

Sociologist Says This Month's Family Murder-Suicides Only 'the Tip of the Iceberg'

January 30 2009

(PhysOrg.com) -- A family sociologist at the University at Buffalo says this month's murder-suicides involving a family of four in Ohio and a family of five in California may be "just the tip of the iceberg."

Sampson Blair, Ph.D., associate professor of sociology at UB, says, "Family murder-suicide is still relatively uncommon, but I expect an increase in such incidents over the next few years because economic strain on families provokes depression and desperation."

He adds that family researchers have long pointed to how financial and occupational stressors can negatively impact the quality of family relationships.

"The economic situation also portends a significant increase in other forms of family violence, including spousal and child abuse, child neglect and other forms of dysfunctional behavior like substance abuse," Blair explains.

"What makes this situation even worse -- and yes, it can get worse -- is that there is also a clear association between suicide rates and the state of the larger economy. Generally, in periods of economic depression, there is a slight increase in the overall suicide rate and job loss produces a two- to three-fold increase in that risk.

"Such tragedies don't occur just because one or more breadwinners have lost their jobs," he says. "High levels of stress arising from job loss are compounded by the level of responsibility that goes along with being a spouse and/or being a parent," Blair says.

"So, from the individual's point of view, the loss of a job is certainly bad, but it can become much, much worse when it coincides with a loss of savings and investments, the loss of the family home (through foreclosure, for instance), and dismal prospects for finding another job soon.

"Understandably, when you put all of those factors together, and consider the current conditions for families here in the U.S., it's a rather bleak forecast," Blair says.

He says the incidence of suicide, or worse, murder-suicide, hasn't received a lot of attention among family researchers because it is a relatively uncommon occurrence, but some basic patterns have been recognized.

"It isn't the loss of a job per se that causes this," he says, "but the level of fear and worry that accompanies it that takes its toll on people. Financial stressors are among the greatest risk factors for emotional disturbance and such physiological reactions as insomnia and high blood pressure."

Blair conducts research in the sociology of the family, child and adolescent development, gender and ethnicity. He directs the undergraduate program in sociology at UB and is the former senior editor of *Sociological Inquiry*, and the former associate editor of the journals *Social Justice Research*, *Journal of Family Values and Marriage* and *Family Review*.

Provided by University at Buffalo

Citation: Sociologist Says This Month's Family Murder-Suicides Only 'the Tip of the Iceberg' (2009, January 30) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-01-sociologist-month-family-murder-suicides-iceberg.html>

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