Marital Status and Suicide in the National Longitudinal Mortality Study

Augustine J. Kposowa, Ph.D.
University of California
Riverside

Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health
March, 2000
Volume 54, No. 4, pages 254-261

Direct correspondence to Dr. Augustine J. Kposowa, Ph.D.,
Department of Sociology, 1214 Watkins Hall, University of
California, 900 University Avenue, Riverside, CA 92521.

Phone: 909.787.5444
FAX: 909.787.3330
Email: Augustine.Kposowa@ucr.edu

I thank the Sociology Department, University of California,
Riverside for funding and research support.

The opinions and interpretations expressed in this paper are
those of the author, and they do not necessarily reflect the
views of the National, Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, the
National Center for Health Statistics, or the U.S. Bureau of the
Census.
Abstract

Objectives. The purpose of the study was to examine the effect of marital status on the risk of suicide, using a large nationally representative sample. A related objective was to investigate the association between marital status and suicide by sex.

Methods. Cox proportional hazards regression models were applied to data from the National Longitudinal Mortality Study, based on the 1979-1989 follow-up. In estimating the effect of marital status, adjustments were made for age, sex, race, education, family income, and region of residence.

Results. For the entire sample, higher risks of suicide were found in divorced than in married individuals. Divorced and separated persons were over twice as likely to commit suicide as married individuals (RR=2.08, 95% CI=1.58,2.72). Being single or widowed had no significant effect on suicide risk. When data were stratified by sex, it was observed that the risk of suicide among divorced men was over twice that of married men (RR=2.38, CI=1.77,3.20). Among women, however, there were no statistically significant differentials in the risk of suicide by marital status categories.

Conclusions. Marital status, especially divorce, has strong net effect on mortality from suicide, but only among men. The study showed that in epidemiologic research on suicide, more accurate results would be obtained if samples are stratified on the basis of key demographic or social characteristics. The study further observed that failure to control for relevant socioeconomic variables or combining men and women in the same models could produce misleading results.

Keywords: suicide, marital status, divorce, widowhood, single, socioeconomic status, effect modification
Key points

Elevated risks of suicide were observed among divorced and separated men, but not among women.

However, being single or widowed had no significant effect on suicide.

Results obtained remained even after adjusting for socioeconomic and demographic variables.

The effect of divorce on suicide risk may be due to absence of social integration, and elevated psychological distress.

Accordingly, socioeconomic variables should be taken into account in epidemiologic research on suicide.
Introduction

Previous studies have reported a link between marital status and suicide.\textsuperscript{1-3} They have shown that married persons experience lower suicide rates than single, never married individuals, and that divorced, separated and widowed individuals have the highest rates.\textsuperscript{2,4} One of the most prominent explanations given in past studies to account for the observed differentials in the risk of suicide by marital status is that marriage provides social and emotional stability, whereas divorce, separation, singlehood and widowhood do not.\textsuperscript{1,5} Accordingly, marriage offers the best protection against suicide because it provides social and community integration, and reduces social isolation.\textsuperscript{1,3,6}

An issue that remains relatively unaddressed in public health research is whether the reported protection provided by marriage against suicide holds for men and women equally. In addition, past studies that have reported associations between marital status and suicide have failed to control for the potentially confounding effects of socioeconomic variables. For example, in a previous report, divorced individuals were found to be 2.9 times as likely to die of suicide than married individuals.\textsuperscript{2} Widowed persons were observed to be 2.8 times more likely to die from suicide compared to married persons, and single individuals experienced a suicide risk that was 1.9 times that of married people. However, that study controlled for only age.\textsuperscript{2} A more recent research also controlled for only age in studying the effect of marital status on suicide.\textsuperscript{4} Hence, it is
unknown whether the observed relationship between marital status and suicide would remain after socioeconomic factors are taken into account.

In the present study, a nationally representative sample is used to examine the risk of suicide by marital status. More specifically, the following questions are addressed: (1) Are divorce, widowhood, and being single significant risk factors for suicide? (2) Do these risks vary by sex? (3) Does the effect of marital status remain after controlling for socioeconomic variables? (4) What are implications of answers to the above questions for research and public health policy?

You may obtain a free copy (reprint) of this or any other article published by Dr. Kposowa, by writing or sending email to: Augustine.Kposowa@ucr.edu