

# Coronavirus policy brief: Middle-aged men

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## Introduction

Middle-aged men have the highest suicide rate of any age group in England, a fact that has persisted for decades.<sup>1</sup> There is a strong socioeconomic gradient to male suicide risk – men who are less well-off and living in the most deprived areas are up to ten times more likely to die by suicide than more well-off men from the most affluent areas.<sup>2</sup> This policy brief addresses some of the economic risk factors that contribute to suicide risk, in the context of the ongoing economic impact of coronavirus.

## What do we know from Samaritans' callers?

During the first 12 months of the pandemic, Samaritans provided support to men over 946,000 times.<sup>3</sup> Fear of losing their income and being unable to provide for their families has been a common theme amongst male callers. 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.<sup>4</sup>

These findings are particularly concerning because we know that economic downturns are connected with increased suicide rates in men.<sup>5</sup> Following the 2008-2010 recession, suicide rates rose for all men, and more steeply for those aged 40-59.<sup>6</sup> In England, over 800 more men died by suicide during that recession than would have been expected from historical trends.<sup>7</sup> Crucially, while suicide rates have historically risen during economic downturns for some groups, research suggests that they may not fall back with financial recovery.<sup>8</sup> The correlation between economic deprivation and suicide risk is especially strong for middle-aged men<sup>9</sup> and in the last recession, significant suicide increases occurred among men in some of England's poorest regions – the North East, North West and South West.<sup>10</sup>

We cannot say that this economic downturn will affect middle-aged men in the same way as previous recessions. Suicide is complex, and there is rarely one single cause. However, we are concerned about risk factors that we know can make men vulnerable, such as unemployment and unmanageable debt, being exacerbated by the pandemic.<sup>11</sup>

## Unemployment

Men contacting us have talked about feelings of fear and uncertainty about the future – and particularly about losing their standard of living, fear of job loss and redundancy, or losing their business for the self-employed. Research suggests that there is a strong relationship between unemployment and suicide in men. A study of suicides during the last recession found a rise in suicide rates among men connected to unemployment, with every 10 per cent increase in unemployment among men associated with a 1.4 per cent increase in male suicides.<sup>12</sup> The reasons for this relationship are complex, but we know from speaking to middle-aged men as part of our report, [Out of Sight, Out of Mind](#), that employment can provide a social network, routine, and sense of purpose.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup>

Unemployment has risen steeply during coronavirus. At the time of writing, 311,000 more people are out of work than the last quarter before the pandemic.<sup>15</sup> This figure will get worse before it gets better; the Office for Budget Responsibility predicts a further 500,000 people will lose their jobs before unemployment peaks – at 6.5% - as furlough ends in late 2021.<sup>16</sup> There is uncertainty around these predictions, and the steps taken by the Government to protect jobs may mitigate the worst impacts for many people. Middle-aged men have not been worst affected by unemployment during the pandemic, but we are particularly concerned due to the impact that job loss can have on them.

### Unmanageable debt

Some men contacting us during the pandemic have expressed serious concerns about their finances, and feelings of shame and guilt at not being able to support their families. A lack of control and powerlessness was especially common, with many male callers feeling a need to be the breadwinner and provide for their family, but unable to do this in the unstable external environment. Some expressed worries about how these issues could affect their relationships and futures. We know that unmanageable debt is a risk factor for suicide among middle-aged men.<sup>17</sup> Adults in debt are twice as likely to consider suicide and research highlights debt as a factor in the adverse relationship between economic recession and suicide.<sup>18</sup> The relationship between debt and mental health involves multiple interacting features, such as debt, depression, substance misuse, and suicidal behaviour.<sup>19</sup> Our research, [Dying from Inequality](#), 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.<sup>20</sup>

Many people entered the current crisis already in a worse financial position than previous crises, with over three million people experiencing severe problem debt in late 2019.<sup>21</sup> Estimates suggest that, even early in lockdown, people with problem debt had amassed around £1,000 in further debt and another £1,000 in arrears.<sup>22</sup> The Government introduced far-reaching payment breaks to support household finances at the beginning of the pandemic, but six million adults still fell behind on their bills.<sup>23</sup> 1 in 5 people who have experience a fall in income have fallen behind on bills, usually council tax, utilities or rent. 1 in 3 have experienced hardship, including skipping meals and rationing utilities.<sup>24</sup>

It is not just the material stresses of falling into debt that can exacerbate suicide risk. Evidence suggests that enforcement action can be a contributing factor. For example, there is a particular link between eviction and suicide with one study finding that individuals who receive an eviction notice are four times more likely to die by suicide, even when controlling for other factors like mental health or substance misuse.<sup>25</sup> The process leading up to eviction plays an important role in this relationship, with most eviction-related suicides occurring before the loss of the home itself.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> as well as short term triggers like threatening debt collection letters or bailiff visits.<sup>28</sup> Many will be able to access payment breaks and the Government's Breathing Space scheme will help some of those experiencing mental health problems to avoid spiraling debts. However, the Government must do more to alleviate short-term pressures on household finances, support people who are experiencing unmanageable debt, and adequately address the causes of the existing relationship between economic deprivation and suicide in middle-aged men.

## Recommendations

- The Government's Restart scheme supports people affected by long-term unemployment in England and Wales. The £2.9 billion budget should include ringfenced funding to ensure that middle-aged men are supported into fulfilling and sustainable work, based on what we know about the connection between unemployment and suicide for this group.
- Unemployment services must be equipped to identify and support men who are struggling. The UK Government set aside £1.4bn in the November 2020 Spending Review to increase capacity in Jobcentre Plus; this should be used to increase the knowledge and capacity of Work Coaches, better equipping them to recognise the signs that middle-aged men may be in distress and signpost them to appropriate support.
- The Government's Breathing Space scheme contains provisions for people receiving NHS crisis care which will support many who are struggling with their mental health due to unmanageable debt in England and Wales. However, we know that two thirds of people who take their own life are not in touch with mental health services before they die, and the majority of this group are men.<sup>29</sup> It is vital that Government consider how the Breathing Space scheme can offer additional recovery space to everyone who needs it on the grounds of mental health, not just those receiving NHS crisis care, to break the link between unmanageable debt and suicide.

## References

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