

Insulation from public pressure leads to more accurate suicide reporting by death investigators

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Medical examiners and appointed coroners are less likely to underreport suicides than are elected coroners, that's according to a new study from Temple University.

Many of us view suicide as an intensely private and personal act and commonly seek to explain it by focusing on the mental and emotional health of the individual. However, because suicides tend to cluster in specific populations and places, sociologists are very interested in how social contexts can affect a person's propensity to commit suicide.

In order to examine those social contexts, however, researchers must rely on official death reporting. "Mortality statistics are crucial because they tell us not just about how people die, but how they lived. To understand the social determinants of health and well-being at the community level, we need to be confident that area-level mortality statistics are relatively unbiased," said Temple [sociologist](#) Joshua Klugman, the study's lead author.

So Klugman, along with his Temple sociology colleagues Gretchen Condran and Matt Wray, set out to answer the question: Does the type of office responsible for reporting on deaths impact the suicide rates, potentially biasing estimates of the social causes of suicide, such as income or divorce rates?

Specifically, in a study presented next week at the Annual Meeting of the [American Sociological Association](#) in Las Vegas, Klugman analyzed reported suicide rates in counties with elected coroners, appointed coroners and appointed medical examiners.

Klugman found that elected coroners have slightly lower official [suicide rates](#) than medical examiners (all of whom are appointed) and appointed coroners.

"Contrary to arguments that medical examiners' greater scientific training makes them more likely to underreport [suicides](#), we conclude that medical examiners and appointed coroners demonstrate less suicide underreporting due to their insulation from public pressure," said Klugman.

Provided by Temple University

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