American Association of Suicidology (http://www.suicidology.org) Statement:

The Economy and Suicide

The current world economic crisis has led to increased media and personal interest in the relationship between the economy and suicide.

Historically, US suicide rates have shown no clear association with times of economic recession. 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[1]. The latest published US suicide rates are for 2005, thus any possible effect of the current economic crisis on suicide cannot be ascertained.

There is a clear and direct relationship between rates of unemployment and suicide. The peak rate of suicide in 1933 occurred one year after the total US unemployment rate reached 25% 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.

As well, economic strain and personal financial crises have been well documented as precipitating events in individual deaths by suicide. Stressful life events, financial and others, have significant impact on those vulnerable to suicide where typical coping mechanisms are compromised by the effects of mental disorder, substance use, acute psychiatric symptoms, and a host of other risk factors associated with suicide.

Of current concern is the high rate of home foreclosures. More than a million people recently have lost their homes, about as many as did in the Great Depression when the population was about half what it is today. For most Americans, our homes are our primary investment and the locus of our identities and social support systems. When combined with the loss of job, home loss has been found to be one of the most common economic strains associated with suicides. In contrast to many other developed nations, the US provides little cushion to buffer these strains -- unemployment benefits are generally limited in duration and are considerably less than full-pay levels, there is no national health insurance, etc.

Although the media have shown interest in the potential for suicides consequent to the current economic crisis and have published case examples of individual suicides of those seemingly affected, we caution the media to follow recommended guidelines for reporting on these suicides in order to minimize the potential for copycat behavior and any untoward negative effect such stories can create. Further, we urge the media to publish sidebars inclusive of warning signs of suicide as a resource to those individuals in financial distress and potentially suicidal.

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[1] The National Bureau of Economic Research has published a listing of recessions in the 20th century, twelve of which (not including the current recession) subsequent to the 1929-1933 Depression. The longest of these lasted 16 months and, on average, these recessions lasted only about 10 months.