



Understanding the Impact of the Economic Recession and Austerity on Suicide and Self-harm in Ireland: Examining trends over time

The examination by the RTE Investigations Unit may not have picked up on the impact of the economic recession on suicide in Ireland because their research only compared suicide rates of individual years. As a consequence, the magnitude of change in suicide rates associated with trends over time was not taken into account.

Recent analysis conducted by the National Suicide Research Foundation has shown that between 2001 and 2007 there was a significant decreasing trend in the rate of suicide among men, and in the rate of self-harm among both men and women. Since 2007, self-harm rates in both males and females and suicide rates among men have been increasing. An interrupted time-series analysis was conducted to examine both the change in the rate of self-harm and male suicide in 2008, and the significance of the on-going trend in the rates since then, over a five-year period.

The analysis showed that in 2008 there was a significant increase in the rate of suicide and self-harm in Ireland, reversing the previous decreasing trend. Subsequently the rate of male suicide and male and female self-harm increased between the years 2008-2012.

In order to quantify the impact of this change, the observed rate of suicide and self-harm was compared with the rate that would have been observed had the decreasing trend continued (if the rate of suicide and self-harm had continued to decline). We found that the rate of male suicide by the end of 2012 was 57% higher than it would have been if the economic recession not occurred. The rate of male and female self-harm was 37% and 26% higher respectively. In absolute numbers, between 2008 and 2012 there were 476 more male suicides than would have been expected during this period had the recession not occurred. Numbers of self-harm presentations were also higher than would have been expected (5029 male and 3833 female).

Similar findings have been found internationally, including the UK and the US (Cheng et al, 2013). However the impact seems to have been greater in Ireland.

Increased unemployment is synonymous with economic recession, but the relationship between unemployment and suicide is complex. The second report of the Suicide Support and Information System (Arensman et al, 2013) found that in 33% of suicides the individual was unemployed and 42% had worked in the construction and production sectors, the sectors most severely affected by the recession. However, other factors, such as history of self-harm, depression and substance abuse were also prevalent.

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