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Economic Strain and Suicide Risk: A Qualitative Analysis

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Abstract

Research at the individual level on economic strain and suicide has focused on unemployment; yet it remains unclear how unemployment and other economic strains actually affect suicide risk for the individual. In the present study Agnew's (1992, 2002), General Strain Theory was applied to a qualitative analysis of case files. Strain issues assessed include the role of goal blockage, economic loss, noxious work environments, anticipated strain, strain clusters, and vicarious strain in the generation of suicide risk. Data are from 62 cases of suicide involving economic strain from the files of an urban county medical examiner's office. The cases were classified into strain categories. Suicide risk was related to all categories of strain; however, economic strains were typically comorbid with additional strains in the genesis of suicide. Key auxiliary strains included anticipated loss of a home place, loss of a car, noxious social relationships, medical problems, death of loved ones, and involvement with the criminal justice system. Some evidence was found linking economic strain to the suicides of nonimpoverished persons. Economic strain and suicide would especially benefit by testing additional hypotheses on strain comorbidity. Unemployment combined with an anticipated eviction from one's home is recommended as a particular point of departure for future work.

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