

Suicides up sharply among US middle school children

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In a chilling new index of social despair, a report published on Thursday indicates that American children from 10 through 14 are now more likely to die from suicide than from car accidents.

In 2014, the last year for which data is available, 425 children between the ages of 10 and 14 killed themselves, as opposed to 384 children who died in car accidents, according to a chart released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on its Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR).

The chart, based on a CDC report published in April, shows an increase in suicides in the 10-14 age group from 1.25 deaths per 100,000 in 1999 to 2.25 in 2014, while the death rate for the same cohort over the same period from motor vehicle accidents declined. The two lines on the chart intersect in 2013.

The April CDC survey found that more boys killed themselves than girls—275 versus 150. But the rate of increase over the period of study was much higher among girls—a threefold increase versus an increase of about one-third for boys. For all children ages 10-14, suicide is now the second-leading cause of death, according to the CDC, after the combined category “unintentional injury,” which includes car wrecks and other forms of accidental death. “Homicide” is fifth on the list, with 156 American children murdered in 2014.

Tellingly, the entire increase in the suicide rate took place after 2007, the year it hit its lowest point in the period of study, at .9 deaths per 100,000 children. Then, from the onset of the Great Recession until 2014, the suicide rate more than doubled, to 2.1 deaths per 100,000 kids.

The CDC did not offer explanations for the increase, but it is noteworthy that there has been a parallel increase in child poverty during the same years. According to Robert D. Putnam, professor of public

policy at Harvard and author of *Our Kids*, a study of the impact of social inequality on American children, the data on the increasing suicide rate is “part of the larger emerging pattern of evidence of the links between poverty, hopelessness and health.”

To cite one example, Columbia University’s National Center for Children in Poverty has found that the percentage of children ages 12-17 living in poor and low income families increased by over 14 percent between 2008 and 2014, with nearly 10 million of America’s 24 million adolescents living in low-income households by the end of that period. “Research is clear that poverty is the single greatest threat to children’s well-being,” the NCCP web site states.

The increased suicide rate among 10-14 year-olds from 2007 also corresponds to a similar increase within the entire population, which has gone up by more than 2 percent per year since 2006, according to the same CDC report published in April. The overall suicide rate in the US in 2014 stood at a 30-year high—with sharp increases in every age group except for the elderly. In 2014, 42,773 Americans killed themselves, up from 29,199 in 1999.

The new CDC report on increased suicide among children follows publication of a 2015 study by Princeton economists Angus Deaton and Anne Case that found mortality rates rapidly increasing among low-income, middle-aged white Americans—an increase attributable in large measure to more suicide, alcohol and drug-related deaths. The death rate for whites with no more than a high school education, ages 45 to 54, increased by 134 deaths per 100,000 people from 1999 to 2014.

CDC epidemiologist Dr. Alex Crosby has studied the historical relationship between economic crisis and the suicide rate as far back as the Great Depression, when

the number of suicides reached its all-time high. “There was a consistent pattern,” he told the *New York Times* in April. “When the economy got worse, suicides went up, and when it got better, they went down.”

No doubt other factors are at play in the growth of the child suicide rate. Life for American children is increasingly stressful, even beyond the immediate economic pressures that their families face. Educational “reform” under the George W. Bush and Barack Obama administrations has resulted in schools increasing standardized testing and emphasizing math and science “STEM” curriculum while rolling back recess, recreation, art, music and gym classes, which served as vehicles of self-expression and release for previous generations of American children.

There is also a dearth of funding for juvenile mental health services and suicide prevention. The US government finds endless money to conduct wars all over the world—with all of the unquantifiable impact that the resulting mood of violence and fear must have on children. It spent some \$600 billion on the military in 2015. On the other hand, federal funding for suicide prevention at the National Institutes of Health stood at only \$25 million in 2016—about the equivalent of four US Abrams tanks.



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