

Sharp rise in US suicide rate

Eighty percent increase among middle-aged white women

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The suicide rate in the United States has increased sharply since the beginning of the current century, according to federal data released Friday by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The increase is led by a particularly sharp rise in suicide among middle-aged white people, especially women.

The study by the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics follows recent reports documenting a decline in life expectancy among whites and sharp increases in lifespan divergences between rich and poor in America. As with life expectancy, the incidence of suicide is a key barometer of the health of a society. The rise in the rate at which people choose to take their own lives is yet another indication of the social crisis gripping America.

The new data shows that the age-adjusted suicide rate in the US jumped 24 percent between 1999 and 2014, from 10.5 per 100,000 people to 13 per 100,000 people. The figures show a 1.0 percent annual increase in suicide between 1999 and 2006 and a 2 percent yearly rise from 2007 to 2014. In total, 42,773 people died from suicide in 2014 compared to 29,199 in 1999.

The accelerated rise in the suicide rate from 2007 to 2014 coincides with the Great Recession and its aftermath and demonstrates the tragic impact of economic distress on significant layers of the population. Other contributing factors cited by the study's authors include rising drug addiction and overdoses, growing divorce rates among older Americans, increased social isolation and a health care system ill-equipped to deal with mental health issues and suicide prevention.

Over the period of the study, the suicide rate for women aged 45-64 jumped by 63 percent and by 43 percent for men in the same age range. White middle-aged women had a shocking 80 percent increase in

suicide during this period, three to four times higher than for females in other racial and ethnic groups.

Suicide rates for non-Hispanic black females rose by 0.8 percent among women 45-64; the rate for Hispanic women in this age group rose by 0.7 percent. Non-Hispanic black males were the only racial and ethnic group of either sex to have a lower suicide rate in 2014 than in 1999, declining by 8 percent.

The suicide rate in the American Indian and Alaska Native population surged from 1999 to 2014, rising by 90 percent for women and 38 percent for men. Among this group, 188 women and 348 men took their own lives in 2014.

Suicides among men were still more than three times the rate among women in 2014, but the study shows that the gap between the genders is closing. The higher rate among men is in part attributed to a higher suicide success rate through the use of firearms, fatal jumps and other methods.

Although based on a small number of suicides when compared to other age groups (150 in 2014), the suicide rate for females aged 10-14 had the largest percentage increase, tripling from 0.5 per 100,000 in 1999 to 1.5 per 100,000 in 2014. The suicide rate increased for women in all age groups except those 75 and above, where it declined by 11 percent.

Suicide rates for males were also higher in 2014 than in 1999 for all age groups under 75 years. However, despite an 8 percent decline for men 75 and older, this age group saw the highest rate of suicide in 2014, with 38.8 per 100,000, or 3,106 male seniors, taking their own lives.

The data shows that from 1999 to 2014, the percentages of suicides involving firearms and poisoning declined, while those involving suffocation increased. For both males and females, about one in

four suicides in 2014 was attributable to suffocation, which includes hanging, self-strangulation and other methods of asphyxia. Experts note that such suicides are difficult to prevent as almost all people have the means to carry them out.

Poisoning was the most common method of suicide for women in 2014, making up about one-third of all female suicides. Poisoning agents include prescription opioids, heroin and other toxic substances. While accidental overdoses from opioids have skyrocketed in recent years, purposeful fatal overdoses have also increased.

The most frequent “other” suicide methods for females in 2014 were falls (2.8 percent) and drowning (1.4 percent). For males, “other” methods included falls (2.2 percent) and cutting or piercing (1.9 percent).

According to the CDC data, 33,113 people committed suicide in 2014. Suicide is one of the 10 leading causes of death for Americans. While death rates for major killers such as some cancers and heart disease have seen a long-term decline in recent decades, the suicide rate is rising precipitously.

Psychiatric conditions--including depression, bipolar disorder and schizophrenia--as well as other chronic medical problems undeniably play a role in suicide. The lack of access to high quality, affordable medical care leads to isolation and marginalization for increasing numbers of those in need of counseling and treatment.

The intersection of these very real medical and mental health issues with the economic devastation faced by millions in 21st century America is pushing increasing numbers of people over the brink. While the Obama administration declared economic “recovery” from the recession in mid-2009, the reality is starkly different for the vast majority of Americans today.

The new CDC study does not break down the incidence of suicide by income level, but its victims are undoubtedly predominantly poor, working class and lower middle class, similar to those in recent studies on US life expectancy.

America is a society in which growing numbers of people survive on low-wage, part-time, temporary and contingent jobs, often holding down two or more jobs to make ends meet. Working families are burdened by soaring medical costs and rising mortgage or rent payments. Many college graduates are saddled with

debt and unable to find secure and decent-paying work. Veterans suffer from post-traumatic stress syndrome. Retirees are unable to survive on paltry Social Security benefits. Millions have been driven out of the labor market and subsist at the margins of society.

This reality does not enter into the current presidential campaign debate. While “democratic socialist” Bernie Sanders rails against the “billionaire class,” the main aim of his campaign is to divert growing anti-capitalist sentiment among workers and young people back into the confines of the Democratic Party. A longtime ally of the Democrats and defender of capitalism, he has pledged to support the Democratic frontrunner, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, a personification of militarism and corruption, should she secure the nomination.

Billionaire businessman Donald Trump, the likely Republican candidate, promotes a fascistic and anti-working class agenda, scapegoating immigrants and Muslims. None of the candidates of the political establishment have answers to the economic and social crisis and the personal toll it takes on working people and youth.



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