

TIME Partners with CNN



U.S. ADD TIME NEWS

SEARCH TIME.COM

INSIDE: Main | The Page | Politics | SwampLand | Real Clear Politics | White House Photo Blog | Videos

# Suicides: Watching for a Recession Spike

By KEN STIER Monday, Feb. 09, 2009



Baerbel Schmidt / Getty

Print Email Share Reprints Related

When [Bernard Madoff's huge Ponzi scheme burst](#), the *New York Post* reported, in its typical cut-to-the-jugular style, that suicide hotlines were lighting up in Greenwich, Connecticut, home to many of the financial high-rollers snared by the alleged \$50 billion scam. But the deadly fallout from it was no joking matter. Only a couple of weeks after Madoff's mischief was revealed, French financier Rene-Thierry Magon de la Villehuchet killed himself in his New York City office, apparently distraught by his having lost more than a billion of his clients' (and his own family's) money to the unprecedented fraud. ([See pictures of Bernard Madoff's demise.](#))

### Sponsored Links

**I Had High Blood Pressure**  
Now it's down to 120/75. Find out how I did it without drugs  
www.resperate.com

**1 Flat Stomach Rule: Obey**  
I Cut Down 3 lbs of Body Fat Per Week by Obeying this 1 Simple Rule.  
HelensDiet.com/Secret

Buy a link here

The Madoff case is just one example of the terrible news gripping the economy and financial markets of late, news that in extreme cases can drive people to take their own lives. Two prominent businessmen, [one in Germany](#) and another in England, recently threw themselves in front of speeding trains after grappling with the wreckage of their beaten-down companies. And late last month, a Los Angeles area man despondent over his faltering finances murdered his wife and five children before killing himself.

Subscribe to TIME Magazine for only \$1.99

### Top Stories on Time.com

- Clinton Courts Syria, but Will Israel Play Ball?
- As Car Sales Collapse, GM and Chrysler Grow Desperate
- Talk Therapy for Kids' Pain: Better than Pills?
- Sudan Braces for an Indictment of Its President over Darfur
- Does Obama Love or Really Like Britain?

Norton from symantec

GET UP TO \$50 BACK\*

Norton Internet Security BUY NOW

ENJOY THE SPEED FOR SPEED

**Related**

**Stories**

- Murder-Suicide in California: A Tragedy of the Financial Crisis?

**More Related**

- Asia on Suicide Watch as Global Recession Hits HomeAsia on Suicide Watch as Global Recession Hits Home
- The World's Worst Suicide Bombers?
- India's Call-Center Jobs Go Begging

Suicide experts say there is a strong correlation between acute financial strains and depression, often a prelude to substance abuse and suicides. While people jumping out of buildings during the Great Depression was not nearly as common as Hollywood and cartoonists had everyone believe, suicide definitely spiked during that dark period in the nation's history. Suicides in the U.S. reached a peak in 1933 (increasing to 17 per 100,000, from 14 per 100,000 in 1929), around the same time unemployment had swollen to 25%. By contrast, more recent recessions have not had a marked effect on suicide rates, which in the U.S have been running at about 11 per 100,000 (and shown a slight overall

decline during the last two decades of relative prosperity). ([See pictures of the stock market crash of 1929.](#))

"If indeed this recession mirrors in some respects more the Great Depression than the other intervening much briefer recessions, then obviously we have reason for greater concern," says Dr. Alan L. Berman, executive director of the American Association of Suicidology.

There are some clear differences between today's conditions and those in the 1930s, which fomented key reforms, including the introduction of welfare and social security. Today people are more willing to acknowledge and are better prepared to address mental illness, though many states' current budget woes will undoubtedly mean some cuts in social services and counseling. And at the Depression's nadir, 34 million Americans had no income at all, which is not likely to happen today. Still, if poverty levels approached anywhere near those levels, the psychological toll could be greater because of the intervening erosion in family and community cohesion.

"What you find is that suicides happen because of the total burden the person is feeling, how much they feel things can't get better and they can't tolerate the psychological pain they are experiencing," says Dr. John L. McIntosh, a psychologist and suicide expert at Indiana University.

"Sometimes it takes years for the effect of economic downturn or instability to trickle down to the level of the psyche or penetrate the psyche, to get under the skin to produce some of the negative outcomes such as suicides."

There are roughly 32,000 suicides every year in the U.S., almost twice the 18,000 homicides recorded each year. Even these figures are just a hint of the nation's psychic pain. There are an estimated 800,000 attempted suicides every year, with the elderly and teenagers or college-age kids the most vulnerable. And survivors — currently numbering somewhere between 10 and 20 million — are at a higher risk for subsequent attempts.

What's more, only about a third of people in need of treatment are getting any. "If we were in the professional world in advertising and marketing we'd all be fired because we are not reaching the majority of our audience," says Alan Ross, executive director of the New York chapter of the Samaritans, an international counseling organization. Last year his center fielded 58,000

**Most Popular »**

[Full List »](#)

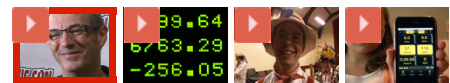
**Most Read**

1. Prince and Target: A Match Made in Discount Heaven
2. Final Exit: Compassion or Assisted Suicide?
3. What the GOP Really Wants: Obama's Autograph
4. Why We're Going Nuts Over Nut Allergies
5. The Obama Team's Drink of Choice? Coke, Not Pepsi
6. Spotting Future Gamblers in Kindergarten
7. The Pentagon's Message on Iran: Don't Panic
8. A Former Nun's Memoirs Rock India's Catholic Church
9. Attack on Sri Lankan Cricket Team: Echoes of Mumbai?
10. Study: Doodling Helps You Pay Attention

**Most Emailed**

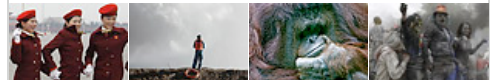
**Video**

[More Videos »](#)



Watchmen's Dave Gibbons

**Today in Pictures »**



[Browse All Photos »](#)

**Sponsored Links**

**I Had High Blood Pressure**

Now it's down to 120/75. Find out how I did it without drugs  
www.resperate.com

**1 Flat Stomach Rule: Obey**

I Cut Down 3 lbs of Body Fat Per Week by Obeying this 1 Simple Rule.  
HelensDiet.com/Secret

calls, which in the last couple of years have been increasing at double previous annual growth rates. He attributes this to a tremendous increase in stress levels due to things like economic insecurities exacerbated by globalization.

The particular nature of the current crisis is also a cause for concern. "For most Americans, our homes are our primary investment and the locus of our identities and social support systems," notes the American Association of Suicidology. "When combined with the loss of job, home loss has been found to be one of the most common economic strains associated with suicides."

Warning signs are already erupting in parts of the U.S. hard hit by the housing crisis. In Los Angeles, calls into the suicide prevention call center run by the Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center spiked 65% in the second half of 2008 over the previous year. There has also been a surge of training requests from fire and police departments from throughout Los Angeles County – even from a mortgage counseling company – to help deal with an upsurge in suicide risk. "The reality is we are already overwhelmed," says Dr. Kita S. Curry, the center's executive director. With any publicity about her center, calls spike, suggesting unmet need.

For all the advances the mental health community has made in recent decades, including pharmacological treatment, the biggest factors influencing suicides rates seems far beyond its reach. "Suicide rates appear to be quite strongly associated with broad sweeping cultural trends rather than more minor things such as a treatment," notes retired Colonel David Litts, who played a key role in reducing suicide within the Air Force by 60% in five years. (The overstretched Army, by contrast, is still experiencing historically high rates.) "So in the face of this economic turmoil perhaps the most important thing we can do is relieve the financial strains on individuals because research has shown that financial strain is the link between unemployment and depression and suicide."

[See pictures of the Jonestown mass suicide](#)

**Connect to this TIME Story**

**Interact with this story**

- Buzz up!
- Facebook
- 442 diggs [digg it](#)
- Email

**Related stories**

- Asia on Suicide Watch as Global Recession Hits Home
- Asia on Suicide Watch as Global Recession Hits Home
- The World's Worst Suicide Bombers?
- India's Call-Center Jobs Go Begging

**People who read this also read**

- India's Call-Center Jobs Go Begging
- The World's Worst Suicide Bombers?
- Asia Braces for Spike in Suicides Due to Economic Woes

**Quotes of the Day »**



*"They do have a much larger physique than a lot of people. So their odds are going to be definitely in their favor."*

ROBERT SIMPSON, Coast Guard petty officer, on the chances that two NFL players and a third man missing since their boat capsized off the Florida coast over the weekend are more likely to fend off hypothermia

[More Quotes »](#)

**TRY 4 ISSUES RISK FREE!**

Full Name  (State/Province)

Address  Zip/Po

City  E-mail

 [CLICK HERE NOW](#)

**CNN Headlines**

- Marines relieve four over deadly F/A-18 crash
- Coast Guard ends search for boaters
- Obama overturns Bush endangered species rule

**Sponsored Links**

**I Had High Blood Pressure**

Now it's down to 120/75. Find out how I did it without drugs  
www.resperate.com

**1 Flat Stomach Rule: Obey**

I Cut Down 3 lbs of Body Fat Per Week by Obeying this 1 Simple Rule.  
HelensDiet.com/Secret

**"Lose Your Belly: 1 Rule"**

I cut down 48 lbs of fat in under 4 months by following this 1 rule.  
HelensDiet.com

[Buy a link here](#)

Get 4 Free Trial Issues of TIME Magazine



**U.S.**

ADD TIME NEWS

INSIDE: [Main](#) | [The Page](#) | [Politics](#) | [Swampland](#) | [Real Clear Politics](#) | [White House Photo Blog](#) | [Videos](#)

**Inside  
Time.com**



Backstage at  
Milan's Fashion  
Week



Watchmen's Dave  
Gibbons



TV for Babies: Does  
It Help or Hurt?



Photos: Thirty  
Years of U2



© 2009 Time Inc. All rights reserved | [Privacy Policy](#) | [RSS](#) | [Newsletter](#) | [TIME For Kids](#)  
[Subscribe](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Terms of Use](#) | [Media Kit](#) | [Reprints & Permissions](#) | [Opinion Leaders Panel](#) | [Help](#) | [Site Map](#)