Mental health, substance abuse, life stresses and economic despair fuel crisis

US suicides increased by 25 percent from 1999 to 2016

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Suicide rates increased by 25 percent across the United States over the two decades ending in 2016. According to research published Thursday by the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 25 states experienced a rise in suicides of more than 30 percent.

The report follows the release the previous week by the CDC of a study showing a rise in deaths between 2013 and 2016 among US children and teens aged 10-19. While deaths in this age group declined between 1999 and 2013, from 2013 to 2016 the death rate, as well as the total number of deaths, increased by a shocking 12 percent.

Taken together, these two reports paint a picture of an immense social crisis confronting the American population. Increasing numbers of people, both young and old, are choosing to take their own lives in the face of personal crises, mental health issues, substance abuse and economic despair.

Using data from the National Vital Statistics System for 50 states and the District of Columbia, the CDC researchers analyzed suicide rates for people 10 years and older from 1999 through 2016. The circumstances surrounding suicides were also compared for 2015 in the 27 states with complete data participating in the CDC's National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS).

The CDC studied six consecutive three-year periods from 1999 to 2016 to calculate the number of suicides per 100,000 persons per year. While overall the US experienced a 25 percent rise in the suicide rate, individual state increases ranged from a 6 percent increase in Delaware to a nearly 58 percent increase in North Dakota. An estimated 45,000 American lives were lost to suicide in 2016 alone.

This dramatic increase over almost two decades shows that, despite government claims of the end of the Great Recession in mid-2009, increasing numbers of people are facing personal and financial hardships that are driving them to take their own lives.

More than half of those who died by suicide had not been diagnosed with a mental health condition. Of the top 10 causes of death in the US, suicide is one of three that have increased recently, the other two being Alzheimer's disease and drug overdoses.

According to NVDRS data for 2015, the top three methods of suicide were firearms (48.5 percent), hanging/strangulation/suffocation (28.9 percent), and poisoning—drugs, alcohol and other substances (14.7 percent). Of substances causing death, opioids accounted for 31.4 percent; antidepressants, 26.6 percent; benzodiazepines, 20.8 percent; and antipsychotics, 7.3 percent. Of the 53.6 percent of people who were tested for alcohol after their suicides, 40.6 percent tested positive.

The age group showing the largest number of suicides in 2015 were those aged 45 to 64. Men accounted for more than three-quarters of suicide deaths, and whites accounted for 83.6 percent. These figures reinforce the findings of research by Princeton University economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton in 2017 that found that the rising death rate for white, middle-aged, working-class Americans, predominantly males, was being driven by "deaths of despair ," those due to drug overdoses, complications from alcohol use, and suicide.

Of those who committed suicide in 2015 and had a current diagnosed mental health condition, 75.2 percent suffered from depression. This was following by anxiety disorder, 16.8 percent; bipolar disorder, 15.2 percent; schizophrenia, 5.4 percent; and post-traumatic stress disorder, 4.5 percent.

The CDC studied relationship problems and losses leading to suicide. While such problems are considered "personal," the causes are invariably social and economic. Two-fifths of those committing suicide in 2015 had suffered from some type of relationship problem or loss. These included

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problems with an intimate partner, being the perpetrator or victim of interpersonal violence, arguments, family problems, and death or suicide of a family member or friend.

Other precursors of suicide include life stresses faced by millions of working-class Americans on a daily basis. This included legal problems, physical health problems, job-related stress, financial problems, eviction or loss of home, school problems, incarceration, or recent release from a hospital, mental health or substance abuse treatment facility.

Those succumbing to desperation and committing suicide are the victims of a society that devalues life and sees workers and youth as a source of profit, no matter the personal suffering and loss. Their tragic stories appear frequently in the news.

* Since the beginning of the year, five taxi or livery drivers in New York City have committed suicide due to income losses caused by competition from ride-sharing companies such as Uber and Lyft. The latest apparent suicide was Mein Chow, 56, a Yellow Cab driver whose body was found floating the East River near the Brooklyn bridge May 30.

* In late March, Carlos Borroto, 26, became the fourth prisoner at Hudson Country Corrections and Rehabilitation Center in Kearny, New Jersey, to commit suicide since June 2017. He had been housed at the jail for less than 48 hours and told police who arrested him on open warrants that he wanted to "jump off a bridge" and reported having mental health issues.

* On July 28, 2017, Glenn Scarapelli, 53, and his wife, Patricia Colant, 50, jumped to their deaths from a building in mid-town Manhattan. The couple explained in their suicide notes that they "cannot live with" their "financial reality." The night before they were seen removing their belongings from their home and putting them on the curb, a sign they may have been evicted.

* In May 2017, there were two reported suicides of people in the custody of US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Jean Jiménez-Joseph, 27, a Panamanian national, held in detention center in Stewart County, Georgia, was found unresponsive with a bedsheet around his neck. He had been isolated in solitary confinement for 19 days.

* Osmar Epifanio Gonzalez-Gadba, 32, from Nicaragua, was rushed to the hospital from Adelanto Detention Facility in California last May after being found hanging from a bedsheet around his neck in his cell. He died from heart failure caused by asphyxiation six days later. He had been detained for over five months.

* In November 2016, a distraught Amazon worker leaped off the rooftop of Amazon's Seattle headquarters in a suicide attempt. The unidentified worker was hospitalized in critical condition after amazingly surviving the 12-story fall. Before trying to take his own life, the worker reportedly sent an email to Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos criticizing the way the company handled his request to transfer to a different department.

The CDC's proposed solutions for what can only be described as a suicide crisis are predictable and limited. They point to the necessity of identifying those who are suicidal and urging them to seek treatment. They also advocate the need for broader access to treatment for mental health services. And they call for reducing access to lethal means, especially firearms, among persons at risk for suicide.

While it is clear that access to affordable mental health care is woefully inadequate in the US, mental health and rehabilitation beds are being cut in state after state. At the same time, despite the opioid catastrophe, pharmaceutical companies continue to pump addictive drugs into neighborhoods, particularly those in the poorest regions ravaged by poverty and unemployment.

Growing social inequality and poverty are reflected in working-class households across America, creating conditions where household budgets are strained, inevitably fueling family crises and straining relationships, leading to arguments, violence and despair, leading potentially to suicide.

As with the report on teenage suicide, there has been no outcry from the Democratic Party over the recent CDC report. The Democrats are complicit with the Trump administration in its war on Medicaid, food stamps, and other social programs, as well as the attacks on immigrants. They put up no serious opposition to Trump's multitrillion-dollar tax cut for corporations and the rich.

As they have recommended with school shootings, they will issue the inevitable calls for gun control and limiting access to firearms for those who are suicidal. But the Democrats have provided the key votes to fund the Pentagon's record $700 billion budget and secured the confirmation of black-site torture administrator Gina Haspel to head the CIA. It is the ruling elite and its political representatives that serve as the ultimate role models for violence, whether through war or self-inflicted.

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