



D35 The Killer Economy

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the relationship between the economic downfall and the suicide rate as it pertains to Harris County, Texas. Attendees will also have an increased awareness of the underlying stressors that result in an individual being vulnerable to suicide. Analysis of statistics in Harris County, Texas will be completed during the years 2006-2009.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by serving as an educational tool for the impact of the poor economy as a possible risk factor for suicide. A full understanding of the risks and factors involved in suicide will help elucidate the interaction between economic cycles, unemployment, and suicide. Improved understanding may help organizations provide services to at risk individuals, possibly preventing some of these deaths in the future.

Recent economic turmoil, increased unemployment and record foreclosure rates have spurred inquiries about whether these changes have led to an increase in suicides. The suicide rates in Harris County, Texas for the period of years 2006-2009 were used to test the general hypothesis that the suicide rate is affected by economic variables and, in particular, to explore the relationship between the economy and the suicide rate. This review shows that a possible relationship exists between unemployment, the economy, and suicide. Although it is difficult to determine the exact stressors that were involved with an individual who commits suicide, a suicide note or comments made to friends or family will give clues into what stressors were involved. This study used investigator reports for Harris County, Texas, and suicide notes left on scene to determine the stressors involved. These statistics were compiled and showed a steady increase in the number of suicides and the number of suicides where the economic downfall, unemployment, or financial strain was specifically mentioned as a primary stress leading to the individuals decision to commit suicide. Statistics showed a steady increase over the years of 2006-2009 in the number of suicides involving financial stress as a factor. The year 2006 was used as a comparison basis for this study as the economic crisis was noted to begin in 2007. There were 363 suicides in 2006, 27 of which revealed suicide notes or comments from family that suggested some financial stress. This is equal to 7.4% of overall cases for the year. In 2007, the number of suicides where notes or family comments confirmed economic stress, increased to 47 cases of the total number of suicides numbering 436 or 10.8%. The trend continued through the 2008 year with 55 of 459 cases or 12.0%. The peak of suicides has been in the year 2009 with 76 of 488 cases or 15.6% of the suicides being directly related to the failing economy. Not all reports contained information valuable in ascertaining whether the economy was a stressor involved. In addition, not all cases involved a suicide note, therefore; many cases where the economy may have been a stressor were unable to be applied with these statistics.

A common "chain of adversity" can begin with job loss and move toward depression through financial strain and loss of personal control. With a better understanding of the risks of suicide, leaders and their organizations can take steps to lessen the impact of the economic downturn. Organizations in the public and private sectors should help make key services more accessible, especially high-quality, comprehensive transition services for the unemployed and assistance for homeowners threatened by foreclosure. Individuals in distress can take action to reduce their own levels of distress. Individuals can engage in activities that relieve anxiety and emotional distress and focus on managing areas in their lives where they still have some control.

Suicides, Economy, Unemployment