

Economic recession and suicide in Italy: A note

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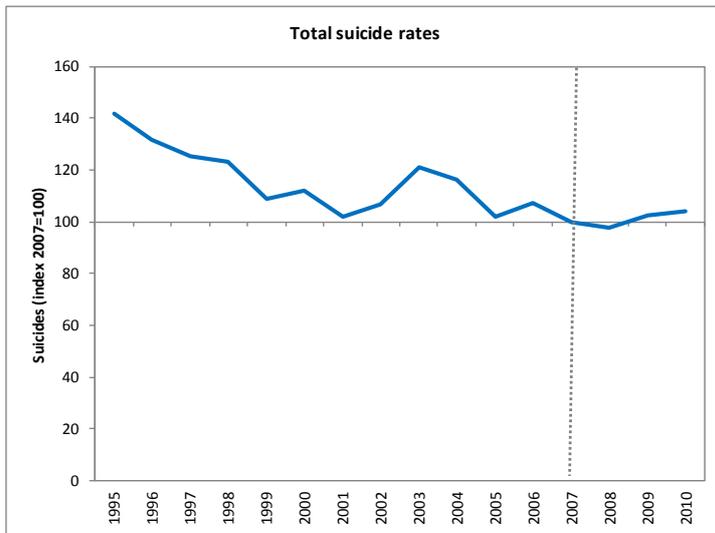
The adverse impact on social and health conditions consequent to the economic recession which started in 2008 has been reported by the mass-media and also by some scholars (Stuckler, 2009; Karanikolos et al. 2013). Great prominence, in particular, has been given to the many cases of suicide which occurred in those European countries that are experiencing this profound recession: Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece. There is, however, some preliminary evidence indicating a relationship between recession and suicide.

A significant rise in suicide numbers due to the recessions in Italy and Greece has been, for example, reported by De Vogli, Marmoth and Stuckler (2012) and, for the EU member States, by Stuckler et al. (2009). A study conducted in Greece on a sample of 2,256 individuals, has indicated a 36% increase in attempted suicides between 2009 and 2011 (Economou et al., 2011). In a review on the effect of the financial crisis and current austerity policies on health, Karanikolos et al. (2013) suggested that 2007 represented a turning point for suicides in the EU (15 and 12 countries): after a fall registered in 2000-2007, suicides then increased. There is, however, some discordant evidence in this regard from the Baltic States: despite their also being hard hit by recession, suicides do not appear to have increased to any real extent (Stankunas et al. 2013).

This note presents some data on recent suicide trends in Italy. During the period 2007-2012 real GDP per capita in Italy shrank, cumulatively, by -8.5 percentage points, and total unemployment rates passed from 6.1% to 10.7%. The crisis was thus severe and prolonged, and led to a significant decline in per capita GDP.

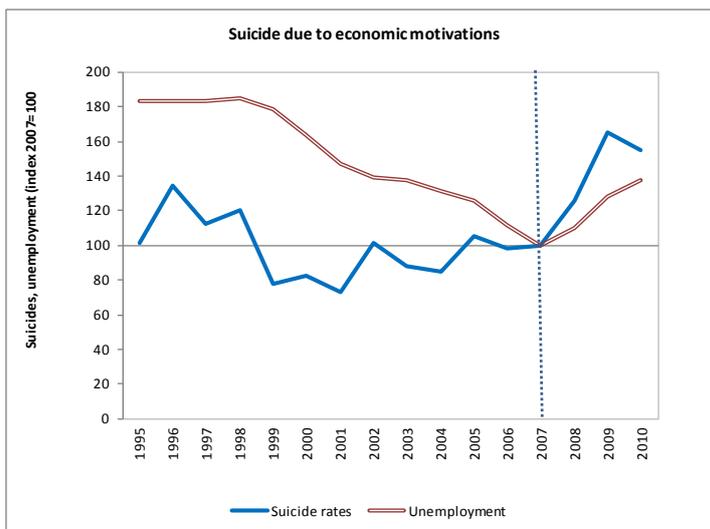
To illustrate suicide trends, I have used data provided by the Italian National Institute of Statistics¹. This data lists types of suicide based on motive, including suicide for economic reasons. As illustrated by Fig 1. in the period 1995-2008, total suicide rates declined, while the impact of recession on post-2007 trend appears to be negligible.

Fig. 1. Total suicide rates 1995-2010 (Index 2007 = 100)



Source: Istat, Suicidi e Tentativi di Suicidio in Italia.

Fig. 2. Suicides due to economic motivations and unemployment rates, 1995-2010 (2007 = 100)



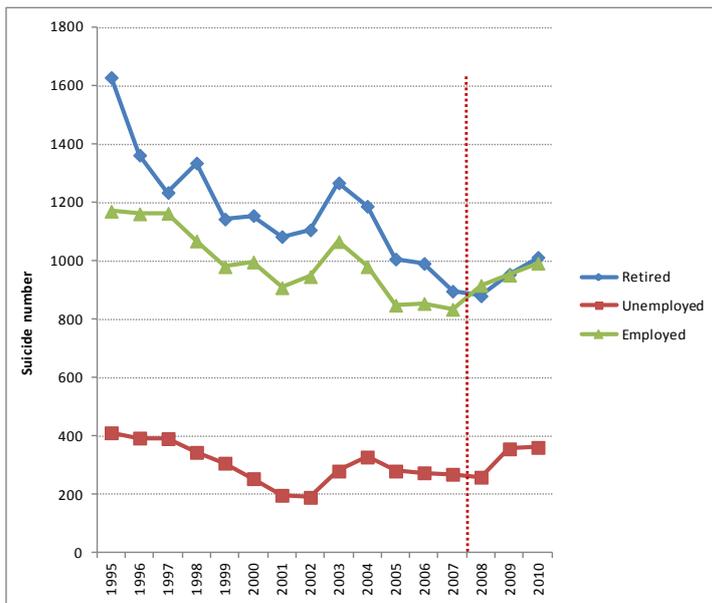
Source: Istat, Suicidi e Tentativi di Suicidio in Italia; Eurostat for unemployment rates.

The trend of suicides caused by economic motives, illustrated by Fig. 2, is notably different: after 2007, these suicides actually increased. For Italy, De Vogli et al. (2012) estimated 290 excess suicides and attempted suicides for economic motives, attributable to economic recession. The increase in suicides for economic reasons was coupled with a rise in unemployment. Over the entire period, however, unemployment and this category of suicides do not exhibit any correlation (for yearly data 1995-2010, $r = 0,072$). Data on suicides, categorized on the basis of the occupational status of the suicidal, show how, with respect to 2007 levels, the number of suicides in 2010 was 34% higher among the unemployed, 19% more among the employed and 13% more among retired people (Fig. 3). It is

important to note, however, how for all three categories the trends had declined since 1995, then reversed in 2008.

The availability of data, updated to 2010, allows us to derive only some preliminary indications: in Italy, in fact, the recession and rising unemployment, have continued up to present (2013). The differences in trends between total suicides and suicide for economic motives, suggest that great caution is required when interpreting data regarding such a complex phenomena.

Fig. 3. Suicides number: retired, unemployed and employed persons



Source: Istat, Suicidi e Tentativi di Suicidio in Italia.

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