

Suicidal behavior in over-indebted individuals: a cross-sectional study in Sweden

12. Socioeconomic, cultural and psychological factors

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Abstract text

The presentation addresses over-indebtedness as a risk factor for suicidal behavior. It will consider the results from our recent publication (Levinsson et al., 2023) where one-fifth among 641 over-indebted individuals in Sweden reported attempting suicide at least once. All respondents had contact with the Swedish Enforcement Authority or debt counseling services.

Over-indebtedness has become a major social problem, not least in high-income countries. Debt in the form of short-term loans has increased dramatically and increases the risk of over-indebtedness and ill-health in the population. Over-indebtedness has negative consequences for both mental and physical health; it is a public health problem associated with sleeping problems, high blood pressure, diabetes, pain, and obesity, but also gambling problems and suicidal behavior. Over-indebtedness and suicidal behavior are closely associated and problems to repay debts significantly increase the risk of suicide. However, research on over-indebtedness as a risk factor for suicidal behavior is limited.

The presentation will also consider our three-year research project that started in 2024. The project explores suicidal behavior and over-indebtedness from a bio-psycho-social perspective, focusing on three groups which are at increased risk of over-indebtedness: young adults, women, and people with gambling disorder. The overarching and long-term aim is suicide prevention, intending to map early signs to better assess the risk of suicide in connection with over-indebtedness, and to offer effective interventions. In the short term, the study is expected to contribute to increased knowledge and awareness, highlighting that over-indebtedness is a risk factor for suicidal behavior. Over-indebtedness and suicide are associated with feelings of guilt and shame, but increased awareness can lead to reduced taboos and stigma, encouraging healthcare professionals to inquire about these topics more openly. Mapping risk factors and offering targeted interventions have the potential to reduce suffering, increase work ability, and ultimately save lives.