Occupational factors in suicide

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This presentation

• Relevance of occupational factors to mental health

Provide a brief overview of research evidence
• Unemployment and suicide: Employment as protective factor?
• Are suicides more common in particular occupational groups?
• Are working conditions associated with suicide?

Approach of the SSIS-ACE study
Work shapes our health in various ways

**Occupational environment**
- Work hazards
  - Physical (e.g., noise, sedentary work)
  - Psychosocial (social conflicts, low influence)
- Work resources (social support, meaningful work)
- Employment

**Psychosocial health and illness**
- Positive and negative
- Physical
- Mental
- Social

**Lifestyle**
- Coping
- Substance abuse

**Social position**
- Financial resources
- Integration in society

**Moderating variables:**
- Age, gender, personality, family
Occupational factors

What do we mean?
• **Employment status**: Suicide more common in unemployed?
• **Occupational group**: Suicide more common in specific professions or industrial sectors?
• **Working conditions**: Suicide more common in individuals working under particular conditions, e.g. unskilled work

Why is that important?
• Focus prevention on unemployed/long-term unemployed?
• Target prevention to particular occupational group?
• Focus on people working under stressful working conditions?
Unemployment and suicide: national level studies

National suicide rates compared with national unemployment rates over time

– Relatively consistent evidence internationally that suicide rates raise in period of economic crisis (growing unemployment rates), raise is higher in unemployed than in employed.¹

– Raise in unemployment-related suicide rates higher during periods of low national unemployment rates ¹,²

– Most common interpretations:
  • Precipitating rather than causative factor
  • Financial pressures
  • Loss of work relationships
  • Undermines resources needed to cope with adverse life events

– Limitations
  • Ecological fallacy: use of aggregate data rather than individual level data (were the cases the ones who were unemployed?)
  • Third factor: mental health as causative for unemployment and suicide

Unemployment and suicide: individual level studies

Are individuals who committed suicide more likely to be unemployed? Or: Are individuals who become unemployed more likely to commit suicide?

Relatively consistent evidence:

– 70% added risk for those who became unemployed (Relative Risk 1.70)
– First 5 years most important: relative risk 2.50
– Risks similar for men and women

However this does not seem to apply for clinical populations being in clinical care due to mental health issues before losing the job

Are suicides more common in specific occupational groups?: Commonly found groups

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>High rates</strong></th>
<th><strong>Males, high rates</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Medical doctors</td>
<td>Construction</td>
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<td>Nursing professionals</td>
<td>Agriculture</td>
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<td>Elementary (unskilled manual)</td>
<td>Elementary occupations</td>
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<td>Plant and machine operators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Construction workers</td>
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<td>Drivers</td>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Low or average rates</strong></th>
<th><strong>Females high rates</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Education and teaching</td>
<td>Health professionals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>Elementary occupations: cleaners</td>
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<td>Business professionals</td>
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Are suicides more common in specific occupational groups?

Meta-analysis with 34 international studies.

• A stepwise gradient in risk, with the **lowest skilled occupations** being at greater risk of suicide than the highest skilled occupations.

• **Elementary professions** (e.g. labourers and cleaners) at the highest elevated risk compared with the working-age population: RR = 1.84, 95% CI 1.46–2.33),

• followed by machine operators and deck crew (RR = 1.78, 95% CI 1.22–2.60) and

• agricultural workers (RR = 1.64, 95% CI 1.19–2.28).

• Lowest rates in **managers** and clerical workers

Job characteristics and suicide

Commonly found factors independently of industrial sector or occupational group in follow-up studies:

- Low control at work
- Lack of social support from co-workers and supervisors
- Long working hours
- High psychological demands
- Imbalance between effort and reward

Evidence is scarce
SSIS-ACE Study Approach

Information to be obtained in interviews

Occupational group
Detailed occupation/profession
Sector of employment
Employed – self employed

Employment security
Permanent, temporary, sporadic hourly
Threat of becoming unemployed
Recent Job loss

Job characteristics:
Social support and work atmosphere, social conflicts
Psychological work demands
Skill utilisation and decision latitude
Implications for prevention practice

• Focus on **unemployed** soon after job loss, don’t forget insecurely employed
• Focus on **unskilled workers and health care workers**
• Target workers in **highly stressful jobs**
• **Construction workers** as emerging group in Ireland?
Thank you for your attention!

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