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## **Suicide and socioeconomic disadvantage during times of economic recession and recovery**

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**SAMARITANS**

# Dying from inequality

Socioeconomic disadvantage  
and suicidal behaviour

SUMMARY REPORT 2017



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## Suicide and socioeconomic disadvantage during times of economic recession and recovery

Individuals experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage during periods of economic change are at increased risk of suicide. This risk can persist when an economic crisis ends and an individual's circumstances do not recover, and this can last for several years. They may be further compounded if governments maintain austerity measures in the longer-term.

This report reviews literature on recent and ongoing economic shocks in the UK, Ireland and other countries, considering the impact of economic recession and periods of economic uncertainty on suicidal behaviour.

### Risk and population groups

The risk of suicide in different population groups changes during times of economic crisis or uncertainty. Men are more vulnerable to the adverse effects of economic recession, including suicide risk, than women. During the 2008-09 recession, suicide rates in England and Wales rose significantly among men aged between 35–44, and rates among men aged 45-64 also rose (Coope et al., 2014). This increase in suicides among men in their middle years may have been partly due to economic uncertainty. There was no significant change by deprivation status: the suicide rate actually decreased significantly in men living in more deprived areas, although the rate remained much higher than that in more affluent areas.

This suggests that a decline in income may have a more negative impact on communities with a higher standard of living than on communities with a lower standard of living. The most socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals may be less vulnerable to new economic shocks because they have fewer assets to lose. Structural factors, such as the strength of the social welfare protection system, will also have an effect. The variation in the level of unemployment seen during an economic crisis may increase vulnerability to suicide. Individuals with pre-existing mental health problems may also be more likely to become unemployed, and are therefore also at greater risk of suicidal behaviour.



Economic uncertainty, unemployment, a decline in income relative to local wages, unmanageable debt, the threat or fear of home repossessions, job insecurity and business downsizing may all increase the risk of suicidal behaviour, especially for individuals who experience socioeconomic disadvantage.

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## Employment

Evidence on the association between working conditions, debt and suicide suggests that increased, involuntary part-time work, job insecurity and workplace downsizing are important risk factors for suicidal behaviour. It is not only unemployed people who are at increased risk. Employees who keep their jobs during a workplace downsizing may experience job insecurity and negative relationships with their peers, as well as stress from an increased workload. People who are self-employed can also be affected if demand for their business decreases.

## Financial issues

Unmanageable debt is also an important risk factor for suicidal behaviour. During the 2008-09 recession, there was a 0.54% increase in suicides for every 1% increase in indebtedness across 20 EU countries, including the UK and Ireland (Reeves et al., 2015). There was a significant increase in men and women with financial problems presenting at hospital having attempted suicide during the recession, with insecure housing status being a particular problem mentioned by women (Hawton et al., 2016). The experience of being declared bankrupt, losing one's home or not being able to repay debts to family and friends is not only stressful but can also feel humiliating.

Unmanageable debt is an important risk factor for suicidal behaviour. Financial advice and support for those at risk of having unmanageable debt can help reduce the risk of mental health problems and suicidal behaviour.