

[Suicide rate up for people WITH jobs](#) 09 Sep 2009 08:28 am

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You might expect the suicide rate among the unemployed to be rising in this economy, but among those of us who are gainfully employed?

Turns out [workplace suicides hit their highest level](#) since the government started tracking the numbers, and the data doesn't bode well for what may be happening among the population at large.

Workplace suicides jumped 28 percent to 251 cases in 2008, up from 196 in the previous year, according to the Department of Labor.

"A tough economic situation tends to be an equal opportunity downer," said [Thierry Guedj](#), the BostonJobDoctor founder and psychology of work expert and professor at Boston University.

"What you see is that many employers are trying to do a whole lot more with less. Many employees are being pushed to the limit by their supervisors, where they cannot possibly meet the productivity targets," he explained. "So, basically they work themselves into the ground. Tremendous anxiety sets in. Insomnia creeps up. People are in a constant state of hyper-alertness, which is very bad for their health. There's also a rise in heart attacks and other serious medical conditions."

According to the DOL nearly 95 percent of the suicides were committed by men, and the highest levels were among those who were between 45 and 54.

When it comes to different age groups and suicide, said [Eric Caine](#), professor and chair of the department of psychiatry at the University of Rochester Medical Center, pointed out, the rate tends to accelerate among those in their early 20s and then tends to level off among those in their early 50s and goes down a bit from there. The fact that so many of the people tracked in this research were around 50 years old may just be a reflection of the size of that group among the working population, he added.

Factors that contribute to suicide among those between 25 to 55, he explained, typically have to do with family stress, financial stress and workplace stress.

To be sure, stress on the job is rising for many workers in this economy as companies cut back benefits, furlough workers, and expect a few to do the job of many.

“Compounding the problem,” added Guedj, “is the huge debt load that Americans have accumulated. So, many people are facing foreclosure. Others can’t pay for their kids’ education. They feel like they have failed on so many fronts. Despair starts to set in and the world looks like a huge black hole from which it seems impossible to escape.”

Among those who committed suicide guns were increasingly the weapon of choice:

For suicides in 2008, gunshot wounds (accounting for 130 suicides) and asphyxiations/strangulations or suffocations (accounting for 78 suicides) were the most common occurrences. Gunshot wounds increased 48 percent from 2007 to 2008.

And it wasn’t just rank and file workers that took their own lives. In fact, managers were more likely to kill themselves. (Here’s [a link to a blog post](#) I wrote on a recent executive suicide.)

Workers in management occupations account for the largest group of suicides, the DOL reported. In 2008 they accounted for 14 percent of suicides (34 fatalities) and in 2007 they accounted for 18 percent of all suicides (35 fatalities). Transportation and material moving occupations, sales and related occupations, and protective service occupations each accounted for 10 percent of total suicides. The occupations that experienced the largest increases in suicides from 2007 to 2008 were protective service occupations (14 to 25 fatalities) and transportation and material moving occupations (13 to 24 fatalities). About a third of the total protective service suicides in 2008 were police officers.

This blog post is fitting right now because this week is [National Suicide Prevention Week](#), according to Clare Miller, director of the [Partnership for Workplace Mental Health American Psychiatric Foundation](#).

We need to be aware of how these times impact us and the people around us. Overall suicide statistics for the nation are woefully slow, and only go back to 2006, said Caine, before the economic hit the skids.

Some mental health experts are bracing for what could be a significant increase given economic conditions. “We know with clarity that in Asia when the economy unraveled in 1997 and 1998 the rate in Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan went up dramatically,” he said. Since [Japan](#) is quicker to track suicide data, he pointed to that nation’s numbers for 2008, which shows the rate rising.

The labor department numbers may also be an ominous sign of what’s happening right now.

Employers are concerned.

This from [a Workforce Management story](#) from last week:

Employers are expressing increasing worry about employee suicide, say employee assistance plan providers.

There have been a greater number of calls recently from employers about how to handle potential suicides, said Dr. Doug Nemecek, Eden Prairie, Minnesota-based senior medical director for Cigna Corp.’s Health Solutions organization, which includes its behavioral health and EAP business.

In some cases, employees are informing managers about co-workers who have expressed suicidal thoughts on their Facebook pages, he said.

Given the potential problem, Caine had some simple pieces of advice for people going through bad times

- *Strong people can ask for help. Some problems can't be solved alone.
- *Many people around us have ideas we haven't thought of, and many people have gone through this before and have been able to come out of it.
- *There are hotlines in many communities and thoughtful, caring people.
- *There is a light at the end of the tunnel — take it on faith.



5 Responses

1. *HikingStick* Says:

[September 9th, 2009 at 9:01 am](#)

A timely post, Eve. I've had some dark times in my life, so my heart goes out to those who are struggling.

Perhaps one of the greatest advances in modern medicine in the past 30 years has been a greater understanding that there are often real physiological factors that contribute or even cause depression in some people. That opened up the doors to allow a flood of scientific pharmacological research into therapies that can help people going through depression get through to better times.

I'm not suggesting that all cases are based on physiology. Clearly, extreme stress and weak interpersonal support networks are also factors. I'm just glad that doctors are now better able to try to help those who are depressed, rather than just dismissing it as something that will pass on its own.

If you know someone who may be depressed, just reach out and offer to take them to coffee (or a similar activity), and be willing to listen. Don't try to make the person be cheerful. Let them know that you've noticed they seem like something has been bothering them, and let them take it from there. Not everyone will open up on the first attempt, so keep reaching out.

Not sure if someone may be depressed?The Mayo Clinic's website lists the following signs for which to watch. Remember, not everyone will display every symptom—everyone is different. Most often, you're looking for changes in the way a specific person normally behaves:

- Loss of interest in normal daily activities
- Feeling sad or down
- Feeling hopeless
- Crying spells for no apparent reason
- Problems sleeping
- Trouble focusing or concentrating
- Difficulty making decisions
- Unintentional weight gain or loss
- Irritability