



Addressing Higher Risk of Suicide Among Farmers in Rural America

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I. Introduction

Suicide is the 10th leading cause of death in the United States.¹ Suicide rates increased approximately 40 percent from 2000 to 2017.² Thirty-eight thousand people died by suicide in 2017 alone.¹ Rural populations have a significantly higher suicide rate than urban areas and available information indicates the suicide rate among farmers is 3.5 times higher than the general population.^{3,4} Male farmers, ranchers and other agricultural managers have a significantly higher rate of suicide deaths at 43.2 per 100,000 compared to the average across all other occupations of 27.4 per 100,000.²

The average age of rural farmers is 57.5 years old and the majority of farms are family owned and operated.⁵ Rural farmer income has decreased slightly in recent years with \$43,053 being the annual pay of a farmer in 2017.⁶ While male, Caucasian farmers are the majority in farming, the demographics of farmers are changing as women, people of color, new farmers and younger individuals are increasingly represented in the workforce.^{2,7} Thirty-six percent of all farm producers are female, fifty-six percent of all farms have at least one female decision maker, eleven percent of farmers are veterans, and twenty-five percent are new farmers.⁷

II. Major Factors Contributing to Risk

Financial Pressures

Financial pressure is commonly associated with rural farmer stress and is strongly associated with poor mental health.⁸ Farmers face significant challenges managing purchase or rent of land, reduction in sales due to tariff regulations, falling commodity prices and rising farm equipment prices.^{8,9} External factors beyond economic considerations also impact farmers' financial well-being as increasing severe weather events threaten crops and livestock.¹⁰ These considerations have created inconsistent cash flow making it difficult for farmers to pay their loans and maintain neutral or marginal profitability.⁹

Social Pressures & Reduced Access

Among farmers there is a strong reluctance to seek out mental health care. Fear of stigma and discrimination from others is a significant consideration as small communities beget less opportunity to keep personal affairs private.^{11,12} Many in rural communities do not view mental health concerns such as depression or anxiety as an issue to reach out to assistance for, but as a private matter to overcome through self-



determination.¹³ Access to available mental health and primary care options is limited in rural areas, making it difficult for farmers to find a practitioner to address mental health or suicidal concerns.¹⁴

III. Limitations in Addressing Farmer Suicide

Rural farmer mental health and suicide rates have been researched for decades in a global context, yet the United States has limited research detailing the unique needs of American farmers.⁷ Additional limitations for farmer suicide information include: lack of data that is representative of all states with a major rural farming economy, statistics are typically based on one year of study, farmer classifications are inconsistent amongst researchers, and there is classification differentiation when reporting cause of death which often leads to underreporting.^{2,15} Consistent and continued attention to understanding American rural farmers and the challenges they face is critical to future well-being.

IV. Policy Recommendations

Rural farmers are the backbone of America, providing \$389 billion of agricultural products in the United States, yet attention and support for our agricultural community's well-being has been chronically overlooked.¹⁶ Solutions need to consider robust funding of research, building the rural healthcare workforce, and addressing barriers to well-being through consideration of the social determinants of health. Per the available knowledge about rural American farmers, recommendations include:

- Reduce tariffs on rural commodities and stabilize product cost to alleviate financial burden on rural farmers.
- Ensure high quality broadband internet access to secure access of affordable, accessible telehealth services, educational opportunities, and professional development of rural farmers and their families.
- Continue to fund community-led mental health education and training emphasizing leadership and inclusion of the rural agricultural workforce and their support network.
- Invest in rural mental health and healthcare workforce through incentive programs for practitioners, developing cultural competency, and reducing barriers to practice in rural areas.
- Increase research efforts in the United States to build awareness of and solutions for supporting mental health in the agricultural industry.



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