

Coronavirus policy brief: Middle-aged men

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Introduction

Middle-aged men have the highest suicide rate of any age group in England, a fact that has persisted for decades.¹ There is a strong socioeconomic gradient to male suicide risk – men who are less well-off and living in the most deprived areas are up to ten times more likely to die by suicide than more well-off men from the most affluent areas.² This policy brief addresses the systematic socioeconomic inequalities in male suicide risk, in the context of the ongoing economic impact of Coronavirus. We know from our previous research that middle-aged men are especially vulnerable to the adverse effects of recession, including suicide risk.³ We are particularly concerned about key risk factors for this group,⁴ such as unemployment and unmanageable debt, that are being exacerbated by the pandemic.⁵

Suicide is complex, and there is rarely one single cause. Analysis of the last recession found that debt and unemployment were the factors most strongly associated with rises in suicide,⁶ but we recognise that there are usually multiple complex factors in male suicide, and these include relationship breakdown and substance misuse. Nevertheless, during this period of unprecedented economic upheaval, it is vital that economic risk factors are adequately recognised in efforts to mitigate the risk of suicide for middle-aged men.

What do we know from Samaritans' callers?

Over the last six months, Samaritans spoke to nearly half a million men.⁷ Financial difficulties were a main concern for many, with concerns about employment doubling among male callers. Men calling us are most worried about reduced income, losing their job or not being able to support their family. They talk about feeling ashamed or guilty about these difficulties, feelings we know from our previous research are associated with suicidality.⁸

These findings are particularly concerning because we know that economic downturns are associated with increased suicide rates in men.⁹ Following the 2008-2010 recession, suicide rates rose for all men, and more steeply for those aged 40-59.¹⁰ In England, over 800 more men died by suicide during that recession than would have been expected from historical trends.¹¹ Crucially, while suicide rates have historically risen during economic downturns for some groups, research suggests that they may not fall back with financial recovery.¹² The correlation between economic deprivation and suicide risk is especially strong for middle-aged men¹³ and in the last recession, significant suicide increases occurred among men in some of England's poorest regions – the North East, North West and South West.¹⁴

We cannot say that this economic crisis will affect middle-aged men in the same way as previous recessions. There are likely to be significant differences in terms of the sectors and demographics impacted,¹⁵ but there is some evidence that older middle-aged men are already among the worst affected – they are more likely to have been furloughed or lost their jobs than those in their mid-career.¹⁶

Middle-aged men are going to experience a historically severe recession at the same time as being exposed to a range of other risk factors for suicide due to Coronavirus, such as social isolation.

Urgent action is needed now to prevent this confluence of risk factors leading to a rise in suicide rates among this group.

Unemployment

Research suggests that there is a strong relationship between unemployment and suicide in men. A study of suicides during the last recession found a rise in suicide rates among men connected to unemployment, with every 10 per cent increase in unemployment among men associated with a 1.4 per cent increase in male suicides.¹⁷ The reasons for this relationship are complex, but we know from speaking to middle-aged men as part of our report, [Out of Sight, Out of Mind](#), that employment can provide a social network, routine, and sense of purpose.¹⁸ Becoming unemployed can leave men disconnected and unsure of what to do with their time, creating or exacerbating risk factors for suicide such as social isolation, rumination, or substance misuse.¹⁹

At the height of the last recession, unemployment reached 8.4 per cent, with 2.7 million people looking for work.²⁰ The Chancellor expects unemployment to rise to similar levels during Coronavirus,²¹ and some forecasts suggest that job losses could be significantly higher.²² There is uncertainty around these predictions, and the steps already taken by the Government to protect jobs may mitigate the worst impacts for many people. Nevertheless, the number of payroll employees has fallen by 782,000 since the pandemic began and unemployment has risen more steeply for men than women, driven by job losses among the self-employed.²³

It is crucial that the Government consider how to weaken the link between socioeconomic deprivation, unemployment, and suicide in middle-aged men, and ensure that those at risk of redundancy as well as those who experience job loss receive effective support.

Unmanageable debt

Middle-aged men are particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of recession, including suicide risk, and one factor of this is unmanageable debt.²⁴ Those in debt are twice as likely to consider suicide.²⁵ The relationship between debt and mental health involves multiple interacting features, such as debt, depression, substance misuse, and suicidal behaviour.²⁶ Our research, [Dying from Inequality](#), found that the experience of unmanageable debt, especially when debt spirals and leads to bankruptcy or losing one's home, can not only feel stressful but humiliating, and this contributes to increased risk of suicidal behaviour.²⁷

Many people are entering the current crisis already in a worse position than previous recessions, with over three million experiencing severe problem debt in late 2019.²⁸ Estimates suggest that, even early in lockdown, people with problem debt had amassed around £1,000 in further debt and another £1,000 in arrears.²⁹ The Government introduced far-reaching payment breaks to support household finances at the beginning of the pandemic, but six million adults still fell behind on their bills, with rent and council tax most likely to be in arrears.³⁰

Unmanageable debt can lead to other risk factors for suicide, such as housing insecurity. There is a particular link between eviction and suicide with one study finding that individuals who receive an eviction notice are four times more likely to die by suicide, even when controlling for other factors like mental health or substance misuse.³¹ The process leading up to eviction plays an important role in this relationship, with most eviction-related suicides occurring before the loss of the home itself.³² Coronavirus could create widespread housing insecurity, with 2.6 million people having missed or expecting to miss rent payments during the pandemic.³³ During the first national lockdown, the

Government mitigated this risk by banning possession proceedings and bailiff visits.³⁴ Pursuing possession claims in the courts has since restarted, and while the Government has advised that bailiffs should not be used to evict people, this is not legally binding.³⁵ With the possibility that thousands of people could lose their homes, attention is needed to address the possible impacts of widespread housing loss and insecurity, particularly among the highest-risk groups for suicide during recession such as middle-aged men.

Not everyone who falls into unmanageable debt during the pandemic will experience increased suicide risk. This relationship is complex, dependent upon the source and reasons for debt, and impacted by longer term factors like pre-existing mental health conditions or persistent inequality³⁶ as well as short term triggers like threatening debt collection letters or bailiff visits.³⁷ Many will be able to access payment breaks and other measures to avoid spiraling debts or housing insecurity. However, the Government must do more to alleviate short-term pressures on household finances, support people who are experiencing unmanageable debt, and adequately address the existing relationship between recession and suicide in middle-aged men.

Recommendations

- The Government's Restart scheme will help people affected by unemployment, and we want to see ringfenced spending within the £2.9 billion budget to ensure that middle-aged men are supported into fulfilling and sustainable work, based on what we know about the connection between unemployment and suicide for this group.
- Workplaces should have a suicide prevention plan in place and provide effective psychological support to employees. Existing toolkits can aid the creation of strategies to identify and support employees who are experiencing distress.³⁸
- Part of the £1.4 billion pledged in the Spending Review to increase capacity in Jobcentre Plus should include specialist training for staff who are likely to have contact with unemployed men to recognise and respond to individuals who are in distress and may be suicidal.
- The Government should reinstate the same prohibitions on evictions and bailiffs as the first national lockdown during any future lockdown and extend them for local areas experiencing the highest tiered restrictions.
- Two thirds of people who take their own life are not in touch with mental health services before they die, and the majority of this group are men.³⁹ Any post-Coronavirus mental health renewal plan must consider how to reach these men who are struggling without the support of services. This plan must involve all government departments and contain interventions that directly tackle issues linked to poverty such as unemployment, substance misuse and addiction. The Government should also embed suicide prevention in all areas of policy, for example in housing and welfare, to tackle inequalities.

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