

Deaths of despair and suicides in the US at historic levels

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Suicide and deaths of despair have reached historic levels in the United States, according to the latest data from the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). There were a record high of 49,369 suicide deaths in 2022 alone and since 2011, nearly 540,000 individuals have been lost to suicide.

For youths and young adults over ages 10 to 24 years the incidence of suicides in the US in the last two decades has risen from 6.9 per 100,000 to 11 per 100,000, or a harrowing increase of 60 percent. Although the incidence for preteens is much lower overall and has remained stable over the last three years, they are up three-fold from 2007. Since 2011, the percent change for suicide deaths for 12 to 17 has been highest compared to any older age category with a rise of 47.7 percent.

In 2020, suicide was listed as the twelfth leading cause of death overall in the US. Among youth and young adults, it ranked in the top four: it was second in those that were 10 to 14 and 25 to 34 age categories, third for those between 15 and 24, and fourth for individuals 35 to 44. For those between five and nine years of age, the CDC stated it was the tenth leading cause of death.

Dr. Madhukar Trivedi, a professor of psychiatry at UT Southwestern Medical center, warned, “We have begun to see much more concerning data even for preteens. We were all along aware that as soon as 15 is a very high-risk period for teenagers, but I think 10- to 14-year-olds are also now beginning to show signs that we need to pay attention to.”

Much of the increase in suicides have been driven by firearm-related suicides, which account for nearly 27,000 of these cases, or nearly 55 percent. Many of the regions of the country with the highest rates of suicide rates are in the western part of the US. For instance,

Montana and Wyoming have the highest age-adjusted rates at 32 and 32.3 suicides per 100,000.

Kaiser Family Foundation, analyzing the CDC’s WONDER data on the underlying causes of death, noted, “The suicide rate may vary by state due to factors such as demographics, firearm availability (involved in over half of suicides), mental health status, and access to mental health services.” They added, “While the exact cause for the rise in suicides in recent years is unknown, it may reflect, in part, increasing stressors and longstanding unmet mental health needs.”

The current incidence of suicide deaths for young adults and those older are similar, ranging from 17.3 suicides for those over 65 to 18.8 for those between 26 and 44. The implication here is that we are seeing a universal phenomenon affecting all of society.

The epidemic of deaths by suicide is also coinciding with opioid overdose fatalities, which have also reached unprecedented levels. In 2022, close to 110,000 people died from illicit drug use or prescription opioids, up from 106,000 in 2021. The last two decades have seen a more than five-fold rise in such deaths.

Eight states—Texas, Oklahoma, Alabama, Nevada, Wyoming, Washington, Oregon, and Maine—and New York City have seen a more than 10 percent surge in overdose deaths. Washington state led the country with a 24 percent jump in such fatalities.

Meanwhile, life insurance actuaries are finding that more people are continuing to die at alarming rates, even more than before the pandemic, that cannot be accounted for by COVID. For instance, the Society of Actuaries Research Institute found there was a 34 percent increase in deaths among working-aged people 35 to 44 in the last quarter of 2022.

Many of them are working-aged people who are in the prime of their life who are suffering deaths from

cardiac and neurological disorders that could be attributable to Long COVID and its complications that include anxiety, depression, and despair. However, the CDC and public health agencies are at a loss to explain these statistics, nor is there any apparent urgency on their part to get to the bottom of this crisis.

This phenomenon is not confined to the US. In the UK, deaths among 20- to 44-year-olds in the first quarter of 2023 were similar to the same time frame in 2021, at the peak of the COVID deaths, and above baselines for the years before the pandemic. In Australia, excess deaths in 2022 were 12 percent higher than previous years, with one-third of those deaths considered non-COVID-related.

According to Our World in Data, under the heading of cumulative number of excess deaths in the last 12 months, as of May 21, 2023, the US had over 103,000, Germany had 83,000, France had 17,600, UK had 55,000, Brazil 60,000, Russia 72,000, and Italy 25,650. Given this number of deaths, it would seem each of these countries is facing a full-scale military conflict. At best, the actuarial reports speculate on what the immediate causes may be, such as drug overdose or delay in access to health facilities.

It is worth recalling the comments from January 2022 by Scott Davison, CEO at one of Indiana's life insurance companies: "We are seeing, right now, the highest death rates we have seen in the history of this business—not just at OneAmerica. The data is consistent across every player in that business."

An important study from Boston University, titled "Missing Americans: Early death in the United States—1933 to 2021," provides context to these statistics. When compared to other similar high-income nations, since the mid-1980s, mortality rates in the US began to outpace its peers.

As the report noted, "The current US mortality disadvantage is unprecedented in modern times: there were more 'missing Americans' in 2021 than at any other point going back to 1933. The United States had lower death rates than other wealthy nations in the 1930s through 1950s and similar deaths rates in the 1960s and 1970s. US deaths rates began to diverge in the 1980s, and this divergence has accelerated in the 21st century."

Between 1980 and 2019, the US experienced 11 million excess deaths above what it would have had it

kept in line with the weighted average of 21 other wealthy nations. By 2019, half of these excess deaths compared to other wealth nations occurred in persons younger than 65. During the first two years of the pandemic, there were 308,000 excess deaths among those who were 15 to 44 years of age and 635,000 among those 45 to 65 years of age.

The report found that "about half of the missing Americans died before reaching age 65 ... Excess US deaths under 65 doubled between 2000 and 2019 and then increased by an additional two-thirds between 2019 and 2021. During the pandemic, half of all US deaths under 65—and 90 percent of the increase in under-65 mortality since 2019—would have been averted if the United States had the ASMRs [age-specific mortality rates] of its peers."

Although these reports fail to explain these trends, there is no doubt that the intensification of the crisis of capitalism and the assault on the working class in the United State over the last four decades is major factor in culling the youngest and most vigorous in the population. This is a generation that has only ever seen the US at war abroad, with mass impoverishment at home, coupled with repeated bailouts for the rich, and an unending wave of police violence and now the turn to fascistic forms of rule. Their living standards have been devastated and their futures stolen in the pursuit of corporate profits.



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