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Original Research

Psychosocial job stressors and thoughts about suicide among males: a cross-sectional study from the first wave of the Ten to Men cohort

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Psychosocial job stressors are known to be associated with poor mental health. This research seeks to assess the relationship between psychosocial working conditions and suicidal ideation using a large dataset of Australian males.

Study design: Cross-sectional study.

Methods: Data from wave 1 of the Australian Longitudinal Study on Male Health (Ten to Men) was used to assess the association between suicidal ideation in the past two weeks and psychosocial working conditions using logistic regression. The sample included 11,052 working males. The exposures included self-reported low job control, high job demands, job insecurity and low fairness of pay. We controlled for relevant confounders.

Results: In multivariable analysis, persons who were exposed to low job control (odds ratio [OR] 1.15, 95% confidence interval [CI] 1.05–1.26, $P = 0.003$), job insecurity (OR 1.69, 95% CI 1.44–1.99, $P < 0.001$) and unfair pay (OR 1.19, 95% CI 1.11–1.27, $P < 0.001$) reported elevated odds of thoughts about suicide. Males employed casually or on fixed-term contracts reported higher odds of suicidal ideation (OR 1.32, 95% CI 1.09–1.61, $P = 0.005$).

Conclusion: Psychosocial job stressors are highly prevalent in the working population and workplace suicide prevention efforts should aim to address these as possible risk factors.

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Introduction

In most Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the rate of suicide among males is three to four times higher than that of women.¹ While there are numerous complex reasons for the greater susceptibility of males to suicide compared to females, evidence suggests risk factors such as their greater likelihood of using more lethal means, and lower likelihood of seeking help for mental health problems as being two important influences.²

In addition to their overall higher rates of suicide, research suggests that males who die by suicide are more sensitive to external economic stressors than their female counterparts. For example, a large body of ecological research shows that the male rate of suicide in a nation correlates with the unemployment rate.^{3,4} The relevance of employment as a potential stressor is also demonstrated in research showing that male suicide rates are higher among those in lower skilled occupations compared to those in higher skilled occupations.⁵

As it stands, there is limited gender specific research on whether males who experience psychosocial job stressors also report a higher frequency of suicidal thoughts, which is often considered an important risk factor for future suicidal behaviours and death, as well as being associated with mental disorders (e.g., depression and anxiety disorders).⁶ In the current study, we sought to extend investigation of this issue using baseline data from a large cohort of 11,600 Australian males to answer the research question: is exposure to psychosocial job stressors associated with higher odds of suicidal ideation among males? This is an important research topic considering the large number of working age males who lose their lives to suicide.¹

Methods

Data source

We used data from the Australian Longitudinal Study on Male Health (Ten to Men). Ten to Men is a national longitudinal study of boys and men aged 10–55 years at baseline. The study aims to collect data on a range of life domains, including demographic and socio-economic characteristics, physical, mental health and well-being, health behaviours, and use and knowledge of health services. Sampling, recruitment and data collection methods are described elsewhere.⁷ For this analysis males 18 years and older were included ($n = 13,884$) as they are exposed to a different and wider set of life stressors associated with employment than younger males. This study received approval from the University of Melbourne Human Research Ethics Committee and conformed to the principles embodied in the Declaration of Helsinki.

Variables

Outcome: suicidal ideation

The item 'Thoughts that you would be better off dead or of hurting yourself in some way' from the Patient Health Questionnaire was used to capture suicidal ideation in the past 2

weeks.⁸ Respondents indicated the frequency of such thoughts in the past two weeks as 'not at all', 'several days', 'more than half the days' and 'nearly every day'. We transformed this into a binary variable where 'not at all' was considered as no experience of suicidal thoughts, and the other categories represented the presence of current suicidal thoughts.

Key exposure of interest: psychosocial working conditions

We assessed four psychosocial job stressors: high job demands, low job control, job insecurity and perceived fairness of pay. Job insecurity represented a sum of the three Likert scales (7 items) (Cronbach's alpha = 0.67): 'I have a secure future in my job' (reverse coded, so higher scores were associated with less security); 'I worry about the future of my job' and; 'My company will still be in business five years from now' (reverse coded, so higher scores associated with less security). Job control comprised the sum of the following Likert scales (7 items): 'I have the freedom to decide how I do my own work' (reverse coded, so higher scores associated with less control); 'I have a lot to say about what happens on my job' (reverse coded, so higher scores associated with less control) and; 'I have lot of freedom to decide when I do my work' (reverse coded, so higher scores associated with less security) (alpha = 0.83). Job demands and complexity comprised the sum of the three Likert scales (7 items): 'I use many of my skills in my current job'; 'My job is complex and difficult' and; 'my job requires learning new skills' (alpha = 0.72). Fairness of pay was measured using a single item: 'I get paid fairly for the things I do in my job' (7 items). This was reverse coded so that higher scores were associated with lower fairness of pay. The four job stressors were rescaled based on the 0–25th, 25th–50th, 50th–75th and 75th–100th percentiles, so that each contained four levels (1 = low exposure and 4 = high exposure).

Confounders

We considered variables that could be plausibly considered as prior common causes of both psychosocial job stressors and suicidal ideation. These included: age (18–24 years, 25–34 years, 35–44 years, 45–54 years, 55 years and over), education (less than year 12, more than year 12), relationship status (never married, widowed, divorce, separated but not divorced, married/*de facto*), employment arrangement (permanent, fixed-term/casual, self-employed) and area level disadvantage (Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas [SEIFA] Relative Socio-Economic Disadvantage, in deciles).⁹ Lower scores on this measure indicate greater disadvantage. We created a binary variable from this measure based on a median split, where below the median was classified as low SEIFA and at the median and above was classified as high SEIFA. We did not include common mental disorder as a confounder due to the concern that this may lie on the causal pathway between job stressors and suicidal ideation (e.g., be a mediator).

Analytic sample

The process of selecting participants can be seen in Fig. 1. From the eligible sample (employed = 11,600), 5% had to be excluded due to missing data.

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