

COVID-19 Policy Brief: Middle-Aged Men

May 2021

Introduction

Men account for three out of every four suicides in Ireland and have long been identified as a high-risk group. Inequality is a key reason why this group are at increased risk of suicide. It is likely that the long-term economic effects of the pandemic will most affect those already socially and economically disadvantaged. There is also a strong socioeconomic link to suicide risk. Researchers have found that depression and anxiety are up to three times as likely for people with low incomes.¹ We also know that middle-aged men are more susceptible to the adverse effects of lower socioeconomic status and economic recession, including suicide risk, than women.²

This policy brief addresses some risk factors that contribute to suicide risk, in the context of the ongoing impact of COVID-19.

What do we know from Samaritans' callers?*

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Samaritans has provided support to men over 700,000 times. Our research tells us that some of the negative life events that may be experienced because of the pandemic are risk factors for suicide among middle-aged men – these include social isolation, relationship strain and job loss.

Research conducted in 2019 among 501 men aged 18+ in the Republic of Ireland indicated that the top 3 stressors for 'finding life though' were: job-loss/job-related problems, relationship breakdown/family problems, and debt/financial worries.³ We have seen these exact themes further exacerbated in our calls throughout the pandemic.

Many callers have felt that they have to 'put on a brave face' rather than openly sharing their concerns and feelings with their friends or loved ones. They talk about feeling ashamed or guilty about these difficulties, feelings we know from our previous research are associated with suicidality.⁴

These findings are particularly concerning because we know that economic downturns are connected with increased suicide rates in men.⁵ Following the 2008 recession, suicide rates rose for all men, and most steeply for those aged 35-44.⁶ Overall, men have experienced greater employment loss due to lockdowns and while this pandemic has disproportionately impacted young people, it is typically older persons that struggle to reenter the workforce – male claimants 55 and older are almost 22% more likely to fall into long-term unemployment.^{7,8} We cannot say that this economic downturn will affect middle-aged men in the same way as previous recessions. Suicide is complex multifaceted issue, and there is rarely one single cause. However, we are concerned about risk factors that we know can make men vulnerable.

* Samaritans' helpline is a free confidential service, but we do survey our listeners on general topics that come up during calls.

Loneliness and Isolation

Since restrictions began, men have been more likely to raise concerns about loneliness/isolation compared to the same time last year (30% of calls from men compared to 26.5%).⁹ The closure of facilities such as gyms, pubs, sporting venues, cafes and offices heightened feelings of loneliness and isolation among male callers who would visit these venues to meet friends or as a coping mechanism to support mental health. Some callers also said they were using drugs and alcohol to cope with loneliness.

As sectors predominately made up of men (i.e., construction) shut down due to the pandemic many men would have faced further social isolation. Through speaking with men as part of our lived experience research, we know that employment can provide a social network, routine, and sense of purpose. Becoming unemployed can leave men disconnected and unsure of what to do with their time, creating or exacerbating risk factors for suicide such as social isolation, rumination, or substance misuse.¹⁰

Worries about Financial/Economic Future

Some men contacting us during the pandemic have expressed serious concerns about their finances and fear of losing their standards of living, because of job loss and redundancy or losing their business [for the self-employed]. Men have also spoken about feelings of shame if they are no longer working and the guilt they feel about not being able to support their families.

While the government has offered various supports throughout the pandemic such as PUP and rent/eviction freezes when these expire some men could face difficulties. Our research found that the experience of unmanageable debt, especially when debt spirals and leads to bankruptcy or losing one's home, can not only feel stressful but humiliating, and this contributes to increased risk of suicidal behaviour. Not everyone who falls into unmanageable debt during the pandemic will experience increased suicide risk. This relationship is complex, dependent upon the source and reasons for debt, and impacted by longer term factors like pre-existing mental health conditions or persistent inequality.¹¹

Strain on Relationships

Men have spoken to us about their worries as to whether their relationship will break down, they have also shared the impacts of working in close quarters with family members, pressures of homeschooling and increased family tensions. On the other spectrum one listener told us they have heard from men who are single fathers and separated from their children due to relationship breakdowns are afraid they may no longer be able to see them or have very limited access.

Our research has indicated that relationship breakdown is more likely to lead to suicidal ideation in men and this can be further exacerbated if [separation from] children are involved. Many suicidal acts occur in the context of a cluster of difficult circumstances that compound each other. For men living in materially difficult circumstances or experiencing unemployment or debt, the impact of a relationship breakdown may be even more severe; and economic pressures can also contribute to relationship breakdown.¹²

Priorities

Middle-Aged men were struggling before the pandemic which is bound to have additional consequential and lasting impact. As the country progresses in its reopening and recovery plan, government should proactively mitigate key risk factors for this cohort.



Fund community-based support services, which provide men the opportunity to contribute to society and work towards common goals and ensure men with lived-experiences are at the root of service design to guarantee supports are available at the right time and in the right ways.



As the [National Men's Health Action Plan](#) is due to expire this year, the plan should be reviewed. This review should include measuring its impact with a pandemic lense.



Develop a new national men's health policy and plan built within the context of and learnings from an active-pandemic world. This plan must take a holistic, whole-life approach, built upon an understanding of the particular, persistent, and proactive engagement needed to reach men and the new challenges they may face after a pandemic. This new plan must also further recognise the social determinants of health and include targeted practical support and specific schemes to provide financial security and help men get back into work where necessary.

¹ Ridley, M. et al. (2020). 'Poverty, depression, and anxiety: Casual evidence and mechanisms', *Science*, Vol. 370, No. 6552

² Samaritans. (2017). [Dying from inequality: socioeconomic disadvantage and suicidal behaviour](#)

³ Samaritans Ireland (2019). Atomik Research Survey. Unpublished.

⁴ Samaritans. (2012). [Men, suicide and society: Why disadvantaged men in mid-life die by suicide](#)

⁵ Oyesanya, M. et al. (2015). 'Systematic review of suicide in economic recession', *World Journal of Psychiatry*, 5(2), 243-54

⁶ Central Statistics Office. (2000-2018). [Published Suicide Deaths and Late Registered Deaths \(VSD33\)](#)

⁷ National Economic and Social Council. (2021). [Gender and Covid-19 in Ireland](#)

⁸ O'Connell, P.J., S. McGuinness, and E. Kelly (2012). 'The transition from short- to long-term unemployment: a statistical profiling model for Ireland', *The Economic and Social Review*, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 135–164.

⁹ Samaritans. (2021). [Coronavirus and middle-aged men](#).

¹⁰ Samaritans. (2020). [Out of sight, out of mind: Why less-well off, middle-aged men do not get the support they need](#)

¹¹ Samaritans. (2017). [Dying from inequality: socioeconomic disadvantage and suicidal behaviour](#)

¹² Samaritans. (2012). [Men, suicide and society: Why disadvantaged men in mid-life die by suicide](#)