

# Death on the Farm: How I Learned that Social Work (and Everyone) Should Care about Farmer Suicide

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**Abstract:** Farmers and farm families are not often seen as a vulnerable population in need of social work services. This narrative reflection describes how I, a child of the suburbs, came to be involved in research examining stress and suicide rates in farmers. Through a chance conversation with a colleague, I began to learn about the high rates of suicide and multiple stressors among farmers. Together with collaborators from Cooperative Extension, we have begun working to develop suicide prevention and intervention initiatives. Through this process I learned about the rich potential for collaboration with scholars and service providers in the agricultural sector and have grown in commitment to this work. Farmers provide the food, fiber, and fuel we all need; their needs and challenges are of relevance to all of us. I believe social work should turn its attention to this vulnerable population in curriculum, direct practice, advocacy, and research.

**Keywords:** rural, farmer stress, agriculture, cooperative extension

## Introduction

“Have you seen the latest CDC report on suicide by occupations?” asked my colleague “Jim,” a leader in our College of Agriculture. We were sitting together waiting for a university meeting to begin, as we usually did, but today was different. His eyes were big, and his voice shook a little. I had never seen my typically affable friend so distressed. “Farmers have one of the highest suicide rates of any occupation. This is shocking. What’s going on?”

I put my hand on Jim’s arm. “I don’t know, Jim. But I’d like to work with you to figure it out.” He smiled, took a deep breath, and said, “Can I pull together a group of us in Ag and in Extension to talk with you about this? Maybe we can do something together.” (For those of you not familiar with Cooperative Extension Services, all land grant universities have a Cooperative Extension unit that provides free, reliable, research-based information to farmers, families, and others through Extension Offices that are found in local areas, usually one in each county.)

I didn’t know it at the time, but this conversation would shift my research agenda, my collaborative relationships, and my social work passion in ways I couldn’t imagine. As a child of the suburbs and a psychiatric social worker by training, I had never thought about rural mental health in general, much less farmer suicide. Yet in the four years since Jim and I had this conversation, I have come to learn about and respect the challenges and stressors faced by farmers and farm families in the US. I have rededicated my career to using social work skills to develop interventions and prevention initiatives for farmer stress and suicide. I’ve also built rich and wonderful collaborative relationships with scholars across multiple disciplines who are passionate about this work.

So, what happened next? Jim did pull together his group, and we met regularly to talk about farmer suicide and rural stress. At first, some people in the group were confused by my presence—they didn't need child welfare, so why was social work here? As we talked, I tried very hard to walk with cultural humility and responsiveness, offering what I knew about mental health from a social work perspective but making clear that they were the experts in this space. The group surveyed extension agents, looked at the issues across the country, and held a Rural Stress Summit. One member of the group talked with her dad, who is a farmer, and heard stories she hadn't heard before about local farmers who had died by suicide. We worked together, and the issue got more real and more urgent.

### **Research and Actions**

As part of the group, I also contributed by offering to look at what was happening in Georgia, using a database with which I'd worked before—the CDC's Violent Death Reporting System (VDRS). The VDRS contains a great deal of information (including occupation), gathered from multiple sources, about all homicides and suicides in a state (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Most importantly to me, the VDRS contains narrative summaries of the police reports and medical examiner reports for each death, providing a story behind the numbers in the database.

Using the VDRS, I gathered information on all suicides among farmers and agricultural workers in Georgia for a ten-year period. The findings were a gut punch for me and for the group. Suicide rates were high, and the precipitators for suicide were heartbreaking—spousal loss, financial stressors, health issues that left farmers unable to work and not wanting to “be a burden” on their families. The stories of isolated people, mostly older men, who thought their families and their farms would be better off without them haunted me. One farmer's last communication was a voicemail to a neighboring farmer, a last act taking care of his family and his farm ... “Please tell my family my wallet is on the mantle, and please take care of my cows” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). That one stayed with me.

The VDRS study really galvanized us into action. The research, combined with the research of my colleagues, the feedback from Extension agents in the field, and input from farming communities has led us to a novel interdisciplinary collaboration among Agriculture, Family and Consumer Sciences, Agricultural Economics, and Cooperative Extension. The *Rural Georgia Growing Stronger* initiative (<https://extension.uga.edu/topic-areas/timely-topics/Rural.html>) is working to combine research, partnerships with local organizations, anti-stigma messaging, and suicide prevention education to develop culturally responsive, evidence-informed, natural helper-grounded interventions. We have received funding from the Provost, blended our research and co-authored manuscripts, and worked together to identify gaps in the research and ways our combined skills could be used to fill those gaps. It is creative and dynamic work, and among the most rewarding things I have done as a social worker.

It was also one of the hardest things I have done—so very far outside of my comfort zone. The first few times I went to South Georgia to talk with farmers and Extension agents I felt that I had entered a totally new world. I was asked to speak about my work on farmer suicide to a group of

farmers and their spouses at an Extension luncheon. Before I started, the hosting Extension agent “Mary” leaned over and quietly asked me “Do you have any connections to farming at all? A point of connection will help so much.” Suddenly, I remembered my grandfather, who had grown coffee in Puerto Rico. He didn’t wear overalls and have a red barn (my suburban stereotype of a farmer), so I hadn’t thought of him. But he cared passionately about his *finca*, and I loved visiting him as a child. I told Mary about my grandfather, and also about my daughter who is studying horticulture focusing on berry production. Mary smiled and we both relaxed, and I learned an important lesson. I have to find a point of connection to build trust, to become a point of caring. And there is always a point of connection.

As I’ve moved along this journey there have been some bumps in the road. My interdisciplinary colleagues and I met monthly (virtually) to share ideas and interests and projects. Understanding each other’s disciplines was sometimes hard. “Wait, social workers do therapy?” “What on earth is an Ag Educator?” “I didn’t know Family and Consumer Science faculty could be Extension Specialists!” But we continued to talk and work together, affectionately nicknamed ourselves the Rural Rock Stars, and have done some good work to support our farmers.

Given the lesson of connection and trust I learned from Mary, one of my early projects was to try to understand who farmers will trust—with whom they will be willing to be vulnerable. Colleagues and I spent three days at the Sunbelt Ag Expo (picture a huge state fair, but instead of rides there is farm equipment and hundreds of farmers from multiple states) where we surveyed and spoke with over 200 farmers and farmer-adjacent Expo visitors. We learned that the people farmers trust most in the world are their spouses, their farmer friends, and their faith leaders.

That finding led us to what has been, for me, one of the most profound pieces of research I’ve done. Along with Mary and “Sue,” another Extension leader in South Georgia who was born and raised on Georgia farms, we held six focus groups with farmers’ wives across the counties. The wives’ stories were profound. The women spoke with true love about their farming life, how much they valued it, and how proud they were to raise their children on the farm. They also talked about knowing the crushing stress their spouses feel, and how wives do the emotional labor to “uplift” him so he can continue farming. Women talked about the impact on their children, who often are the only ones whose daddy isn’t watching them play in the football game because it’s planting season and he is working 16-hour days, seven days a week. They talked about the fatigue and the relentlessness of it; one woman said she had not had a vacation in 47 years. The wives shared stories, laughing and telling tales about being new brides trying to figure out what being a farmer’s wife really meant ... and also told the sad stories of family members who had lived with depression, or alcohol misuse, or farming accidents. I don’t think there was a single group where I didn’t quietly shed tears.

I felt incredibly privileged to hear these women’s stories, and for Mary, Sue, and me to bring them back to the rest of our colleagues. We are now developing a toolkit for farmers’ wives, with information on how they can help a farmer experiencing high stress, how they can recognize signs of potential suicide risk, and where they can go for help. It will also include lots of resources for the women’s own self-care. We are looking forward to going to South Georgia

and taking the toolkit back to the women who spoke with us. I am excited to let them know that we heard them, to get feedback from them about what we did right and where we missed the mark, and to thank them for their generosity of spirit. I want them to know that they are helping many women who are farmers' wives and mothers and daughters, and that their wisdom matters. This might be the richest gift I've experienced so far in this work. I can't remember when I've felt so honored.

### **Lessons for Social Work**

I've been thinking about what I have learned in my journey that I would like to share with other social workers. There's a lot. While I know there are dedicated rural social workers and rural social work scholars, this still seems like a boutique topic. I would like all of us to see the issue of farmer suicide and stress within the context of rural mental health as a broader interest of importance to us all. I'd like us to be aware that 85 percent of the food we eat is grown within the US (United States Food and Drug Administration, 2019)—farmers are essential workers in the US. They are also in crisis, with suicide rates of 32.2 per 100,000 (Bissen, 2020). They face many precipitating stressors, including 1) intrapersonal challenges such as isolation, mental health/substance use issues, illnesses, and injuries; 2) interpersonal challenges such as relationship issues and loss or farm succession struggles; 3) community and cultural challenges such as lack of access to health/mental healthcare, stigma regarding help-seeking, and the agrarian imperative of fierce independence; 4) systemic challenges such as high input costs, low commodity prices, supply chain disruptions, and harmful tariff policies; and 5) environmental challenges such as natural disasters, pesticide exposure, and climate change (Kohlbeck et al., 2022; Scheyett et al., 2019).

This crisis reveals some of the basic human rights denied to farmers—access to healthcare, economic security, and a voice in the systems that determine their economic survival. Despite this, we as a social work profession in the US have been curiously quiet on this issue (Bryant & Garnham, 2017). With our community-based, clinical, and policy practice skills, US social workers have so much to contribute to addressing the farmer suicide crisis. Most social worker scholars don't think about it, but we are really needed in farming communities ... and most agricultural scholars don't understand the skills and capacities that social work researchers and practitioners can bring to the table. Social work and agriculture, particularly Cooperative Extension, need to find each other and become a powerful combination for building and disseminating interventions throughout rural areas.

What should social work do to address farmer suicide? First, it is crucial we understand that everyone who eats food (i.e., all of us) should care deeply about the fate of farmers. For social work students, practitioners, and researchers not in rural areas, there are still important advocacy roles we can play. We can advocate for policy changes that 1) ensure accessible health/mental health services in rural areas and 2) ensure access to broadband (without this telehealth is impossible). We can advocate for the right to economic security by 1) advocating for fair and timely natural disaster relief; 2) supporting policies that limit climate change and help farmers learn sustainable agricultural methods; 3) understanding the economics of food production and advocating for fair prices, fair costs, and an effective supply/distribution chain; and 4)

advocating against policies that create unfair tariffs impacting farmers. We also need to be engaged in both micro- and macro-level research on farmer and farm family wellbeing. By bringing out systems thinking and a social justice lens we will be able to better understand and develop effective interventions to prevent farmer suicide and promote farmer and farm family resilience.

Understanding food production, the challenges farmers face, and the need to advocate for policies that support their wellbeing should be an essential part of training for *all* social workers and social work students. Social work has an important role to play, but until we understand that this issue touches all of us, the farmer suicide crisis will continue, and we'll continue to see these tragic deaths on the farm.

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