

San Diego suicides reach highest reported number in 2013

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A recent report from the San Diego Suicide Prevention Council noted a 20 percent increase in suicides over the past six years within the county.

The SDSPC report, which compiled data from numerous organizations, found that in 2012 there was a California statewide suicide rate of 10.2 per 100,000 population, compared to 13.2 in San Diego County. The United States as of 2010 had an average suicide rate of 11.9 per 100,000, according to the most recent national figures.

SDSPC was formed in 2010 in response to the high suicide rate in San Diego County, the fifth most populous county in the nation. An earlier study by the County of San Diego Health and Human Services Agency found that there was one suicide per day from 2000 to 2009. In 2008, there were 366 suicides, or 12.1 per 100,000 residents. The most recent report shows that from 2010 the rates steadily increased up to 441 suicides, or 14.0 per 100,000 residents in 2013. This is the highest overall number of suicides ever recorded in a single year within the county.

Further, the SDSPC report shows that within the past six years the number of students who have seriously considered suicide has jumped from 17 percent up to 20 percent.

Suicide deaths were highest among those with a Native American background, numbering 34.8 deaths per 100,000, followed by 23.0 among Caucasians and 12.1 among the African-American population. Rates are approximately three times higher in males than females, and the highest rates are in the working-age population.

The sharp increase in suicide has made it the second leading cause of non-natural death in San Diego County.

Following the National Strategy for Suicide

Prevention in 2001 and a California Strategic Plan in 2008, the County of San Diego has implemented various programs in an effort to reduce suicides. In 2010 a media campaign called, "It's Up to Us" was launched to inform the public of suicide prevention. In 2011, the SDSPC began conducting "Question, Persuade, Refer" (QPR) training for social workers and other health care professionals that come into contact with suicide victims in their professional lives. Despite these efforts, San Diego County continues to experience an increase in suicides.

While suicide as a cause of death is perhaps the most troubling and difficult to explain, there are certainly social and protracted historical processes that can be examined in an attempt to understand this tragic phenomenon.

A partial explanation of the high suicide rate can be attributed to the number of war veterans who live in San Diego County. According to the US Census, veterans account for 15 to 17 percent of the population in the county, with at least 30 percent of them living below the poverty line.

The San Diego Veterans Affairs 2013 Suicide Data revealed 42 suicides and 159 suicide attempts among veterans. The report notes depression and post-traumatic stress disorder as the leading psychological causes, and family/relationship and financial/workplace difficulties as leading psychosocial stressors.

As in many parts of the US, war veterans often return home with severe depression and other mental or physical disabilities, often coupled with the acute crisis of not being able to find employment. Suicide while on active duty has also reached all-time highs during the recent wars in the Middle East. In 2012, suicides eclipsed combat deaths in Afghanistan.

Another factor in the higher suicide rate is the

increasingly high cost of living, making it more difficult to make ends meet.

In 2014, San Diego's cost of living was 30 percent above the national average and the median home value was well over double the national average. The City of San Diego states on its web site, "Currently, the median income for a family of four in San Diego is \$63,400. Utilizing [the Housing and Urban Development's] definition, affordable housing for a low-income family (household earning up to 80 percent of San Diego area median income), would be an apartment renting for about \$1,500 per month or a home priced under \$225,000." The city states the median price of a home in San Diego is more than \$500,000.

According to the 2013 Annual Homeless Assessment Report by HUD, San Diego has the third-largest chronically homeless population in the nation, or 2,531 individuals. The city has the third-largest homeless veteran population, 1,486, second only to New York City, with 3,547, and Los Angeles, with 6,291. More than 90 percent of homeless in San Diego are unsheltered, also the third highest in nation. On any given night, there are around 5,000 homeless on the streets.

There have been numerous studies on the impact of the increasingly high cost of living in the region. The non-profit Center on Policy Initiatives (CPI) published a study titled "Making Ends Meet 2014—When Wages Fail to Meet Basic Costs of Living in San Diego County." The WSWs has previously reported this study, which highlighted the fact that 300,000 households in the county, or 38 percent, do not generate enough money to meet their basic needs. These needs are categorized as housing, childcare, food, transportation, health care, taxes and miscellaneous.

The Public Policy Institute of California generated the study "California Poverty Measure," which takes into account the high cost of living and anti-poverty programs such as CalWORKS (cash aid and services) and CalFRESH, (Food Stamps), when estimating poverty. While the Official Poverty Measure of the US Census puts the number of workers living in poverty in San Diego at 14.9 percent, the CPM study found that the poverty rate based on the alternative measure is actually 22.7 percent. The study reveals that almost one in four San Diegans live in poverty, while many more border the threshold.

Numerous studies have pointed to connections between the economy and suicide. Historically, the highest suicide rates in the US were experienced during the Great Depression. Recent reports show that the greatest increases in the suicide rate have been in the working age population, whereas in the past, suicide rates were highest among the elderly population.

The increase in suicides among the working age population is not unique to San Diego. According to a report from the Centers for Disease Control in May 2013, "From 1999 to 2010, the age-adjusted suicide rate for adults aged 35-64 years in the United States increased significantly by 28.4 percent."

The report notes, "Possible contributing factors for the rise in suicide rates among middle-aged adults include the recent economic downturn (historically, suicide rates tend to correlate with business cycles, with the higher rates observed during times of economic hardship)."

The sharp growth in suicides in San Diego is one expression of the deepening economic crisis, in California and throughout the country.



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