FACT SHEET:

Tragic Loss

BACKGROUND

Research for this project was conducted by Chad Bouma, Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing.

Tragic loss occurs when an individual suddenly and unexpectedly is killed as the victim of a crime or dies due to suicide, an accident, a sudden health event, or a natural disaster.

This fact sheet has been designed to complement the Canadian Centre for Agricultural Wellbeing's (CCAW) Response Toolkit for Agricultural Crises.

Find the Toolkit and other crisis-specific fact sheets on the CCAW website.

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR AGRICULTURAL WELLBEING

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TRAGIC LOSS IN AGRICULTURE

Human fatalities on farms may involve family members and/or agricultural workers.

Between 1990 and 2020, there were an average of 91 agriculture-related deaths in Canada annually (Canadian Agricultural Injury Reporting, 2023).

A 2023 report by the Canadian Agricultural Safety Association highlighted that from 2011 to 2020 there were 624 agriculture-related deaths in Canada. The leading causes of these fatalities included machinery rollovers, runovers, and entanglements. Notably, children aged one to four and seniors aged 70 to 79 were disproportionately affected.

While comprehensive national data on suicides among agricultural workers in Canada is limited, existing studies suggest that these individuals may face a higher risk compared to the general population (Centre for Suicide Prevention, 2022).

Death by suicide on farms may be underreported because of the potential negative impact due to stigmatization, lack of mental health resources, or potential financial loss, such as nullified insurance policies.

Impacts on Farms and Farmers

The possible impacts of tragic loss on farms and farmers in Canada, whether from accidents or suicides, are far-reaching and may affect many facets of the agricultural community. These impacts may be significant in the immediate aftermath of an event as well as in residual ways over several years or even decades.

Specific impacts of tragic loss as they relate to farmers' wellbeing and livelihoods are described below.

Financial Impacts

- The death of a farmer or agricultural worker may result in a direct loss of productivity on farms, affecting crop production, livestock care, and overall farm management. Many farms are small, family-run operations, and this loss of productivity can halt or severely disrupt day-to-day operations.
- Farms may struggle to recover from the financial costs associated with tragic loss, and some farms may be unable to maintain operations due to these financial losses. Post-traumatic stress experienced by family or agricultural workers in the aftermath of tragic loss may also contribute to a long-term decline in farm management.
- In cases of tragic loss due to suicide, life insurance payouts may be minimized or withheld altogether, further increasing financial strain for those affected.

Social and Familial Impacts

- The death of a family member on the farm can have a profound emotional and psychological impact on surviving family members. The loss of children due to farm accidents can be especially devastating and may have lifelong emotional and psychological impacts for those affected.
- The loss of a family member or agricultural worker due to suicide can also be traumatic, resulting in significant grief and added psychological distress based on the nature of the person's death.
- Tragic loss on farms can lead to disruption to farm legacies and succession planning. Uncertainty or the loss of future direction may increase the stress that families and farm managers must navigate. In some cases, surviving family members may not want to continue the farming operation due to the emotional and financial toll of the loss.
- Farmers often have strong community values and ties. Tragic loss on a farm can have a substantial ripple effect in the broader agricultural community.

Mental Health Impacts

The added responsibility and burden of carrying on a farming operation may significantly add to the stress and mental strain that farmers experience (Hagen et al., 2021; Jones-Bitton et al., 2019; Jones-Bitton et al., 2020). The added stressors brought on because of a tragic loss can lead to further burnout and serious mental health issues (Hagen et al., 2021).

Negative stigma surrounding suicide-related loss may also prevent people from reaching out for mental health supports (Skaczkowski et al., 2024). This isolation is a risk factor that can compound the impacts of trauma, grief, and loss on an individual.

SAFE FARMS POLICY AND ADVOCACY

Due to the inherent danger of the nature of work on farms, accidents that occur have a high likelihood of resulting in serious injury or death (CCOHS, 2022).

Many of these accidents may be preventable, but the challenge of creating farm safe plans while staying productively efficient means that many farms do not have adequate safety training and education.

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