

“Deaths of despair” continue to soar

US deaths from alcohol, drugs and suicide at all-time high

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More than 150,000 Americans died from alcohol and drug-induced fatalities and suicide in 2017. This is more than twice as many as in 1999 and the highest number since recordkeeping began in that year. This skyrocketing rate of so-called deaths of despair was confirmed in a new analysis released this week by Trust for America’s Health (TFAH) and Well Being Trust (WBT).

TFAH and WBT analyzed data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) between 2016 and 2017 and found that the national rate for deaths due to alcohol, drugs and suicide increased 6 percent over that year, from 43.9 deaths per 100,000 to 46.6 deaths per 100,000. While the rate of increase is lower than in the previous two years, it is still higher than the 4 percent average annual increase since 1999.

The new analysis provides insight into the CDC’s findings last year that showed a drop in life expectancy from 78.7 years to 78.6 years, the third consecutive year-on-year decline. In the years since the 2008 financial crisis many workers and their families have confronted an unprecedented crisis of social misery, which is literally cutting life out from under them.

Certain groups of Americans have been hardest hit by the “deaths of despair” examined in the new analysis:

- Ages 35–54: The rate of death from alcohol, drugs and suicide was 72.4 per 100,000. This was a 35 percent increase over 2007 figures.
- Males of all ages: A death rate of 68.2 deaths per 100,000 was found among men.
- Regional disparities: West Virginia, with 81 deaths per 100,000, and New Mexico, with 77, had the highest rates of “deaths of despair” among the 50 US states.

Death by suicide

The suicide rate in 2017 was 4 percent higher than in 2016, rising from 13.9 deaths per 100,000 to 14.5 deaths per 100,000. In 2017, 47,200 Americans died as a result of suicide. Deaths by suicide were particularly high among males (22.9 per 100,000), whites (16.6 per 100,000) and people living in rural areas (19.4 per 100,000)

Over the past decade suicide rates increased by 22 percent. Suffocation and hanging suicides have risen by 42 percent since 2008, while firearm suicides saw a 22 percent increase. These methods are often chosen by suicide victims over less violent means because they are more likely to result in death.

One of the most disturbing trends over the last decade has been the rise in deaths by children ages 1–17. Although suicide deaths in 2017 were still lower than for other age groups, at 2.4 per 100,000, they have risen by 16 percent since 2016. Over the last decade, 12,660 youth under the age of 17 took their own lives, according to the CDC.

Suicide rates over the past decade have also increased proportionally more among blacks (30 percent rise) and Latinos (36 percent) than among other racial and ethnic groups.

Research published by the CDC last year showed that the overall suicide rate increased by 25 percent across the US over the two decades ending in 2016. These figures paint a picture of a social crisis driving increasing numbers of people, both young and old, to take their own lives in the face of personal crises, mental health issues, substance abuse and economic despair.

In 2017, 35,800 Americans died of alcohol-induced

causes. The TFAH/WBT report included deaths from alcohol induced causes, including alcohol poisoning, liver and other diseases. It did not include alcohol-related vehicle accidents, violence or accidental fatalities.

Alcohol-induced deaths rose 2 percent in 2017 over 2016, the smallest increase since 2008–2009. The alcohol death rate has increased by 38 percent since 2008. Alcohol-related deaths were highest among males (16.2 per 100,000), whites (12.2 per 100,000), adults ages 55–74 (26.4 per 100,000) and in rural areas (13 per 100,000).

People 55–74, who should be enjoying their retirement, instead are abusing alcohol in record numbers. Those 18–34—who should be gainfully employed, studying or embarking on new careers—have seen a 69 percent rise in alcohol-related deaths over the past decade, as they suffer through unemployment and layoffs and drown in college debt.

Drug deaths

The synthetic opioids fentanyl and carfentanil are 50 to 100 times and 10,000 times more potent than morphine, respectively. Natural/semisynthetic opioids include hydrocodone, oxycodone, morphine and heroin.

Two decades ago, synthetic opioids were responsible for less than 10 percent of all drug deaths in the US. In 2017, they accounted for 38 percent of all drug deaths, with an average of 547 Americans succumbing to opioid overdose deaths *every week*.

The synthetic opioid crisis has taken its toll on every segment of American society, but has especially hit males (with 12.8 deaths per 100,000 in 2017), blacks (8.6 deaths per 100,000), whites (9.5 deaths per 100,000), adults ages 18–54 (15.2 deaths per 100,000) and those living in metropolitan areas.

A recent study showed that opioid overdose death rates among US teens and children have tripled over the past 17 years. The study, published online in JAMA Network Open, found that young children died from either accidentally ingesting narcotics or from intentional poisoning. Teens more often died from unintentional overdoses, using prescription painkillers found in their homes or drugs bought on the streets.

The Northeast region had the highest opioid mortality rate in 2017 (15.7 deaths per 100,000), followed by the Midwest (12.1 deaths per 100,000). Drug deaths in the

Midwest, which includes the Rust Belt ravaged by industrial decline, saw a 122 percent increase from 2007 to 2017.

The surge in synthetic drug deaths must be laid at the feet of the multibillion-dollar pharmaceutical companies, who have flooded neighborhoods with these potent opioids. Drug companies have pushed prescription narcotics through bribing doctors to prescribe the addictive substances, and by secretly and deliberately increasing their addictive properties.

While politicians of both big business parties have feigned outrage at such practices, they are on the payroll of Big Pharma, receiving millions of dollars from drug company lobbyists. In 2018 alone, the pharmaceutical and health products industry spent a record \$280 million on their lobbying efforts.

The war against the health and lives of American workers has been a bipartisan conspiracy conducted over decades as part of a conscious strategy to claw back the gains of the working class begun over a century ago.

For the 150,000 Americans who died from alcohol and drug-induced fatalities and suicides in 2017, millions more have been affected—family, friends, co-workers. But for politicians in Congress and pharmaceutical CEOs this devastating toll is seen as the “cost of doing business.”

The US health care crisis—exemplified by these “deaths of despair” and falling life-expectancy—is a true national emergency, in contrast to the “national emergency” on the Southern US border fabricated by Donald Trump and his fascistic advisers.

The epidemic of alcohol-, drug- and suicide-related deaths is a social crisis that requires a socialist response. Such social misery cannot be battled under conditions where the health and welfare of the vast majority is subjugated to the private wealth of the pharmaceutical and insurance companies and giant healthcare chains. These capitalist enterprises must be expropriated, transformed into public utilities and run on the basis of social need, not profit.



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