

**TITLE:** Suicide attempt in young people: A signal for long-term health care and social needs

**PUBLICATION SOURCE:** *JAMA Psychiatry*, Dec. 4, 2013 issue

**THE FINDINGS:**

- Among 1,037 people followed up as part of a longitudinal study, 8.8% (91 out of 1,037) had attempted suicide by the age of 24. These young New Zealanders came of age at a time when their country suffered a severe economic recession, with rising youth unemployment and youth suicide. This study may help to answer questions about the future life outcomes of young people experiencing similar conditions in today's recession.
- When followed up in their late thirties these young suicide attempters, compared to their peers, were at increased risk for a variety of poor life outcomes.
- For example, the suicide attempters:
  - Were 3 times more likely than non-attempters to be hospitalized for a psychiatric problem;
  - Were 2 times more likely to have developed the metabolic syndrome in their thirties (a syndrome which leads to cardiovascular disease and diabetes);
  - Had substantially higher levels of systemic inflammation (a blood test which points to high risk for heart disease);
  - Were 2.5 times more likely to be convicted for a violent crime;
  - Relied on government welfare benefits for approximately 3 years longer (on average) than non-attempters; and
  - Reported in their late thirties that they felt lonely and dissatisfied with life.
- Many suicide attempters had a psychiatric disorder before their attempt, but suicide attempt was a signal for poor long-term outcomes over and above knowing any mental health diagnosis they had.
- It is important not to assume that attempting suicide is what *caused* these young attempters to have worse outcomes in adulthood. Instead, the study shows that a suicide attempt is a powerful signal for increased treatment need.

## WHY ARE THESE FINDINGS IMPORTANT?

Approximately 8% of U.S. high school students report having attempted suicide in 2011.<sup>1</sup> This is in addition to the estimated 1 million U.S. adults >18 years who attempt suicide every year.<sup>2</sup> Although it is well known that people who attempt suicide are at higher risk for future suicide attempts,<sup>3</sup> there has been very little research examining whether suicide attempters are at greater risk for other poor life outcomes.

This study's results suggest that the many young people who attempt suicide in the U.S. every year could be burdened by costly health problems and worse economic prospects for much of their lives.

Predicting in advance who will attempt suicide, and preventing those attempts, is very difficult. Targeting services towards young people who have *already* attempted suicide may help alleviate future suffering and reduce risk among suicide attempters, their families, and their communities.

## SUPPORTING DETAILS:

Suicide attempts were reported by participants during interviews at ages 18, 21, and 26. Methods included, for example, overdosing on pills, taking poison, crashing a car on purpose, or jumping from a high place.

Outcome variables included both subjective (self-reported) and objective (clinical or administrative data) measures, which increases our confidence that the observed effects were real.

Ruling out alternative explanations. Suicide attempters were at higher risk for poor outcomes in adulthood, even when taking into account their family's social class and their pre-existing mental illness.

---

<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance – United States, 2011. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*. 2012;61.

<sup>2</sup> Crosby AE, Han B, Ortega LAG, Parks SE, Gfroerer J. Suicidal thoughts and behaviors among adults aged >18 years - United States, 2008-2009. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report Surveillance Summaries*. 2011;60(13).

<sup>3</sup> Spirito A, Esposito-Smythers C. Attempted and completed suicide in adolescence. *Annual Review of Clinical Psychology* 2006;2:237-266.

## **PARTICIPANTS:**

1037 members of the Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, which follows children born in Dunedin, New Zealand, between 1972 and 1973. This birth cohort's families represented the full range of socioeconomic status in the general population of New Zealand's South Island. Follow-ups have been carried out at birth and at ages 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 18, 21, 26, 32, and 38 years, when 95% of the 1,007 Study members still alive took part.

## **MEDIA CONTACTS:**

Sidra Goldman-Mellor, *Center for Developmental Science, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University, Durham, NC*; email: [sidra.goldman-mellor@duke.edu](mailto:sidra.goldman-mellor@duke.edu)

Avshalom Caspi, *Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Duke University, Durham, NC*; e-mail: [avshalom.caspi@duke.edu](mailto:avshalom.caspi@duke.edu)

Terrie Moffitt, *Department of Psychology and Neuroscience, Duke University, Durham, NC*; e-mail: [terrie.moffitt@duke.edu](mailto:terrie.moffitt@duke.edu)

## **UNIVERSITIES INVOLVED:**

Duke University, 2020 West Main Street, Box 104410, Durham, NC, 27708, USA; King's College London, Institute of Psychiatry, UK; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, 27514, USA; and University of Otago, Dunedin, 9016, New Zealand.

## **MAIN FUNDING SOURCES:**

U.S. National Institute of Aging; U.K. Medical Research Council; Jacobs Foundation; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; New Zealand Health Research Council.

## **ADDITIONAL LINKS:**

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention is a research and advocacy organization that works to understand, prevent, and cope with suicide. [www.afsp.org](http://www.afsp.org)

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides many useful resources related to suicide and violence, including media reporting guidelines about suicide. [www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/suicide)