

Dead End: Protestantism and Suicide^{*}

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In *Le suicide*, Émile Durkheim (1897) presented aggregate indicators showing that Protestantism was a leading correlate of suicide incidence. We extend Gary Becker and Richard Posner's (2004) economic theory of suicide to account for an effect of Protestant vs. Catholic denomination, modeling differences in the possibility of confession of sins, in views about the ability of man to affect God's judgment, and in group- vs. individually-oriented attitudes. We test the economic theory of religion-specific suicide rates using a unique new dataset capturing the micro-regional variation across 452 counties in 19th-century Prussia. Prussia had substantial denominational variation within a common institutional framework and provides county-level census data on suicide, religion, and covariates at a time when religiousness was still pervasive. As early as 1919, it has been suggested that the higher incidence of suicide among the Protestant population may simply be the result of selection into denominational groups (Kollarits 1919). This establishes a fundamental challenge for empirical identification, and although many sociological studies have confirmed Durkheim's association since, little attention has been given to causal identification. To identify exogenous variation in religious denomination, we exploit the fact that Protestantism tended to spread across Prussia in geographically concentric circles around Luther's city of Wittenberg (Becker and Woessmann QJE 2009). Using distance to Wittenberg as an instrument for Protestantism, we find that Protestantism had indeed a significant causal positive effect on suicide both in 1816-21 and in 1868-71.

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