

## THE ECONOMICS OF SUICIDE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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*Abstract*

This study investigates the economics of suicide in South Africa using the Mortality and Causes of Death data from death notification as well as regional economic data for the 2006-2008 period. Using an inflation rate that varies by month and across province of residence as a proxy for economic performance, the results indicate a negative relationship between inflation and suicide, suggesting that suicides are countercyclical. When controlling for month and province fixed effects, however, the inflation coefficient, albeit remaining negative, is no longer significant, except in the female sample. Suicide is more prevalent among younger individuals, while the greatest proportion of suicide is seen among men. Suicides also exhibit a strong seasonal variation, with peaks in spring and summer, with December having the highest suicide prevalence. The overall results indicate a negative but insignificant relationship between economic performance and suicide in South Africa, with socio-economic differences and individual characteristics accounting for most of the variation in suicide.

*JEL Classification:* Z13

*Keywords:* Suicide, economic performance, suicide dynamics, South Africa

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Suicide is one of the leading causes of unnatural death (Flisher *et al.*, 2004; Schlebusch, 2005) and among the top 20 causes of all deaths in South Africa (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2004), translating to about 7,000 fatal suicide attempts annually or roughly 20 everyday (Burrows and Schlebusch, 2008). Among its many causes, economic variables such as real gross domestic product (GDP) growth and the unemployment rate have been established as important determinants of suicide, as numerous studies have investigated the topic since the seminal work of Hamermesh and Soss (1974). In contrast to a growing body of international literature, few studies have been conducted on suicide in developing countries, and no studies exist specifically on the economics of suicide in South Africa. South African studies on suicide have mainly focused on the seasonality of suicide over time (Flisher *et al.*, 1997, 2004) and the socio-demographic distribution of suicide (Burrows *et al.*, 2003; Burrows and Laflamme, 2006). The purpose of this study is to fill this gap in the South African literature. As such, the main aim of this study is to determine whether a relationship exists between suicide prevalence and the performance of the South African economy, while controlling for individual and regional characteristics. In addition, suicide generally reflects a gender paradox, where male suicide

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The author wishes to thank Ebrahim Seedat, Philippe Burger, Jen Snowball, an associate editor and two anonymous referees for many helpful comments and suggestions on a previous version of this paper, as well as Helga Schabert from Quantec for making available the provincial-level data employed in the analysis.