

Employment Status and Suicide Risk



From Science to Practice

Using Research to Promote Safety and Prevent Suicide

Overview

Unemployment can be detrimental to mental health¹ and associated with increased risk for suicide,^{1,2} including among Veterans.³ By contrast, full-time employment may be a protective factor against suicide among Veterans.⁴ However, the relationship between unemployment and suicide is complex.⁵ While many studies confirm a relationship, some have reported contradictory evidence (i.e., no association or a weak association), suggesting that individual factors (e.g., mental health) and contextual factors (e.g., availability and adequacy of unemployment benefits) also play a role.^{6,7} Clinicians can help by routinely asking Veterans about their employment status, discussing their perceived employment barriers in treatment, and actively helping unemployed, underemployed, or unstably employed Veterans access and engage with employment services. Everyone who works with Veterans is part of their employment team and can help support Veterans in meaningful employment.

Key Findings

- Unemployment is associated with a heightened risk for suicide among both men and women.^{2,8,9} While unemployment rates among male and female Veterans are similar, in 2020 the rates of Veteran unemployment rose across both gender and period of service era.¹⁰
- The age-adjusted suicide rate increases when the economy is in recession and more people are unemployed, and it falls when the economy is booming, and more people have jobs.⁵
- Unemployment becomes a greater risk factor for suicide as a worker ages.⁵ In 2020, 581,000 Veterans were unemployed. Of those, 54% were between the ages of 25 and 54 and 41% were aged 55 and older.¹⁰ However, studies conducted in other countries suggest that this correlation may be unique to the

United States.¹¹

- Counterintuitively, one study found that among men unemployed for more than two weeks, rates of suicide increased when national unemployment was lower and decreased when national unemployment was higher.¹¹ The researchers suggested this may be due to people who lose their jobs during times of high unemployment being less likely to blame themselves.¹¹
- Unless it is part of a mass layoff, losing a job does not seem to immediately increase suicide risk. Instead, suicide risk increases the longer a person is unemployed, with risk likely peaking within the first five years following job loss.^{8,13}
- Income loss may be a more salient predictor of increasing suicide rates than unemployment for all age groups, an effect which may be especially pronounced among those of both sexes over the age of 70.¹⁴
- Associations between financial strain factors and suicide risk appear to be cumulative. In a study that analyzed data at two time points, the probability of suicidal ideation and attempts increased significantly with the presence of financial strain indicators (i.e., unemployment, financial debt or crisis, past homelessness, and lower income). Unemployment endorsed at wave 1 predicted subsequent suicidal ideation and suicide attempt between waves 1 and 2.¹ Individuals who endorsed all four financial risk factors had a 20 times higher probability for future suicide attempt than those with zero financial risk factors.¹
- A study of VHA patients found that 3.5% endorsed employment or financial problems, an adverse social determinant of health (SDH) that was independently associated with increased odds for suicidal ideation and suicide attempt.³ Of the Veterans who reported having employment or financial problems, over 57% also reported housing instability, another adverse SDH that independently increased odds for suicidality.³ Adverse SDH (e.g., violence, housing instability, employment/financial problems, legal issues, social/family issues) seem to have a dose-response association with suicidality, with each additional SDH increasing the odds of suicidal ideation by 67% and suicide attempt by 49%.³
- Job insecurity (the perceived threat and associated fear

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- of losing one's job) is associated with higher odds of suicidal ideation.¹⁵
- People with mental health problems, who are predisposed to job insecurity, may be particularly at risk for suicide after losing their job.⁸
- A systematic review found that the availability and adequacy of different government policies including unemployment benefits, active labor market programs, and employment protection legislation may each moderate the role of unemployment as a risk for suicide.⁷
- After controlling for baseline suicidal ideation, being employed with full-time or part-time work was associated with significantly lower odds of suicidal ideation in the subsequent year in a national longitudinal study of post-9/11 Veterans.⁴ Other protective factors against suicidal ideation include having enough money to meet basic needs (e.g., food, clothes, shelter); being able to care for oneself without help; living stability, social support,^{16,4} spirituality, resilience, and self-determination.⁴
- Abraham and colleagues (2021) examined the association between employment and later health care utilization for over 29,000 Veterans with substance use and mental health disorders at discharge from VHA employment programs. The authors found that after completing a VHA employment program, Veterans who were employed at program discharge were less likely in the five years following program completion to receive VHA homeless services, primary care visits, and had lower odds of mental health and medical hospitalizations than those who were not employed at program completion.¹⁷

Ways You Can Help

- Be invested in understanding Veterans' employment needs and barriers, and routinely ask about employment status as part of treatment. Proactively assist unemployed, underemployed, and unstably employed Veterans to access and engage in available employment programs offered through **Veteran Readiness and Employment** programs at all VA medical centers. There are a range of employment services available at each program location, including supported employment, which has a strong evidence base and supports Veterans to obtain and maintain employment.
- Inform unemployed, underemployed, and unstably employed Veterans that VA offers **career and employment** resources to build Veteran's careers and find the opportunities that are right for them. Provide support and assist with referrals if needed.
- Inform Veterans that the VA offers a multitude of **mental health services**. Mental health services are offered both in person and online.
- Direct Veterans and their dependents to the free **educational and career guidance, planning, and resources** the VA offers.
- Inform unemployed Veterans about the **US Department of Labor Veteran and Military Transition Center** with job listings, assistance with resumes and interviews, and Veteran Job Matcher that converts military experience to work in a civilian career.

There is no single cause of suicide. It is often the result of a complex interaction of risk and protective factors at the individual, interpersonal, community, and societal levels. To prevent Veteran suicide, we must maximize protective factors and minimize risk factors at all of these levels.

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