

Suicide Prevention in the Workplace: Data Briefing and Talking Points

Take-Home Points

- Approximately 70% of suicide are among working age adults.
- Though strategies to reach working age adults face significant challenges, most adults spend the majority of their day at work, so the workplace is one of the best settings to reach them.
- Some of the occupational-related risk factors for suicide include access to lethal means, and high stress and high-pressure work environments, socioeconomic inequities, and challenges to maintaining work-life balance.
- Promoting mental wellness is good business; supportive and healthy work settings are both more productive and can save businesses substantial costs by preventing illness and disability.
- Comprehensive strategies for workplace suicide prevention have been developed that are based on highly successful, evidence-based programs that have been shown to reduce rates of suicide as well as other deleterious outcomes.

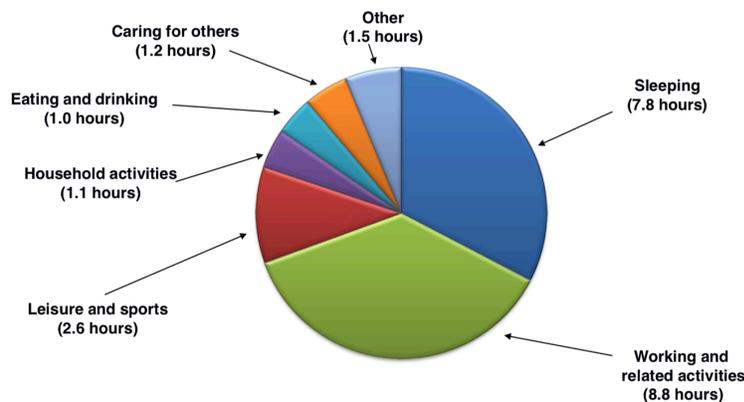
Why Focus on Suicide Prevention in the Workplace?

Approximately 70% of suicides are among working age adults between the ages of 18-64 (Han et. al., 2016. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4959536/>). Whereas historically rates of suicide (which control for population size and provide a measure of impact on a particular group) have increased with age, in the last 10 years the rates of suicide are increasing most rapidly among working age adults.

Reaching working age adults with suicide prevention messaging can be a significant challenge. They are dispersed throughout communities in a very broad range of settings. They may work at very large companies with thousands of employees, very small mom and pops, or in isolated settings. Employment can be seasonal or intermittent. Some occupations are solo ventures and people work in isolation. Despite the challenges, the call to action is clear.

Most adults spend a significant portion of their lives at work. According to the [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), working and related activities account for the majority of the day. This is more time than they spend doing all other activities combined, including leisure and taking meals, except for sleeping.

Time use on an average work day for employed persons ages 25 to 54 with children



NOTE: Data include employed persons on days they worked, ages 25 to 54, who lived in households with children under 18. Data include non-holiday weekdays and are annual averages for 2015. Data include related travel for each activity.

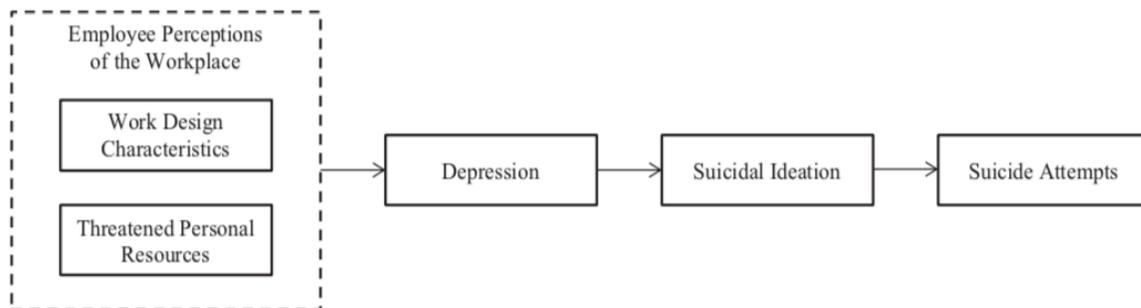
SOURCE: Bureau of Labor Statistics, American Time Use Survey

For many adults, time spent at work is balanced, often precariously, against the need to care for children and aging parents. A [Pew Research Center study](#) reported that that nearly half of adults in their 40s and 50s are both raising or supporting a child, while providing some emotional and even financial support for aging parents. The [sandwich generation](#) pours their energy and hours into the need to earn a living and care for dependents, with very little time left to attend to their own needs. Their identity is often tied closely to their employment and their role as caregivers and providers. When financial hardship hits, they may feel exponential distress over a perceived failure to take care of those that depend on them.

Issues related to job satisfaction and work/family balance can play a role in suicide risk among working age adults. A [recent study](#) published in the Journal of Psychology found an association between depression and suicidal ideation and how employees perceive their role at work, and suggested that supportive workplace policies are vital to a comprehensive approach to suicide prevention.

Another study found a link between negative perceptions of the workplace with depression and risk of suicide ideation and attempts (Howard & Krannitz, 2017). The authors provided some practical implications from this research, including creating policies and management practices that can enhance employees' positive perceptions of their job and work life balance. Other

suggestions included offering training and education on recognizing signs of depression and suicide as well as stress management and relaxation techniques.



From: Howard & Krannitz, 2017.

Risk and Protective Factors on the Workplace

Certain occupations may be characterized by conditions and settings that may present more risk factors than others. However it is important to note that suicide risk can occur in any occupation. Knowing the signs of suicide and depression and how to effectively connect someone to help are important aspects of any work environment.

Some industries have taken the lead in delving deeper into the problem of suicide. The [Construction Industry Blueprint for Suicide Prevention](#) offers an example. Some occupation-related risk factors identified in the Blueprint include:

- Access to lethal means (such as firearms, pills, high places such as bridges or buildings, heavy equipment)
- Workplace culture of recklessness, bravery, stoicism, reward for being tough
- Exposure to physical strain, chronic pain, burnout; to psychological trauma through life threatening situations and events
- Culture of substance abuse (informal support for self-medication and overuse of substances to work through fatigue or pain, and to let off steam)
- Work-life imbalance (long commutes, inflexible work hours, requirement of being away from home/support networks for long periods of time)
- Humiliation/Shame (problems with work leading to sense of failure)
- Entrapment (feeling that things must be done that they wouldn't normally do, no other way to meet their goals but to go along)

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- High stress/high pressure work environment (tight deadlines, long hours, “pressure cooker” atmosphere)
- Potential for economic insecurity (cyclical lay-offs, seasonal or intermittent work, uncertainty about employment)

Protective factors include:

- Culture of employee engagement and connectedness, emphasis on team work
- Culture of wellness that values mental health and employee safety
- Access to insurance and mental health care
- Informational support systems (buddy systems)
- Leadership and supervisor training in suicide prevention

Workplace Suicide Prevention Strategies

The following are general strategies to promote protective factors and limit risk factors in most work environments.

- Offer self-screening tools and host wellness events that improve behavioral health knowledge.
- Promote behavioral health and crisis resources such as the Suicide Prevention Lifeline and Employee Assistance Programs and make sure all staff know about them.
- Provide suicide prevention training to managers and supervisors at minimum.
- Develop a workplace crisis plan that includes addressing access to lethal means and support after suicide.

References

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Han B, Crosby AE, Ortega, LAG, Parks SE, Compton WM, Gfroerer J. Suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, and occupations among employed adults aged 18–64 years in the United States. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*. 2016; 66: 176–186. (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4959536/>)

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Hoffmire CA, Kemp JE, Bossarte RM. Changes in Suicide Mortality for Veterans and Nonveterans by Gender and History of VHA Service Use, 2000–2010. *Psychiatric Services*. 66:9, September 2015 (<https://ps.psychiatryonline.org/doi/pdf/10.1176/appi.ps.201400031>)

Howard, Matt & Morgan Krannitz (2017) A Reanalysis of Occupation and Suicide: Negative Perceptions of the Workplace Linked to Suicide Attempts, *The Journal of Psychology*, 151:8, 767-788, DOI: 10.1080/00223980.2017.1393378 (<https://doi.org/10.1080/00223980.2017.1393378>)

National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention
Workplace Taskforce: <http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org/workplace-task-force>
Comprehensive Blueprint for Workplace Suicide Prevention
<http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org/comprehensive-blueprint-workplace-suicide-prevention-1>

Partnership for Workplace Mental Health. <http://www.workplacementalhealth.org>

Pew Research Center Social & Demographic Trends. The Sandwich Generation: Rising financial burdens for middle-aged Americans. Jan. 30, 2013, retrieved from http://assets.pewresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2013/01/Sandwich_Generation_Report_FINAL_1-29.pdf

Suicide Prevention Resource Center: Workplaces <https://www.sprc.org/settings/workplaces>

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U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Fatal occupational injuries counts and rates for selected occupations, 2015-2016. Retrieved from: <https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/print.pl/news.release/cfoi.t03.htm>

Workplace Strategies for Mental Health.
<https://www.workplacestrategiesformentalhealth.com>