

Behind the Masks they Wear: Exploring the Factors Contributing to Farmer Suicide

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Background

Suicide is recognized as a serious public health concern claiming the lives of over 700,000 per year. Farmers and agricultural workers have higher suicide rates than those working in other occupations. It is unclear what chain of events might lead a farmer towards the path of suicide.

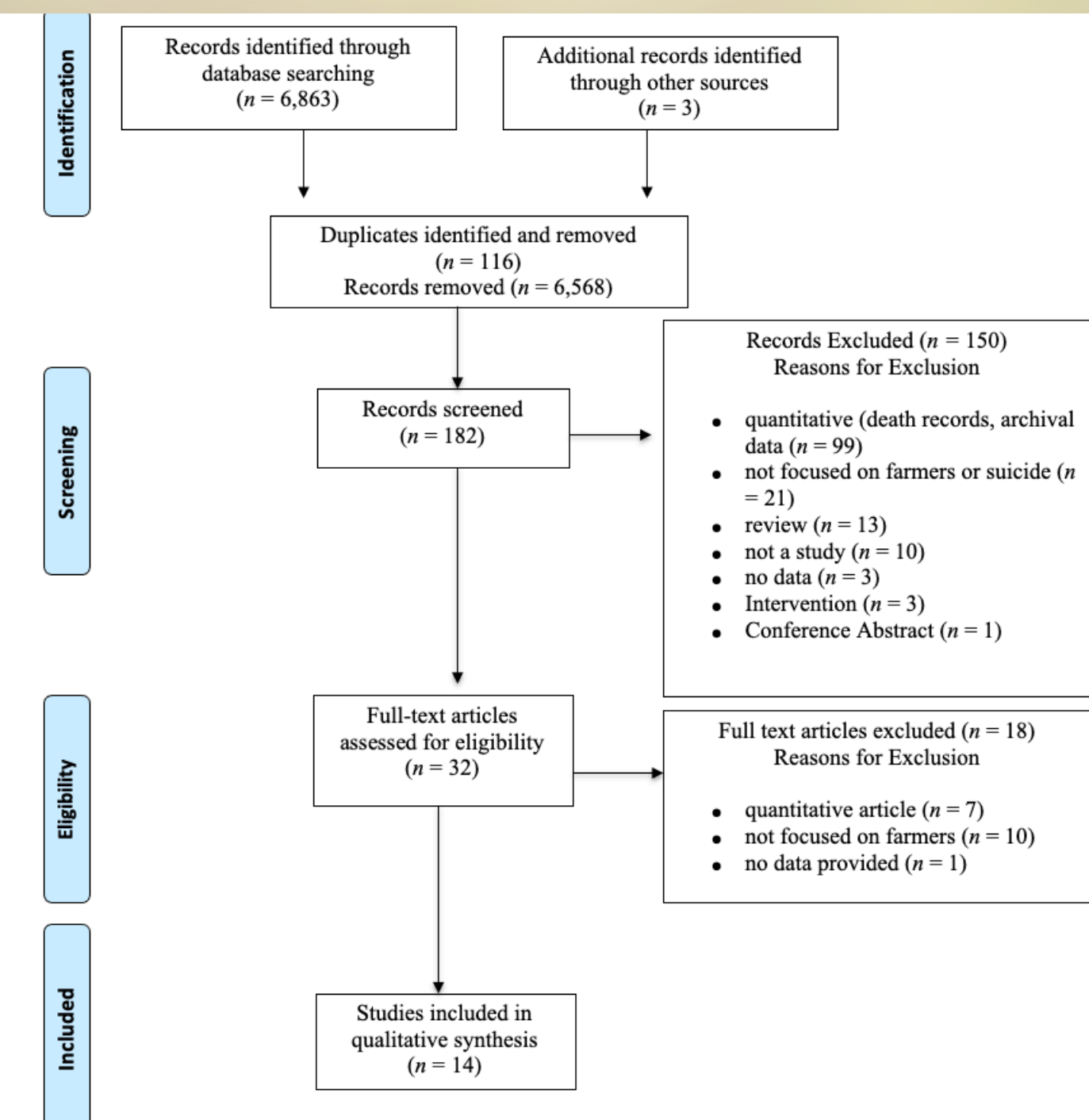
The aim of our study was to understand the risk and protective factors associated with farmer suicide from the perspectives of people who knew them well, and to use this information to develop a conceptual model that explains the chain of events.

Method

We conducted a synthesis of qualitative research on farmers and suicide conducted from 1980-2022. We searched electronic databases to find studies.

We used Noblit and Hare's (1988) meta-ethnography approach to synthesize qualitative findings. Our analysis involved four steps: (1) reading the studies to identify main concepts, (2) determining how the studies are related, (3) translating the studies into one another, and (4) synthesizing the translations.

Figure 1. PRISMA diagram of selected studies.



Results

We identified seven themes that contributed to farmer suicide

Maintaining a "Farmer Identity"

Farmers were described as hard-working, strong, and private who took pride in being the breadwinners of their families. If the farm failed, they failed, and they could not imagine working in any other job. Three sub-themes emerged: bonded to the farm, physical health conditions, and mental health stigma.

"I think it is when we identify ourselves with what we do and that becomes who we are and then when you see that potentially slipping away... you get lost... I think you lose that sense of who you are."

Financial Crisis

Uncontrollable events (changes in market regulations, government legislation, repeated crop failures or livestock diseases) left farmers with mounting debt.

"Our loans mounted and my brother started blaming himself for the situation. One day he went to the fields and never came back. His body was found in the fields the next day"

Family: Support and Stress

Many had recently separated or divorced from their partner. And the enmeshed work-home relationship meant that the family was deeply invested in the business.

"I just keep going because I think someday my son will need me."

Isolation from Others

Farmers commonly experienced geographic, social, and emotional isolation.

"If you are feeling isolated from your family and you have no one who really knows you in order to ask the right questions - "are you okay?" - it does make you feel isolated."

The Community Panopticon

The community helped farmers stay socially integrated through local events but could also be a source of stress as farmers felt their decisions would be seen and judged by others.

"If you're a farmer...you'd consider changing anything because yes, everyone in the district would know within 24 hours if you've changed something... and they'll be wanting to know why you've decided to do that and you have to justify that."

An Unpredictable Environment

Uncontrollable events (e.g., market regulations or government policies, volatile weather, and pests and livestock epidemics) forced farmers to adjust their practices from what they historically done, placing them in unfamiliar territory.

"When you get up in the morning and you've got to go out...and you're seeing all these dead animals consistently every day and having to shoot the cows, shoot the calves every single day, no days off. This went on for nearly two years... it wears you down."

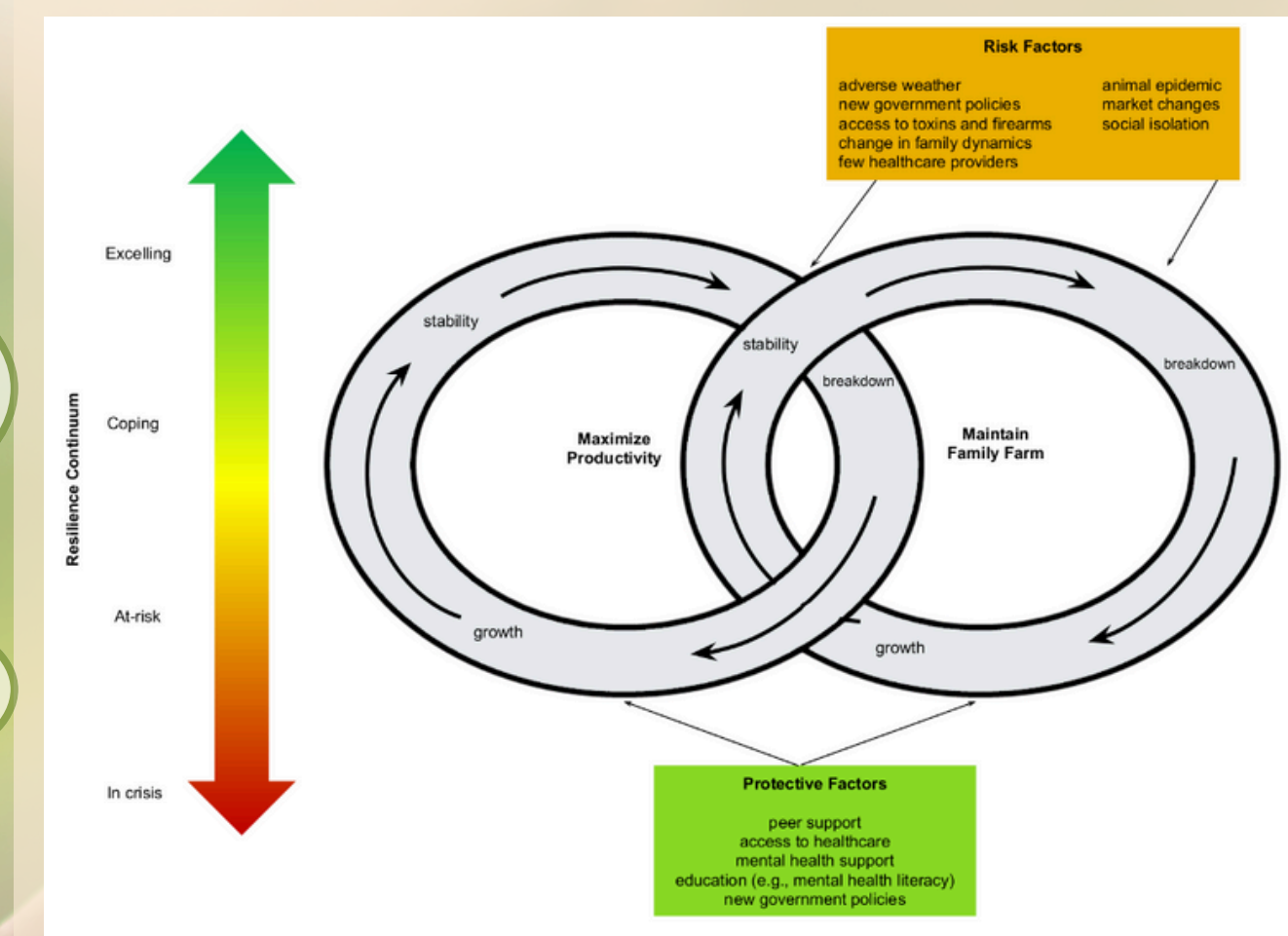
Access to Toxins and Firearms

Farmers have easy access and are familiar with pesticides and firearms as they may be a part of regular farm work (e.g., controlling pests, euthanizing livestock).

"That may be why suicide is at a higher rate in the country, because we do that (use firearms) on a daily basis anyway. It's an identified end to a problem for everything else."

We used the themes to generate the Farming Adversity-Resilience Management framework (FARM framework). The rings represent the two main goals of farming, and their dynamic relationship to mental health and wellness.

Figure 2. The Farming Adversity-Resilience Management framework (FARM framework)



Discussion

Our review uncovered several dynamic relationships between risk and protective factors:

- The dose of stressors may have contributed to burnout and feeling trapped in a hopeless situation.
- Traits such as stoicism, independence, and a strong desire to keep matters private -- traits used to describe traditional ideals of farmers -- may be maladaptive as they reduce help-seeking.
- Social support from partners, relatives and the community can represent both a stressor and a protective factor.

Implications

Recommendations to support farmers include:

- Offering mental health literacy programs.
- Promoting psychological counselling, especially from counsellors who are familiar with farming.
- Reducing the financial barriers of psychological counselling (e.g., insurance coverage).
- Educating healthcare providers of the common stressors farmers face and incorporating questions into their consultations to better assess a farmer's level of distress.