

The economics of grief

January 10 2017



Credit: University of Bristol

The loss of a child can cause intense grief for parents and for many, life is never the same again. Now researchers have built up a comprehensive picture of the devastating social and economic impact that a child's death can have.

The findings could help policy-makers improve the support provided to bereaved [parents](#), which in turn could reduce the economic costs to the family and the state.

Professor Gerard van den Berg from the University of Bristol, together with colleagues from Sweden (Petter Lundborg from Lund University and Johan Vikström from Uppsala University), used extensive information on the parents of all Swedish children aged one or above who died from traffic collisions or sudden accidents between 1993 and 2003 (almost 2,000 children).

In such cases, parents could not have modified their behaviour in response to an impending death, making their situation just before the tragedy comparable to parents in similar circumstances who have not lost a [child](#).

The loss of a child impacted on almost every outcome studied, from reducing family income to increasing the likelihood of divorce and reduced mental health. The economic well-being of parents was also found to suffer for a long time after intense grief had subsided. In some cases, the chances of being out of work years after the child's death was nine per cent greater than if the child had not died, while the probability that a parent would be hospitalised for [mental health](#) problems was two to three times higher than otherwise.

Professor van den Berg, from Bristol's Department of Economics said: "Clearly, grief may lead to sickness absence. But in some cases, the parent decides to quit work or is pushed into a long-term sickness program. The resulting prolonged spells of inactivity may have persistent negative effects on the individual's labour market chances. After a substantial amount of time out of work, it becomes more and more difficult to find a job again. In extreme cases, the parent will never work again and could separate from their partner."

The study showed that the estimated effects on a grieving parent are invariant to characteristics of the child; they do not depend on the age of the child, birth order of the child, or family size.

"Whether the child is a son or a daughter does not matter either, with one exception," added Professor van den Berg. "If a family has more than one daughter and one of them dies then the father seems to be less affected than if the family has multiple sons of which one dies. In the latter scenario the father's labour income goes down more strongly than in the former. For mothers we do not see such differences, and if the only daughter dies then there is no difference for fathers either.

"A loss of employment seems to trigger a downward spiral in the parents' subsequent life. This suggests that it is important to communicate to parents who have just lost a child that they should try, where possible, to continue working," said Professor van den Berg.

"In addition, if such parents do actually quit employment, it may be sensible to think about how these people can get professional support and help to prevent a downward spiral in their subsequent life."

Provided by University of Bristol

Citation: The economics of grief (2017, January 10) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-01-economics-grief.html>

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