughly 92% of the total population in this world region); northern and western Europe (Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, The Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the UK; N=16; roughly 99% of the total population); southern and eastern Europe (Belarus, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, Moldova, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, Ukraine; N=18; roughly 98% of the total population); non-Americans and non-Europe (Australia, Egypt, Georgia, Hong Kong, Israel, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Kyrgyzstan, Mauritius, New Zealand, Singapore, South Africa, South Korea; N=14; 25% of the whole population, 12% of the population of Africa, 54% of Asia, and 72% of Oceania).

Similar to Chang and colleagues,¹³ we considered the number of suicides per 100 000 population (suicide rate) for the following four age categories by sex: 15–24 years, 25–44 years (reference category), 45–64 years, and 65 years and older.

	Americas	Northern and western Europe	Southern and eastern Europe	Non-Americas and non-Europe	Overall (all study countries)
Sex (ref. men)					
Women	0.215 (0.174–0.265)	0.287 (0.247–0.333)	0.208 (0.169–0.257)	0.347 (0.190–0.634)	0.251 (0.212–0.297)
Time	1.007 (1.001–1.014)	0.976 (0.973–0.979)	0.977 (0.973–0.981)	1.003 (0.995–1.011)	0.989 (0.986–0.992)
Age, years (ref. 25–44)					
15–24	1.145 (0.853–1.535)	0.643 (0.520–0.796)	0.571 (0.425–0.766)	0.808 (0.345–1.891)	0.750 (0.591–0.952)
45–64	0.981 (0.731–1.316)	1.516 (1.226–1.873)	1.701 (1.270–2.277)	0.951 (0.407–2.219)	1.266 (0.999–1.605)
≥65	0.941 (0.698–1.269)	1.449 (1.176–1.786)	2.172 (1.627–2.901)	1.033 (0.440–2.426)	1.338 (1.055–1.697)
Unemployment rate, examples (%)					
3	1.178 (1.126–1.232)	1.154 (1.105–1.204)	1.137 (1.089–1.188)	1.383 (1.198–1.597)	1.158 (1.125–1.193)
6	1.258 (1.181–1.341)	1.222 (1.151–1.298)	1.198 (1.126–1.274)	1.577 (1.289–1.929)	1.229 (1.179–1.282)
9	1.312 (1.217–1.414)	1.268 (1.181–1.362)	1.238 (1.151–1.332)	1.714 (1.351–2.176)	1.277 (1.215–1.341)
12	1.353 (1.245–1.471)	1.303 (1.204–1.411)	1.269 (1.170–1.376)	1.823 (1.398–2.377)	1.313 (1.243–1.387)
15	1.387 (1.267–1.518)	1.331 (1.222–1.451)	1.293 (1.185–1.412)	1.914 (1.436–2.550)	1.342 (1.265–1.424)

Data are RR (95% CI). RR values are transformed (exponentiated) values of the model estimates presented in table 1. Because the unemployment rate is a non-linear predictor in the model, we present RR examples for different unemployment rates between 3–15%.

Table 2: Final model relative risks (RR) of suicides in four world regions and overall (non-linear, by 6 month time-lagged unemployment rate)

For the WHO mortality database see http://www.who.int/healthinfo/mortality_data/en/

For the UN population database see http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/panel_population.htm

Economic data

From the International Monetary Fund's world economic outlook database, we extracted four economic indicators: the unemployment rate gives the percentage of unemployed people to the total labour force; the GDP based on purchasing-power-parity per capita is expressed in current international dollars; the growth rate describes year-on-year changes of annual percentages of constant price GDP; and inflation means year-on-year changes of the annual percentages of average consumer prices. The unemployment rate for Suriname was missing in 2011 and was taken from the corresponding public website.²⁴

Statistical analysis

We analysed the annual number of suicides per 100 000 population in the 504 different age-specific and sex-specific groups, each with up to twelve timepoints. We applied a random coefficient model for non-Gaussian longitudinal data with a negative binomial distribution to account for overdispersion, using the procedure NLMIXED in SAS version 9.4 with log as link function. In table 1, *K* shows the estimated value of the parameter for overdispersion, adjusting the variance independently of the mean. The random coefficient model allowed us to specify intercepts and slopes for each of the 504 groups for the calendar years 2000–11 (rescaled to be zero in 2000). The variance of the intercept of subgroups (D11 in table 1), the variance of subgroup slopes (D22), and the covariance (D21) between intercepts and slopes were fitted as drawn from normal distributions. Although both variances must be positive, it is a common finding that the covariance is negative. The chosen random coefficient model estimated the number of suicides for the years with missing data.

Visual inspection of the data pointed to a time lag of a few months between unemployment rate and suicide

rate shifted forward. Because of the available annual data, we applied a 6 month time lag by calculating the mean of the unemployment rate in a current year and in the following year. To find an approximation of the time lag and possible non-linearity, we considered six variants of the unemployment rate: 1) linear; 2) linear, time lagged by 6 months; 3) linear, time lagged by 1 year; 4) non-linear (logarithmised); 5) non-linear, time lagged by 6 months; and 6) non-linear, time lagged by 1 year. Other economic factors analysed were inflation, growth rate, and GDP per capita. GDP per capita was divided by 1000 to enhance estimation of the model and interpretation of effects, and also used as a non-linear predictor variable (logarithmised). We examined the model fit and model comparison with Bayesian information criterion (BIC) and checked the stability of the estimated effects of economic variables over world regions. We assumed a probable association between unemployment rate and

For the International Monetary Fund economic outlook database see <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2014/01/weodata/index.aspx>

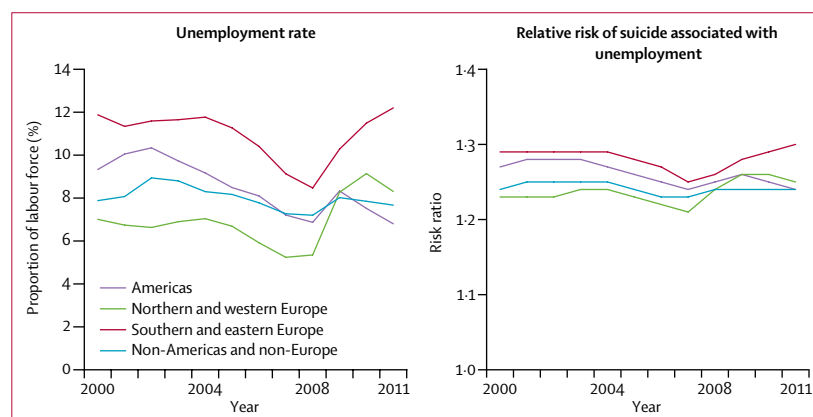


Figure 1: Mean unemployment rates and estimated relative risks of suicide associated with unemployment in four world regions, 2000–11 (final model, overall)

suicide rate to be similar in different world regions as long as potential non-linearity is accounted for.

Estimates of the final statistical model (table 1) were transformed (exponentiated) into relative risks (table 2, figure 1), and suicide rates and numbers (figure 2, table 3). 95% CIs shown in figure 2 and table 3 are based on predictions of the procedure NLMIXED applying the

See Online for appendix Δ method.

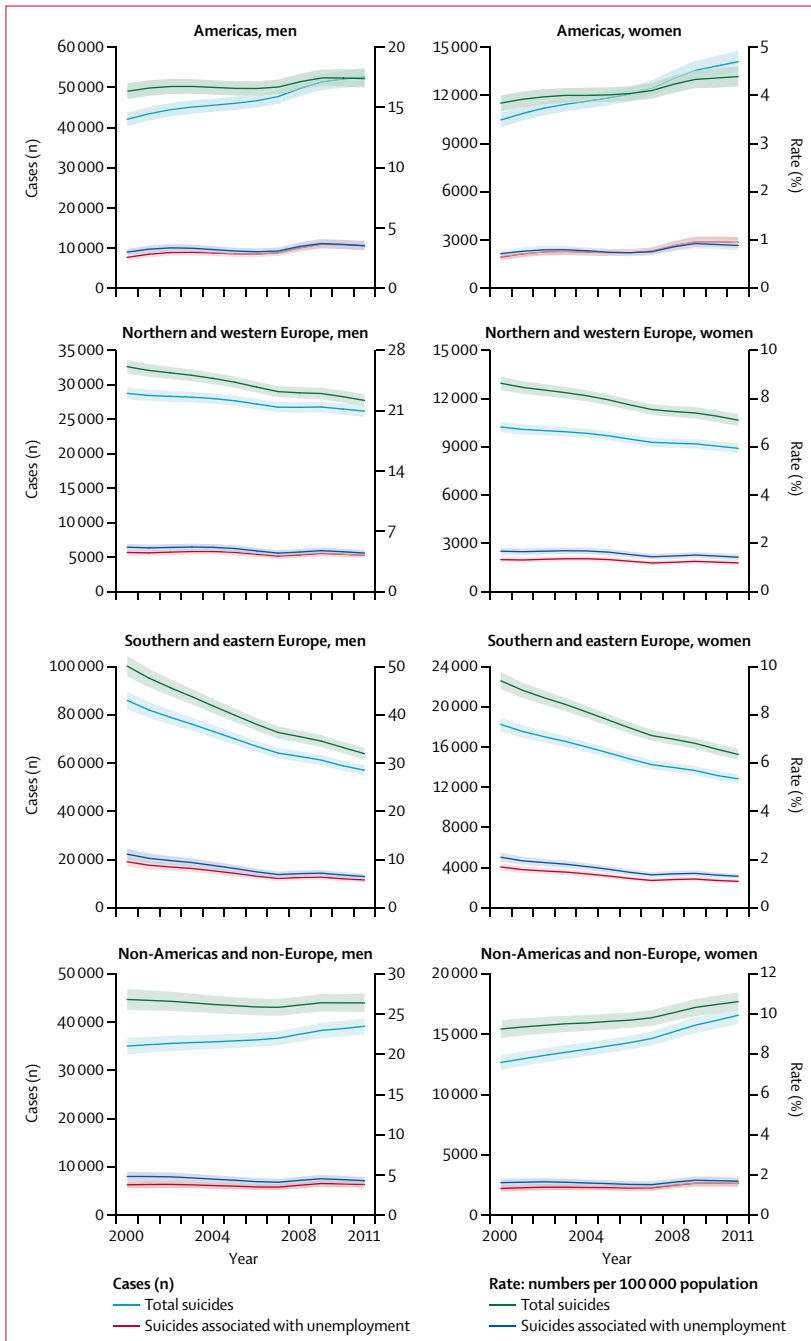


Figure 2: Estimated number of suicide cases and rates by world region and sex, 2000–11 (final model, overall) Shading shows 95% CI.

Role of the funding source

The sponsors of the study had no role in the study design, data collection, data analysis, data interpretation, or writing of the report. The corresponding author had full access to all the data in the study and had final responsibility for the decision to submit for publication.

Results

Of the four economic variables examined, the non-linear, 6 month time-lagged unemployment rate (table 1) led to the best model fit, while showing comparable estimates between world regions (appendix pp 1–15). Specifically, we noted higher effects for lower baseline unemployment rates, and an increase in the suicide rate preceding the increase in the unemployment rate by 6 months. Interaction effects with unemployment (appendix p 11) did not improve the model fit compared with the final model (table 1; appendix p 15) in any of the four world regions.

In total, preliminary models of other economic variables led to a poorer model fit and less stable results. The inflation rate did not improve the model fit in any of the four world regions. Although the effect of the growth rate was significant in all regions except in the Americas, the estimated effect sizes of the growth rate were generally small. The GDP as a linear or non-linear predictor led to a better model fit in three world regions, but not in the non-Americas and non-Europe. Further, GDP led to unstable and inconsistent findings when considered together with the unemployment rate. Because GDP also showed very strong correlations with calendar year ($r \approx 0.96$ within countries between 2000 and 2011; appendix p 16), we finally excluded GDP from statistical analysis because of multicollinearity.

According to our final statistical models, the relative risk of suicide associated with unemployment was elevated by 20–30% in all world regions between 2000 and 2011 (figure 1). After the 2008 economic crisis, the unemployment rate increased most strongly in southern and eastern Europe. In general, the data shows that the unemployment rate decreased before the crisis in all world regions and after the crisis reached a level roughly similar level to that of 2005. However, northern and western Europe had higher unemployment rates after 2009 than in 2008 or before. By contrast to southern and eastern Europe, the unemployment rate decreased in other world regions after a previous short-term increase. The unemployment rates among the world regions differed more than the relative risk of suicides associated with unemployment between 2000 and 2011, reflecting non-linearity.

An increase from 3% to 6% in the unemployment rate corresponds to a rise in the relative risk of suicide from 1.158 (95% CI 1.125–1.193) to 1.229 (1.179–1.282; table 2). This corresponds to a 6.1% increase in the suicide rate (1.229/1.158–1; appendix p 1). If the unemployment rate were to rise from 12% to 15%, the

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Cases												
Total suicides	243 455 (238 833– 248 077)	240 725 (236 453– 244 997)	238 846 (234 838– 242 854)	236 668 (232 872– 240 464)	233 783 (230 161– 237 405)	230 854 (227 352– 234 356)	227 811 (224 386– 231 236)	225 920 (222 505– 229 335)	228 135 (224 625– 231 645)	229 804 (226 181– 233 427)	228 311 (224 604– 232 018)	227 388 (223 570– 231 206)
Suicides associated with unemployment	49 064 (46 728– 51 400)	48 383 (46 234– 50 532)	48 288 (46 238– 50 338)	47 659 (45 699– 49 619)	46 108 (44 269– 47 947)	44 312 (42 577– 46 047)	42 257 (40 624– 43 890)	41 148 (39 552– 42 744)	43 983 (42 243– 45 723)	46 131 (44 292– 47 970)	44 979 (43 175– 46 783)	43 831 (42 066– 45 596)
Rate per 100 000 population												
Total suicides	17.49 (17.16– 17.82)	17.11 (16.81– 17.42)	16.80 (16.52– 17.08)	16.48 (16.21– 16.74)	16.11 (15.86– 16.35)	15.74 (15.50– 15.98)	15.39 (15.15– 15.62)	15.11 (14.88– 15.34)	15.12 (14.89– 15.35)	15.10 (14.86– 15.34)	14.87 (14.63– 15.12)	14.66 (14.41– 14.90)
Suicides associated with unemployment	3.53 (3.36–3.69)	3.44 (3.29–3.59)	3.40 (3.25–3.54)	3.32 (3.18–3.45)	3.18 (3.05–3.30)	3.02 (2.90–3.14)	2.85 (2.74–2.96)	2.75 (2.65–2.86)	2.92 (2.80–3.03)	3.03 (2.91–3.15)	2.93 (2.81–3.05)	2.82 (2.71–2.94)

Data are n (95% CI) or rate per 100 000 (95% CI).

Table 3: Estimated suicide numbers and rates—total and those associated with unemployment (final model, overall)

relative risk of suicide associated with unemployment would change from 1.313 (95% CI 1.243–1.387) to 1.342 (1.265–1.424). Here, the suicide rate increases only by 2.2% (1.342/1.313–1), and, therefore, less than the change in the unemployment rate. In these examples, the rise in the suicide rate is based on the assumption that no other time trends in the relative risk of suicide are present.

The final overall model estimated a total of about 233 000 suicides each year and suicides associated with unemployment of about 45 000, making up about 20% of all suicides (table 3). Suicides associated with unemployment made up 41 148 (95% CI 39 552–42 744) in 2007 and 46 131 (44 292–47 970) in 2009, indicating an increase of 4983 compared with the precrisis year. Over all study countries, the suicide rate associated with unemployment per 100 000 population decreased from 3.53 (95% CI 3.36–3.69) in 2000, to 2.75 (2.65–2.86) in 2007, increased to 3.03 (2.91–3.15) in 2009, and decreased thereafter to 2.82 (2.71–2.94) in 2011 (table 3).

Besides similar effects of unemployment, only the effect of sex was comparable among the four world regions. Women had a four-fold lower relative risk of suicide than men (overall model 0.251 [95% CI 0.212–0.297]; table 2). Men had the highest suicide rates in southern and eastern Europe; women had the highest rates in the non-Americas and non-Europe (figure 2).

In the overall model, the relative risk of suicide decreased by 1.1% (95% CI 0.8–1.4%) per year between 2000 and 2011 (table 2). Notably, the time trends in the relative risk of suicide differed substantially. In the Americas, the relative risk of suicide increased by 0.7% (95% CI 0.1–1.4) per year, whereas in the non-Americas and non-Europe it remained stable (table 2). In northern and western Europe, the relative risk of suicide decreased by 2.4% (95% CI 2.1–2.7) per year and in southern and eastern Europe by 2.3% (1.9–2.7) per year between 2000 and 2011. The different time trends for each world region were also visible for sex (figure 2).

Finally, age groups only differed significantly in Europe, but not in the Americas and non-Americas and non-Europe (table 2). The relative risk of suicide in Europe was increased among older age groups (reference group: 25–44 years; northern and western Europe, 45–64 years: 1.516 [95% CI 1.226–1.873]; northern and western Europe, ≥65 years: 1.449 [1.176–1.786]; southern and eastern Europe, 45–64 years: 1.701 [1.270–2.277]; southern and eastern Europe, ≥65 years: 2.172 [1.627–2.901]). Those individuals aged between 15 and 24 years had a reduced relative risk of suicide (northern and western Europe: 0.643 [95% CI 0.520–0.796]; southern and eastern Europe: 0.571 [0.425–0.766]).

Discussion

We have shown that it is feasible to directly estimate the effect of non-linear and time-lagged unemployment rates on suicide rates in 63 countries while accounting for age and sex including specific time trends among subgroups. Of the economic variables tested, only unemployment is associated with similar effects in each of the four world regions. We noted that unemployment was related to an increased relative risk of suicide by 20–30% in all four world regions. Suicides associated with unemployment contributed 41 148 in 2007 and 46 131 in 2009, meaning an increase of 4983 compared with the pre-crisis year. In the four world regions, a changing unemployment rate affected both sexes as well as different age groups equally.

Generally, our results correspond with previous research indicating that a rise in unemployment is linked with an increase in suicides (panel).^{5–8,12–18} As suggested by previous studies, our model was able to corroborate that this association is non-linear¹³ and time-lagged.^{6,14,18} Therefore, by contrast with others^{8,12,25} who have described a linear increase between unemployment and suicide rate, the level of the unemployment rate has to be taken into account. The effect of a change in unemployment on suicide is stronger in countries with a lower rather than with a higher precrisis unemployment rate. Thus, in

Panel: Research in context**Systematic review**

We searched PubMed for all studies published up to June 12, 2014, using the key words "suicide" and ("unemployment" or "economic crisis" or "prevention"). The resulting articles were selected manually. We included studies that, like our study, used official databases and conducted retrospective data analyses. We identified only one study¹³ that included several world regions in their analysis focusing on the economic downturn in 2008.

Interpretation

Similar to other studies, we noted a relationship between suicide and unemployment. Specifically, we identified a comparable effect size of unemployment on suicide in each of four world regions. Moreover, as shown in some previous studies, our final statistical model showed that the relative risk of suicide increased before the change in unemployment rates, pointing to a time-lag. Further, as stated by a recent worldwide study, the suicide risk associated with unemployment increased particularly in countries with lower unemployment rates, meaning that the effect of unemployment was non-linear. We noted that suicide due to unemployment might be severely underestimated if studies focus only the time period of the economic crisis. By contrast with other studies, we did not find that different age or sex groups were less affected by rising unemployment. As part of suicide prevention, governmental and specific therapeutic interventions are needed to prevent or reduce employment insecurity, thus helping the individuals affected.

countries where unemployment is uncommon, an unexpected increase in the unemployment rate might trigger greater fears and insecurity than in countries with higher precrisis unemployment rates. With respect to the time lag, our final model showed that the suicide rate increased 6 months before the rise in the unemployment rate. Corporate downsizing and labour market restructuring during economic contraction could create additional work stress and a sense of job insecurity among the employed (eg, through an increasing work-load, change to part-time employment, or intermittent lay-offs), which might contribute to poor mental health.^{18,26} Besides such circumstances, however, particularly vulnerable individuals have an increased risk of dying by suicide.^{14,18}

We did not find a lower effect size of unemployment in the 65 years and older age group in any of the four world regions. Retired individuals might also be affected by changes in unemployment—eg, when their offspring are or become unemployed. Accordingly, job loss can affect the risk of suicide of other household or family members as well.²¹ By contrast with our results, other studies have reported that men are more affected by unemployment than are women.^{5,8,12,13,19} One main reason for this reported difference could be separate analyses for men and women. To maintain statistical power and to directly assess sex and age differences, we preferred to construct a joint model.

Our study has several limitations. Apart from problems with the definition of and measurement of unemployment, we hold the unemployment rate as a broad indicator of the level of economic stress and uncertainty faced by the whole population. Because of restricted availability, we could not control for age-specific and sex-specific unemployment rates. Even if

there were differences in total suicide rates between world regions, which we accounted for, there are numerous unconsidered and difficult to obtain clinical and psychosocial factors associated with suicide.¹⁴ Without question, it is impossible that an analysis on a world region level can be interpreted causally in a narrow sense. Further, because of missing data, the Asian (eg, China and India) and also African countries included in this study are not representative. Therefore, suicide numbers and rates might be underestimated. As our applied model belongs to the group of random coefficient models, we assumed subgroup intercepts to be uncorrelated with predictors, thus effects could be overestimated because of unobserved heterogeneity.

Corresponding with our results, other investigators^{13,17} have estimated excess suicide numbers of about 5000 cases associated with the economic crisis of 2008. Looking at our estimated suicide rates associated with unemployment, they had nearly reached pre-crisis level in 2011. Further, focusing on excess suicide alone leads to an underestimation of suicides. As we identified out from our statistical model, besides the additional 5000 cases, a nine-fold higher number of suicides (roughly 46000) in 2009 can be associated with unemployment when considering all the years from 2000 to 2011 (figure 1).

Despite certain minor differences between world regions, the relative risk of suicide associated with unemployment remained quite similar between world regions and with time. This finding means that there is a continuous need to focus on preventing suicides, even more so in economically prosperous, stable time periods than in times of lower prosperity, when resources are scarcer. These efforts are necessary and valuable not only in countries with high, but also in those with low, unemployment rates. In particular, the interaction of fiscal austerity with economic shocks and weak social protection seems to escalate health and social crises, at least in Europe.²⁰ Sufficient investment of governments in active labour market policies that enhance the efficiency of labour markets can reduce the unemployment rate and therefore help to generate additional jobs.¹⁰

Efforts at suicide prevention should be extended to professionals working with individuals at risk of unemployment, such as social workers and human resource management professionals. These professional groups should be informed about the specific risk and trained concerning the practical assessment of suicidality and possible interventions. Further, general programmes in medical education should support physicians to recognise, diagnose, and treat patients with depressions, thus leading to reductions in suicide.³ This also requires the particular attention of primary physicians to patients who are unemployed or at risk of job loss.

Contributors

CN compiled the data, designed and did the empirical analysis, and drafted the report. IW facilitated the interpretation of the findings, drafted the report, provided background information, and reviewed the

literature. WK oversaw the design of the study. WK and ES facilitated the interpretation of the findings, provided background information, and critically revised the manuscript for important intellectual content. All authors have seen and approved the final version of the report. All authors agree to be accountable for all aspects of the work in ensuring that questions related to the accuracy or integrity of any part of the work are appropriately investigated and resolved.

Declaration of interests

We declare no competing interests.

Acknowledgments

We thank Konstantinos N Fountoulakis for his important comments on preliminary versions of the report and Heather Murray for language editing.

References

- 1 WHO. Public health action for the prevention of suicide. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2012.
- 2 Bertolote JM, Fleischmann A. A global perspective on the magnitude of suicide mortality. Wasserman D, Wasserman C, eds. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. pp 91–98.
- 3 Mann JJ, Apter A, Bertolote J. Suicide prevention strategies. A systematic review. *JAMA* 2005; **294**: 2064–74.
- 4 United Nations. Prevention of suicide: guidelines for the formulation and implementation of national strategies. New York: U.N. Department of Policy and Coordination and Sustainable Development, ST/ESA/245, 1996.
- 5 Chang SS, Gunell D, Sterne JAC, Lu T, Cheng ATA. Was the economic crisis 1997–1998 responsible for rising suicide rates in East/Southeast Asia? A time-trend analysis for Japan, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore and Thailand. *Soc Sci Med* 2009; **68**: 1322–31.
- 6 Garcy AM, Vågerö D. Unemployment and suicide during and after a deep recession: a longitudinal study of 3.4 million Swedish men and women. *Am J Public Health* 2013; **103**: 1031–38.
- 7 Kwon JW, Chun H, Cho SI. A closer look at the increase in suicide rates in South Korea from 1986–2005. *BMC Public Health* 2009; **9**: 72.
- 8 Stuckler D, Basu S, Suhrcke M, Coutts A, McKee M. The public health effect of economic crises and alternative policy responses in Europe: an empirical analysis. *Lancet* 2009; **374**: 315–23.
- 9 International Monetary Fund. Working paper. Financial crises: Explanations, types and implications: International Monetary Fund, 2013.
- 10 International Labour Organization. Global employment trends 2014. Risk of jobless recovery? Geneva: International Labour Force, 2014.
- 11 Tapia Granados JA. Increasing mortality during the expansion of the US economy, 1990–1996. *Int J Epidemiol* 2005; **34**: 1194–202.
- 12 Barr B, Taylor-Robinson D, Scott-Samuel A, McKee M, Stuckler D. Suicides associated with the 2008–10 economic recession in England: time trend analysis. *BMJ* 2012; **345**: e5142.
- 13 Chang SS, Stuckler D. Impact of 2008 global economic crisis on suicide: time trend study in 54 countries. *BMJ* 2013; **347**: f5239.
- 14 Fountoulakis KN, Kawohl W, Theodorakis PN, et al. Relationship of suicide rates to economic variables in Europe: 2000–2011. *Br J Psychiatry* 2014; **205**: 486–96.
- 15 Kentikelenis A, Karanikolos M, Papanicolas I, Basu S, McKee M, Stuckler D. Health effects of financial crisis: omens of a Greek tragedy. *Lancet* 2011; **378**: 1457–58.
- 16 Stuckler D, Basu S, Suhrcke M, Coutts A, McKee M. Effects of 2008 recession on health: a first look at European data. *Lancet* 2011; **378**: 124–25.
- 17 Reeves A, Stuckler D, McKee M, Gunell D, Chang SS, Basu S. Increase in state suicide rates in the USA during economic recession. *Lancet* 2012; **380**: 1813–14.
- 18 Chan CH, Caine ED, You S, Fu KW, Chang SS, Yip PS. Suicide rates among working-age adults in South Korea before and after the 2008 economic crisis. *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2014; **68**: 246–52.
- 19 Pompili M, Vichi M, Innamorati M, et al. Suicide in Italy during a time of economic recession: some recent data related to age and gender based on a nationwide register study. *Health Soc Care Community* 2014; **22**: 361–67.
- 20 Karanikolos M, Mladovsky P, Cylus J, et al. Financial crisis, austerity, and health in Europe. *Lancet* 2013; **381**: 1323–31.
- 21 Classen TJ, Dunn RA. The effect of job loss and unemployment duration on suicide risk in the united states: a new look using mass-layoffs and unemployment duration. *Health Econ* 2012; **21**: 338–50.
- 22 Mortensen PB, Agerbo E, Erikson T, Qin P, Westergaard-Nielsen P. Psychiatric illness and risk factors for suicide in Denmark. *Lancet* 2000; **355**: 9–12.
- 23 United Nations. Population and vital statistics report. statistical papers. Series A Vol. LXVI. New York: United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Statistics division, 2014.
- 24 Algemeen Bureau voor de Statistiek in Suriname. Arbeidsstatistieken, 2014. <http://www.statistics-suriname.org/index.php/statistieken/database/151-arbeidsstatistieken> (accessed Feb 12, 2014).
- 25 Laanani M, Ghosn W, Jouglu E, Rey G. Impact of unemployment variations on suicide mortality in Western European countries (2000–2010). *J Epidemiol Community Health* 2014; published online June 18. DOI:10.1136/jech-2013-203624.
- 26 Melchior M, Caspi A, Milne BJ, Danese A, Poulton R, Moffitt TE. Work stress precipitates depression and anxiety in young, working women and men. *Psychol Med* 2007; **38**: 1119–29.

Suicide, unemployment, and the effect of economic recession

WHO recently estimated that 804 000 people worldwide died by suicide during 2012.¹ Suicide prevention experts have historically focused their attention on elevated risk during times of economic downturn. For instance, Stack and Haas estimated that more than 900 suicides in the USA were attributable to the sharp rise in redundancies that occurred in 1981–82 during the early years of the Reagan administration, and which pushed the national unemployment rate up to its highest level since the interwar Great Depression era.² More recently, adverse effects linked with the 2008 economic crisis have also been reported. For example, Barr and colleagues reported that geographical regions in England with the greatest increases in levels of unemployment have also seen the largest rises in suicide risk, especially so for men.³

In *The Lancet Psychiatry*, Carlos Nordt and colleagues⁴ report on their longitudinal analyses of suicide risk across 63 countries during years 2000–11. This paper builds on previous work examining data from 54 countries that was published from the same WHO mortality dataset.⁵ What is novel about the current paper is its longitudinal modelling of the international effect of unemployment at population level across a period that encompasses economic stability as well as the crisis and its aftermath. This approach has enabled the authors to estimate the number of excess suicides attributable to unemployment per se, as well as the number specifically attributable to the recession and its wake. The nine-fold difference between these two values is striking. It implies that national and international suicide prevention strategies need to target the ill effects associated with unemployment in times of economic stability as well as during recession. The paper also highlights the fact that not all job losses necessarily have an equivalent effect, because the effect on suicide risk could be greatest in settings where being without work is fairly unusual.

Nordt and colleagues have correctly highlighted missing information from large and populous countries such as China and India, as well as most of the African continent, as the key limitation of the WHO mortality dataset that they examined.⁴ Another major restriction, one the authors did not address, is that examining fluctuating unemployment levels encompasses merely

a fraction of complete societal exposure to the effects of economic recession and subsequent periods of public spending cuts and fiscal austerity.⁶ Thus, many affected individuals who remain in work during these hard times encounter serious psychological stressors due to pernicious economic strains other than unemployment, including falling income, 'zero-hour' contracting, job insecurity, bankruptcy, debt, and home repossession.⁷ Caution should therefore be exercised when considering estimated numbers of additional suicide cases attributable to global economic downturn, because they may represent a substantial undercount. The Trussell Trust, a charity that organises many of the food banks that have proliferated across the UK in recent years, reported in 2014 a steep rise in demand for their services. This increase in demand might seem surprising because the country has formally been in a period of economic recovery for some time. The Trust's most recent figures indicate that low income is the fastest growing reason for referral to their services.⁸

Further research is needed to understand these complex relationships from broader perspectives. For example, little is known about how individual-level and area-level unemployment could interact to affect risk. We need to discern whether psychological problems and suicide risk are greatest for jobless individuals living in localities with high unemployment rates, or whether the effect of being out of work is more profound for those living in places where unemployment is relatively uncommon. This type of information could have important policy implications. It might be unwise, for example, to focus preventive initiatives solely on so-called unemployment hotspots, because unemployed individuals with increased suicide risk could be distributed across a far greater geographical spread. We also need to understand who is at greatest risk—previous studies have suggested that young people might be particularly vulnerable,^{5,7} but this was not borne out in the current analysis.

Nordt and colleagues report excess suicide cases of around 5000 attributable to increases in unemployment since the global recession from 2008 onwards.⁴ However, fatalities are bound to represent merely the tip of the iceberg. Therefore, we also require a better understanding of other psychosocial manifestations



Peter Böhler/Corbis

Lancet Psychiatry 2015

Published Online

February 11, 2015

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(14\)00129-1](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)00129-1)

S2215-0366(14)00129-1

See Online/Articles

[http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(14\)00118-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)00118-7)

S2215-0366(14)00118-7

of economic adversity, including non-fatal self-harm, stress and anxiety, low mood, hopelessness, alcohol problems, anger, familial conflict, and relationship breakdown. We also need to know how and why highly resilient individuals who experience the greatest levels of economic adversity manage to sustain favourable mental health and wellbeing.⁹

*Roger T Webb**, *Navneet Kapur*

Centre for Mental Health and Risk (RTW, NK), and Centre for Suicide Prevention (NK), University of Manchester, Manchester M13 9PL, UK
roger.webb@manchester.ac.uk

RW declares no competing interests. NK is co-principal investigator on an National Institute for Health Research funded Programme Grant (RP-PG-0610-10026), one component of which will examine the effect of the 2008 recession on suicidal behaviour in England with a view to developing interventions (lead, D J Gunnell). NK is also a member of the Department of Health's (England) National Suicide Prevention Strategy Advisory Group. The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the National Health Service, the National Institute of Health and Research, or the Department of Health.

- 1 WHO. Preventing Suicide: a Global Imperative. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2014.
- 2 Stack S, Haas A. The effects of unemployment duration on national suicide rates: a time series analysis, 1948–1982. *Sociol Focus* 1984; **17**: 17–29.
- 3 Barr B, Taylor-Robinson D, Scott-Samuel A, McKee M, Stuckler D. Suicides associated with the 2008–10 economic recession in England: time trend analysis. *BMJ* 2012; **345**: e5142.
- 4 Nordt C, Warnke I, Seifritz E, Kawohl W. Modelling suicide and unemployment: a longitudinal analysis covering 63 countries, 2000–2011. *Lancet Psychiatry* 2015; published online Feb 11. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366\(14\)00118-7](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S2215-0366(14)00118-7).
- 5 Chang SS, Stuckler D, Yip P, Gunnell D. Impact of 2008 global economic crisis on suicide: time trend study in 54 countries. *BMJ* 2013; **347**: f5239.
- 6 Antonakakis N, Collins A. The impact of fiscal on suicide: on the empirics of a modern Greek tragedy. *Soc Sci Med* 2014; **112**: 39–50.
- 7 Coope C, Gunnell D, Hollingworth W, et al Suicide and the 2008 economic recession: who is most at risk? Trends in suicide rates in England and Wales 2001–2011. *Soc Sci Med* 2014; **117**: 76–85.
- 8 Trussell Trust. Low income and welfare problems see foodbank numbers rise by 38% despite economic recovery. <http://www.trusselltrust.org/mid-year-stats-2014-2015> (accessed Dec 5, 2014).
- 9 Davydov DM, Stewart R, Ritchie K, Chaudieu I. Resilience and mental health. *Clin Psychol Rev* 2010; **30**: 479–95.