

# More Americans Committing Suicide than During the Great Depression

By [Washington's Blog](#)

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## Higher Numbers of Americans Take Their Lives than During the Depths of the Great Depression

Suicide rates are tied to the economy.

The Boston Globe [reported](#) in 2011:

A new report issued today by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention finds that the overall suicide rate rises and falls with the state of the economy — dating all the way back to the Great Depression.

The report, published in the [American Journal of Public Health](#), found that suicide rates increased in times of economic crisis: the Great Depression (1929-1933), the end of the New Deal (1937-1938), the Oil Crisis (1973-1975), and the Double-Dip Recession (1980-1982). Those rates tended to fall during strong economic times — with fast growth and low unemployment — like right after World War II and during the 1990s.

During the depths of the Great Depression, suicide rates in America significantly increased. As the Globe notes:

The largest increase in the US suicide rate occurred during the Great Depression surging from 18 in 100,000 up to **22 in 100,000** ...

We've previously [pointed out](#) that suicide rates have skyrocketed recently:

The number of deaths by suicide has [also surpassed car crashes](#), and many connect the increase in suicides [to the downturn in the economy](#). Around [35,000](#) Americans kill themselves each year (and more American soldiers [die by suicide than combat](#); the number of veterans committing suicide is astronomical and [under-reported](#)). So you're [2,059](#) times more likely to kill yourself than die at the hand of a terrorist.

NBC News [reported](#) in March:

Suicide rates are up alarmingly among middle-aged Americans, according to the latest federal government statistics.

They show a 28 percent rise in suicide rates for people aged 35 to 64 between 1999 and 2010.

RT [reports](#):

In a letter to The Lancet medical journal, scientists from Britain, Hong Kong and United States said an analysis of data from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicated that while suicide rates increased slowly between 1999 and 2007, the rate of increase more than quadrupled from 2008 to 2010, Reuters reported.

Earlier this month, NY Daily News [wrote](#):

The Great Recession may have been at the root of a great depression that caused suicides to soar among middle-aged Americans, a government report speculates.

The annual suicide rate for adults ages 35 to 64 spiked in the past decade, according to a study from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And a shaky economy that nose-dived into the worst financial crisis since the Depression may be the biggest reason why.

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The CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report said the annual suicide rate jumped 28.4% from 1999-2010.

It was the biggest increase of any age group, said the CDC, citing "the recent economic downturn" as one of the "possible contributing factors" for the increase.

"Historically, suicide rates tend to correlate with business cycles, with higher rates observed during times of economic hardship," the report said.

David Stuckler (a senior research leader in sociology at Oxford), and Sanjay Basu (an assistant professor of medicine and an epidemiologist in the Prevention Research Center at Stanford), [write](#) in the New York Times:

The correlation between unemployment and suicide has been observed since the 19th century.

(And see these articles by the [Wall Street Journal](#) and the [Los Angeles Times](#). This is obviously true world-wide. For example, last year the New York Times [reported](#):

The economic downturn that has shaken Europe for the last three years has also swept away the foundations of once-sturdy lives, leading to an alarming spike in suicide rates. Especially in the most fragile nations like Greece, Ireland and Italy, small-business owners and entrepreneurs are increasingly taking their own lives in a phenomenon some European newspapers have started

calling “suicide by economic crisis.”

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In Greece, the suicide rate among men increased more than 24 percent from 2007 to 2009, government statistics show. In Ireland during the same period, suicides among men rose more than 16 percent. In Italy, suicides motivated by economic difficulties have increased 52 percent, to 187 in 2010 — the most recent year for which statistics were available — from 123 in 2005.)

Indeed, more Americans are killing themselves today than during the Great Depression. Specifically, there were [123 million](#) Americans in 1930. The maximum suicide rate during the depths of the Great Depression was [22 out of 100,000](#) Americans. That means that up to [27,060](#) Americans killed themselves each year.

In contrast, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control reports that [38,364](#) Americans committed suicide in 2010. In other words, 2010 suicides were approximately [142%](#) of suicides during the depths of the Great Depression. (The suicide *rate* is lower today than during the Great Depression, but - given that there are *more Americans* - there are *more suicides* each year.)

The head of my local county’s mental health services confirmed to me today that there are now more suicides now than during the Great Depression.

## **The Root Causes: Unemployment and Foreclosure**

Why do more people kill themselves during severe downturns? It’s not just a downturn in the business cycle in some general sense. It’s more specific than that.

**Unemployment** and **foreclosure** are the largest triggers in increased suicide risk.

David Stuckler and Sanjay Basu [write](#):

People looking for work are about twice as likely to end their lives as those who have jobs.

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Unemployment is a leading cause of depression, anxiety, alcoholism and suicidal thinking.

ABC News [points out](#):

“Joblessness is a risk factor for suicide,” said Nadine Kaslow, professor of psychology in the Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at Emory University in Atlanta. “The stress is just overwhelming. ... People are freaked out.”

Bloomberg [reports](#):

“The suicide rate started accelerating in 2008, 2009 and 2010 — someone might still be working, but their house is underwater, or they’re working but they’re working part-time,” Eric Caine, the director of the CDC’s [Injury Control](#)

[Research Center for Suicide Prevention](#), said by telephone. “These things ripple into families. There’s an economic stress.”

NY Daily News writes:

“Most people who commit suicide tend to suffer from major depression, and this vulnerability tends to be brought forth by very stressful situations like losing one’s home or job,” [Dr. Dan Iosifescu, director of mood and anxiety disorders program at Mount Sinai Hospital] said.

NBC News [reports](#):

The [American Association for Suicidology](#) says economic recessions don’t normally affect suicide rates.

“Although US suicide rates did increase slightly during the years of the Great Depression, reaching a peak rate of 17.4/100,000 in 1933, subsequent US recessions have not been found to lead to increased national rates of suicide in the period of or immediately following each recession,” the group says.

The latest numbers suggest suicide rates for middle-aged Americans now surpass the peak during the Depression. And there’s another possible explanation.

“There is a clear and direct relationship between rates of unemployment and suicide,” the suicidology group says in its statement.

“The peak rate of suicide in 1933 occurred one year after the total US unemployment rate reached 25 percent of the labor force. Similar findings have been documented internationally. At the individual level, unemployed individuals have between two and four times the suicide rate of those employed.”

The group also raises concern about the home foreclosure rate.

Indeed, it is likely that [more people have lost their jobs](#) during this “Great Recession” than during the Great Depression ... especially when you look at the [masses of people](#) who have given up altogether and dropped out of the work force.

And it is possible that [more people have lost their homes through foreclosure](#) than during the Great Depression as well.

No wonder there are so many suicides ...

*Postscript: If you suffer from depression, [this may help](#).*

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