

Individual suicide risk can be dramatically altered by social 'sameness,' study finds

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Bernice Pescosolido Credit: Indiana University

Similarities among individuals living in the same communities can dramatically change their risk of dying by suicide, according to a new study by Indiana University researchers.

The study, published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, examined the relationship between [suicide](#) and social "sameness"—living in communities with other individuals who share common social characteristics, such as employment and marital status, ethnicity or place of birth. Researchers found that social similarity reduced well-known individual risks of suicide for those younger than 45, unemployed, widowed, white, Black or not born in the United States.

But sameness was not always protective. Social similarity increased suicide risk for individuals who were born in the United States, had never married, or were Alaska Native, Native American, Hispanic or Asian, according to the study.

"This study breaks a longstanding barrier to understanding the link between individual suicide risk and community-based risk," said Bernice Pescosolido, co-author of the study and a Distinguished Professor of Sociology in the College of Arts and Sciences at IU Bloomington. "This offers new insights into how complex the relationship between suicide and cultural and [social connections](#) is. Science has been challenged to get beyond the split between looking at individuals and looking at communities in the U.S. Sameness allows us to think about the role of connectedness in new ways."

Researchers merged data from a number of sources, including the National Violence Data Reporting System and the American Community Survey, to examine whether "sameness" between individuals and where they live affected their risk of suicide in the U.S. between 2005 and 2011.

Suicide in America has been on the rise, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, pressing the need for new approaches to reduce risk. While individual suicide risks have been previously documented in individuals, the finding that those risks change

depending on social geography has previously been difficult to establish in the U.S., Pescosolido said.

"These findings challenge the idea of a 'one size fits all' approach to programs trying to reduce suicide—even for targeted groups like teens, where the increase has been great," she said. "We need to consider where they are."

Traditional treatment and prevention efforts have focused around the idea that strong social ties protect people from suicide, and those who lose or do not have those connections are thought to be more at risk of suicide.

But according to Pescosolido and her colleagues, social similarity is not always a strong lever to reduce suicide risk. For example, their findings suggest that in isolated communities or those communities where socio-economic devastation has been great, similarity can actually increase the risks of suicide.

"With the burdens that people are experiencing due to the pandemic, this study reinforces calls for fresh approaches to understanding suicide risk," Pescosolido, said. "Knowing how social context alters individual [suicide risk](#) provides a path toward personalized and tailored strategies for anti-suicide programs, policies and treatment."

More information: Bernice A. Pescosolido et al, Cross-level sociodemographic homogeneity alters individual risk for completed suicide, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2020). [DOI: 10.1073/pnas.2006333117](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2006333117)

Provided by Indiana University

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