

Early Data Suggest Suicides Are Rising

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Reports Indicate 2008 Uptick Is Similar to Those Seen in Past Recessions, Though Cause Is Unclear

• Article

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Early signs suggest the number of suicides in the U.S. crept up during the worst recession in decades, according to a Wall Street Journal survey of states that account for about 40% of the U.S. population.

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Associated Press

A 1987 Dodge van stuck on a rock overhang near Grand Junction, Colo., after the driver sent the vehicle off a cliff in an apparent suicide attempt in January. The driver survived. Available data, still incomplete, suggest that this recession, like past ones, coincided with an uptick in suicides. The data from 19 states find an increase in suicides in the recessionary year of 2008 from 2007. Those states historically account for about half of annual suicides in the U.S. Calls to suicide hotlines are rising. And suicides in the workplace and the military -- a small sliver all of self-inflicted deaths -- were up in 2008.

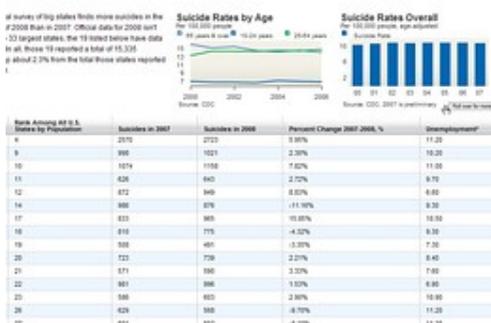
Official data on suicides in the U.S. lag, and a 2008 national tally isn't yet available. In 2007, there were 33,185 suicides, according to preliminary estimates from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, compared with an average of about 32,800 in the previous three years.

A Journal survey of the 33 largest states by population found 19 have data for 2008. In all, those 19 reported a total of 15,335 suicides in 2008, up about 2.3% from the previous year.

Thirteen states, accounting for 30% of the U.S. population, reported more suicides in 2008. In Florida, for instance, suicides were up 6%, in Georgia, up 2.3%, and in North Carolina, up 7.8%. In six smaller states, which account for about 9.5% of the population, the number of suicides fell.

Suicide and Recession

A Wall Street Journal survey of big states finds more suicides in the recessionary year of 2008 than in 2007. See details.



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The precise reasons for the rise in suicides aren't yet known. But suicide rates have historically risen during tough economic times, when unemployment is high, suicide experts say.

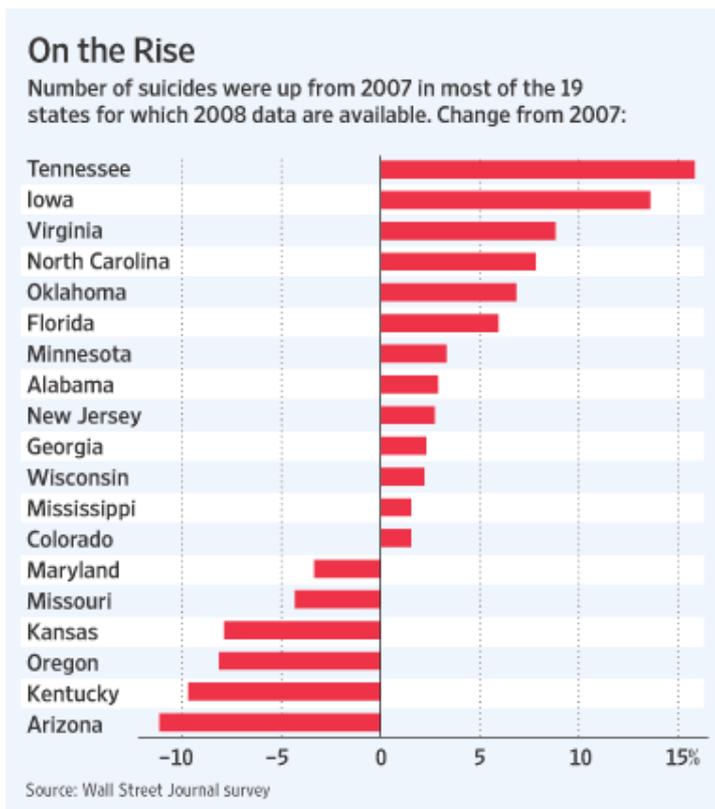
William Parente, a New York lawyer, killed himself as well as his wife and two daughters in Towson, Md., in April amid allegations that he was involved in a Ponzi scheme. "He, through fraudulent transactions, basically collapsed the savings for several of his clientele," said Cpl. Michael Hill of the Baltimore County Police Department. "Even though we cannot say concretely that the cause of some suicides, even with a background of financial situations, are related to the economy, it is rare that we normally see this many" suicides that appear to be related to finances, Cpl. Hill said.

Calls to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, a government-funded number (1-800-273-TALK) linked to a network of crisis centers, are on pace to reach about 630,000 in 2009, according to officials there. That is up about 15% from last year on top of a 36% increase in 2008 that Lifeline officials attribute, in part, to a promotion of the hotline by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

"We're hearing from people who might not have sought help before," said John Draper, project director. Some crisis centers note that financial problems outpace depression as reasons for the calls, he said. "There's a lot more anxiety and fear related to paying bills and finding a job. Certainly there's some hopelessness about the future."

The suicides of two businessmen this year are among those that occurred against a backdrop of financial strain. Colleagues of David B. Kellermann, the 41-year-old acting finance chief for mortgage giant Freddie Mac, said he seemed overwhelmed by his job as he dealt with investigations into the company's accounting and finances. Thierry Magon de La Villehuchet, 65, co-founder of an investment firm that lost \$1.5 billion in the Bernard Madoff scandal, killed himself in his New York office in December.

Tough economic times alone don't push most to suicide. About 90% of those who kill themselves have a mental-health disorder, experts say, most often depression or substance abuse. An economic downturn can exacerbate them, said Paula Clayton, medical director for the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention.



Other factors may be contributing. So far this year, 140 U.S. soldiers have committed suicide, the same as in all of 2008. There were 115 soldier suicides in 2007.

A survey released in September by the federal Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found that nearly 8.3 million adults had serious thoughts of suicide in 2008. Of them, 1.1 million, or 0.5% of adult Americans, attempted suicide. It is the first survey of its kind, so there is no comparable earlier data.

The number of suicides tends to rise with a state's unemployment rate, said Christopher J. Ruhm, an economist at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, who has studied the health effects of recessions. His research suggests that for every one percentage point increase in a state's unemployment rate, the number of suicides increases 1.3%, "What I actually find is there's an effect pretty quickly," Mr. Ruhm said, "but that effect builds a bit over time."

That was the case during the Great Depression. Despite cartoons of people jumping from windows during the 1929 stock-market crash, the suicide rate rose sharply only in subsequent years, Ms. Clayton noted. The U.S. recorded 15.3 suicides per 100,000 people in 1929, rising to 17 in 1930 and 18.6 in 1932, according to U.S. Vital Statistics reports from those years. Data before 1933 don't include all states and weren't collected uniformly, however. The suicide rate in 1933, when unemployment was nearly 25%, was higher than any year since. The suicide rate in 2007, based on preliminary estimates, was 10.8 per 100,000.

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