

Opioid crisis, suicides driving decline in U.S. life expectancy: CDC

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(HealthDay)—Life expectancy in the United States has now declined for

three years in a row, fueled largely by a record number of drug overdose deaths and rising suicide rates, new government statistics show.

"It's really the first time we've seen this multi-year drop" in decades, said Renee Gindi, chief of the Analytic Studies Branch of the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), part of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. She's one of the lead coordinators for the report.

Babies now can expect to live 78.6 years on average, based on 2017 data, according to NCHS researchers.

That's down from 78.7 years in 2015 and 78.9 years in 2014.

There were a total of 2.8 million U.S. deaths in 2017, almost 70,000 more than the [previous year](#), the CDC reported.

"We've been talking about the fact that our children will live less long than we will, and that's clearly coming to pass," said Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association.

Worse, it looks like the trend will continue for at least another year, said Benjamin, who wasn't involved with the research.

"I always tell people one year is interesting, two years is more interesting, and three years is a trend," Benjamin said.

Final longevity numbers for 2014 through 2016 were published Sept. 20 in *Health, United States, 2017*, an annual report produced by the NCHS. The new numbers take that through 2017.

Life expectancy at birth decreased by 0.2 years between 2014 and 2015,

which was the first drop seen since 1993. It then decreased another 0.1 years between 2015 and 2016.

The opioid epidemic likely plays a large role in the continuing decline, the researchers said, with a record 70,000 deaths linked to drug overdoses in 2017 alone.

The age-adjusted death rate for drug overdose in the United States increased 72 percent between 2006 and 2016, to stand at 19.8 by 2016. It then rose by another 9.6 percent in 2017, and now stands at nearly 22 deaths per 100,000.

There's also been a startling increase in the suicide rate. Between 2006 and 2017, the age-adjusted suicide death rate increased 23 percent, from 11 to 14 deaths per 100,000 people.

Suicides have been increasing in particular among military veterans and children, Benjamin said.

"We don't understand all of the root causes of that, but we certainly are in a much more stressful society," Benjamin said. "We have a huge population of people coming back from military service and [they] aren't necessarily getting the services they need to deal with mental health issues and traumatic brain injury."

Chronic liver disease and cirrhosis also appears to play a part in the decline in life expectancy.

Death rates for [chronic liver disease](#) increased by an average 7.9 percent per year between 2006 and 2016 among men aged 25 to 34, the report found. Among women in the same age group, this increase averaged 11.4 percent per year.

This could have been caused by a number of factors, including alcohol use or hepatitis infection, Gindi said.

The report also noted increases in the rates of death caused by Alzheimer's disease and septicemia, or blood poisoning.

For decades, life expectancy increased based on public health measures people now take for granted, Gindi said—modern sewers, clean water, vaccines.

More recently, a focus on caring for chronic diseases kept life expectancy growing.

"When we acknowledged that chronic diseases played a larger role, we were able to start preventing and diagnosing and treating these in ways we hadn't been able to before, particularly heart disease and cancer," Gindi said.

But gains in life expectancy due to advances against heart disease and cancer have been flattening, Benjamin said, while these other causes of [death](#) have been increasing.

"People were predicting this would be because of the obesity epidemic," Benjamin said of the downward trend in [life expectancy](#). "Not to say that doesn't play a role, but suicides and drug overdoses have eclipsed that in many ways and it's really a driving factor."

More information: Renee Gindi, Ph.D., chief, Analytic Studies Branch, U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Georges Benjamin, M.D., executive director, American Public Health Association; Sept. 20, 2018, *Health, United States, 2017*

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on [life expectancy](#) in the United States.

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