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Short Communication

Economic stress in childhood and suicide thoughts and suicide attempts: a population-based study among adults

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: To investigate associations between economic stress in childhood and suicide thoughts and attempts.**Study design:** The 2012 public health survey in Scania, Sweden, is a cross-sectional postal questionnaire study including 28,029 participants, aged 18–80 years.**Methods:** Associations were analyzed in logistic regressions.**Results:** A 12.1% prevalence of men and 15.5% of women had ever experienced suicide thoughts, while 3.2% of men and 5.3% of women had experienced suicide attempt. Roughly 24% had experienced less severe and 8% severe economic problems in childhood. Significant associations between economic stress in childhood and suicide thoughts and attempts remained throughout the age-adjusted and multiple adjusted analyses.**Conclusions:** Economic stress in childhood is associated with self-reported suicide thoughts and suicide attempts in an adult general population.© 2018 The Authors. Published by Elsevier Ltd on behalf of The Royal Society for Public Health. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Poor mental health is a major public health problem globally. Suicide is a grave result of poor mental health and a major public health problem in its own right. The average suicide rate in the entire population in Sweden was 11.6/100,000 in 2010–2012, stratified by sex 17.3/100,000 among men and 6.7/100,000 among women.¹ Suicide rates have declined in Sweden since the early 1990s, in part due to the introduction of the new generation of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) antidepressants,² although no decline has been apparent in

the 15–24 years age group with even signs of an increase in both suicide rate and attempts since the 1990s.³

Suicidal ideation, suicide attempt, and suicide in adolescence and adulthood are affected by current psychological, psychosocial, and economic conditions in adulthood, but conditions during childhood and adolescence such as parental depression are also important.^{4,5} Child abuse and family violence have the greatest early life impact on future mental health.⁶ In a previous study, we demonstrated that the

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experience of parental separation/divorce in the 4/5-year age intervals within age 0–18 years is significantly associated with (with few exceptions) the self-reported experience of ever experience of suicide thoughts and suicide attempts among both men and women.⁷ Economic conditions in childhood may plausibly also be associated with ever experience of suicide thoughts and attempts in adolescence and adulthood.⁸ In one study, economic stress in childhood and adulthood were combined and investigated in relation to poor psychological health in adulthood testing the three life course critical period, accumulation, and social mobility hypotheses. The results supported the two latter hypotheses.⁹ Since the economic stress in adulthood item reflects economic stress in problems paying bills during the past year, the temporal relationship with items referring to ever experience of suicide thoughts and attempts will be unclear. We will thus investigate economic stress in childhood and adults' ever experience of suicide thoughts and attempts with the hypothesis that significant associations exist even in multiple adjusted models.

The aim of this study is to investigate associations between economic stress in childhood and ever experience of suicide thoughts and suicide attempts in an adult population in southern Sweden.

The public health survey 2012 in Scania (southern Sweden) is a cross-sectional study based on a stratified random (weighted) sample of people from the population register. In August to September 2012, a total of 28,029 persons answered the postal questionnaire (51.7% participation). Three reminders were sent to non-respondents. Ethical approval was given by the Ethical Committee, Lund University.

The item 'Have you ever considered taking your own life, and may even have planned how you would do it?' (suicide thoughts) entailed the answers 'No, never', 'Yes, more than a year ago', 'Yes, during the past year', and 'Yes, during the past week'. The item was dichotomized with the first answer depicting 'No' and the three latter 'Yes'.

The item 'Have you ever tried to take your own life?' (suicide attempt) entailed the alternatives 'No, never', 'Yes, more than a year ago', 'Yes, during the past year', and 'Yes, during the past week'. Dichotomization was conducted with the first answer depicting 'No' and the three latter 'Yes'.

All variables included in age-adjusted and multiple adjusted logistic regression models in [Table 1](#) have previously been shown to be significantly associated with higher odds ratios of suicide thoughts and suicide attempts (younger age, born abroad, lower socio-economic status [SES], unmarried, divorced, low emotional and instrumental support, low trust, and parental separation/divorce).⁷

Age is analyzed as a continuous variable 18–80 years.

Stratification was conducted by sex.

Country of birth entails born in Sweden and outside Sweden.

SES included higher non-manual employees, medium level non-manual employees, low non-manual employees, skilled and unskilled manual workers, and self-employed/farmers. The groups outside the workforce entail long-term sick leave, unemployed, students, pensioners, and unclassified/homeworkers.

Civil status entails married/registered partnership/cohabitant, unmarried, divorced, and widow/widower.

Emotional support with the question 'Do you feel that you have someone or some persons who can give you proper personal support to cope with the stress and problems of life?' had four alternatives 'Yes, I am absolutely certain to get such support', 'Yes, possibly', 'Not certain', and 'No'. The latter three were collapsed as low emotional support.

Instrumental support was assessed with 'Can you get help by some or several persons in case of illness or practical problems (borrow minor items, help with reparation, help to write a letter, getting advice or information)?' with the same alternatives as emotional support and the same dichotomization.

Generalized trust in other people was investigated with the item 'Generally, you can trust other people' and comprises the alternatives 'Do not agree at all', 'Do not agree', 'Agree', and 'Completely agree'. The two first and the two latter were collapsed.

Parental separation/divorce was assessed with 'Did your parents divorce or separate at any time during your childhood and adolescence before you became 18 years old?' with the options 'Yes' and 'No'.

Age at parental divorce/separation was assessed with the item 'How old were you when your parents divorced/separated?' with the alternatives 0–4, 5–9, 10–14, and 15–18 years. The two items parental separation/divorce and age at parental separation/divorce were merged.

Economic stress in adulthood was assessed with 'How often during the past 12 months have you had problems paying your bills?' with the four alternatives 'Never', 'Occasionally', 'Every second month', and 'Every month'.

Economic stress in childhood with the question 'Did your family experience economic hardship during your childhood' yielded the three alternatives 'No, no significant problems', 'Yes, less severe problems and/or problems during short time periods' and 'Yes, severe problems and/or problems during long time periods'.

Age-adjusted and multiple adjusted odds ratios (ORs) and 95% confidence intervals of ever experience of suicide thoughts and ever experience of suicide attempt were calculated according to economic stress in childhood, adjusting for age, country of birth, SES, civil status, emotional support, instrumental support, trust, economic stress in adulthood, and parental separation/divorce ([Table 1](#)). The SPSS software package, version 22.0, was used.

Prevalence 12.1% of men and 15.5% of women had ever had suicide thoughts, and 3.2% of men and 5.3% of women had ever tried. The prevalence of men answering no significant economic problems in childhood was 67.6%, less severe and/or shorter period 24.5%, and severe and/or longer period 8.1%, and the corresponding prevalence figures for women are 67.2%, 24.3%, and 8.5%, respectively.

[Table 1](#) shows that both the experiences of suicide thoughts and of ever having made a suicide attempt were significantly associated with less severe as well as severe economic stress in childhood among both men and women in the age-adjusted calculations. In the final multiple adjusted logistic regression models, the ORs were reduced but remained statistically significant with strong effect measures for both men and women, with the exception of the association between less severe and/or shorter period of economic

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