

US workplace suicides up by 28 percent

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The number of workplace suicides reported in 2008 rose by 28 percent over the previous year, according to figures released Thursday by the US Labor Department.

There were 251 reported workplace suicides in 2008, up from 196 in 2007. Protective service workers, including police and firefighters, registered the highest increase in workplace suicides, with the figure rising from 14 to 25.

Overall workplace fatalities fell by 10 percent in 2008, according to the figures, in part because fewer people are working. The largest decrease in fatalities came from the construction sector, which contracted sharply after the housing bubble collapsed. Private-sector construction laborer deaths fell by 31 percent, but construction retained its status as the deadliest sector, with 969 reported fatalities.

A total of 5,071 workplace fatalities were reported last year, a decrease from 5,657 in 2007. The reported figures were preliminary and subject to revision, but this is the smallest total number of fatalities since the Labor Department began keeping records in 1992.

While “economic factors likely played a role” in reducing overall fatalities, the Labor Department noted that much of the drop-off may be attributable to underreporting due to state budget crises. The department noted that additional reports usually come in late, but since more than half of states are facing fiscal crises and cutting spending wherever they can, more late reports are expected than in previous years.

Workplace fatalities fell among white workers by 8 percent, 16 percent for blacks, and 18 percent for Hispanics. Bill Kojola, an industrial hygienist, told Bloomberg.com that the latter two groups are “the most vulnerable people in this economy.” These groups on average receive lower wages, have higher workplace injury rates, and are “highly likely unemployed”

because of an economic downturn.

About 2.6 million jobs were eliminated in 2008, as the unemployment rate climbed from 4.9 to 7.2 percent in 12 months. Even more dropped out of the workforce because they couldn’t find jobs, or were forced to work part-time involuntarily. Some 6.7 million jobs have been destroyed since the recession started in December 2007.

Gary Chaison, a labor relations professor at Clark University, told the Associated Press that deteriorating economic conditions were likely related to the upsurge in suicides.

“Those who are at places where there have been substantial layoffs are trying to cope with survivor’s guilt,” Chaison said. “I also think there’s tremendous anxiety in the American workplace. It’s not just being anxious, it’s being depressed.”

With some areas registering more than 25 percent unemployment, the pressure of keeping a job in the midst of hopeless economic prospects inevitably takes its toll.

With employers cutting back hours in addition to perpetuating layoffs, many of those who remain at work are forced to show up day in and day out while their houses slip into foreclosure and creditors keep calling. Many workers have been forced to take involuntary furloughs, with some expected to show up to work without pay.

The US suicide rate rose by 5 percent from 1999 to 2005, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. There were 33,185 total suicides in the United States in 2007, according to the Centers for Disease Control, but figures for 2008 are not yet available.

“There is a correlation between suicide and unemployment rates,” Dr. Paula Clayton, medical director at the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, told Bloomberg.com. She said that the number of calls to suicide hotlines have increased in the

recent period.

These figures make clear the devastating impact of the economic crisis on workers. While the unemployment rate fell slightly last month for the first time since the recession began, it is expected to reach 10 percent by the end of the year, and remain much higher than its previous rate for years to come. Credit card defaults and foreclosures are near record rates, while workers' incomes are falling and social services are being cut back.



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