



Pathology & Biology Section – 2004

G14 The Richard Cory Phenomenon: Suicide and Socioeconomic Status in Kansas City, Missouri

Thomas W. Young, MD, Jackson County Medical Examiner, 660 East 24th Street, Kansas City, MO 64108; Suzanna Wooden, University of Missouri, Kansas City School of Medicine, 2411 Holmes, Kansas City, MO 64108; Jinwen Cai, MD and Gerald L. Hoff, PhD, Kansas City Missouri Health Department, 2400 Troost, Kansas City, MO 64108; Paul C. Dew, MD, MPH, University of Health Sciences, 1750 Independence Avenue, Kansas City, MO 64106*

The goal of this presentation is to present findings from a retrospective study demonstrating a positive association between suicide and socioeconomic status.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by enabling the design of more effective public health interventions for people at risk for suicide. The study also illustrates how data obtained from a coroner or medical examiner agency may be useful for the epidemiologic research of violent death.

Edwin Arlington Robinson's famous poem, "Richard Cory," tells how a man of refinement and wealth goes home "one calm summer night" and inexplicably puts "a bullet through his head." The poem leaves the reader surprised that a wealthy man with all one could seemingly desire in life kills himself. Is a suicide like his unexpected? Results of a retrospective study performed in Kansas City, Missouri, indicate that suicide actually occurs more frequently among those with more of life's finer things.

The Jackson County Medical Examiner receives reports of and investigates all deaths from injury and many natural deaths in Jackson County, Missouri, and maintains a database of information from these investigations. The information includes the home address of each victim. Jackson County Government performs house and personal property appraisals for taxation purposes. Appraisal values for real estate and personal property can be viewed from the Jackson County Government website (www.jacksongov.org) by the parcel address and by the name of each individual owning personal property subject to taxation. These government home and personal property appraisals tend to be lower than actual real market value.

The authors studied all suicides reported to the Medical Examiner from 1998 to 2002. They compared appraisals of houses where suicide victims used to live to appraisals of houses lived in by victims from a control group of non-suicidal deaths. Each non-suicide control victim was randomly selected from the Jackson County Medical Examiner database and matched by age, race, sex, and year of death with each suicide victim. Where available, appraisals for personal property owned by each victim, the victim's spouse, or the victim's parents were also obtained and compared for each group. Additionally, stressors for suicidal intent, such as financial strain, recent loss of a loved one, relationship difficulties, and health, mental or drug problems, were identified for each suicide from investigative reports.

The suicide and control groups each had 426 victims. Significantly more victims in the suicide group lived in houses than victims in the control group (suicide: 70% vs. control: 56.8%, $p < 0.001$ by chi square analysis). Appraisal values for the houses obtained for 277 members of the suicide group had a significantly higher mean and median compared to those of 227 members of the control group (mean: \$70,143 for suicide vs. \$61,513 for control, median: \$62,316 for suicide vs. \$50,580 for control, $p = 0.04$ for two means by two-tailed t-test). Personal property appraisals were available for only 93 members of the suicide group and 90 members of the control group. Although the mean and median appraisals were higher for the suicide group (mean: \$3,666 for suicide vs. \$3,054 for control, median: \$2,750 for suicide vs. \$2,045 for control), the differences were not statistically significant. Analysis of stressors within the suicide group identified mental health and relationship issues as the predominant stressors, but financial strain, identified in only 8% of victims, was the least frequent stressor. Those suicide victims identified with financial strain had even higher mean and median house values than the suicide or control groups (mean of financial strain group, \$77,126; median, \$74,050).

The data indicate that suicide victims are: 1) more likely to live in houses than other victims rather than in apartments or trailers, 2) more likely to live in more expensive houses than other victims, 3) more likely to kill themselves because of factors other than financial strain, and 4) if financial strain is a factor, more likely to kill themselves after becoming accustomed to a more affluent lifestyle.

Suicide, Socioeconomic Status, Retrospective Study