

National suicide rate shows two-year decline, but not all Americans are benefiting

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When the pandemic lockdown led to high unemployment numbers and strict social distancing measures, public health experts warned of a coming mental health crisis. However, recent provisional data from the

National Vital Statistics System published by JAMA Network showed that suicide deaths dropped 5.6% in the last year—from 47,511 in 2019 to 44,834 in 2020, providing researchers with a reason for "cautious optimism."

The decrease would be the second in consecutive years—the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported the first drop last December, a total of 833 fewer deaths from the previous year. It was the first decline since 1999.

But while the preliminary numbers point toward a shift in the right direction, it's important to recognize that it "may not be a decrease for all groups," said Mary Ann Murtha, director of the Philadelphia area chapter of the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. The pandemic has had a disproportionate effect on some populations, she said.

"When the CDC starts to analyze the data on age, gender, race, [social determinants](#) like income levels, and did the community have the most appropriate access to health care, we will have a better view," she said.

Preliminary studies of communities in Illinois, Connecticut, and Maryland have found a rise in suicides among Black Americans and other people of color, compared to previous years. Communities of color have borne the brunt of the pandemic—Hispanic, Black, and Native Americans are more likely to be hospitalized and to die from COVID-19 than white Americans. They have also experienced more financial hardships; reported jobless rates in February were 9.9% and 8.5% for Black and Hispanic workers, respectively, but only 5.6% for white workers.

"We're not yet sure how that will translate into [suicide](#) data," said Rhonda Boyd, a clinical psychologist at the Children's Hospital of

Philadelphia. "Communities of color also have trouble accessing mental health treatment, so we don't know how these groups—Black, Latinx, Asian, and Indigenous Americans—will be affected. Hopefully more data will come out and we'll get a better picture."

Suicide also affects children, teens, and [young adults](#), accounting for the second-leading cause of death among Americans ages 10 to 34. Boyd pointed out that in the past few years, suicide rates among Black youth have increased. It's impossible to know the long-term consequences of the pandemic on children's mental health right now, she said.

"Kids' brains are still developing until they're 25," Boyd said. "We don't know the impact of those missed social interactions and what they will mean in the long term. So in the meantime, we have to make sure we're taking care of our youth because they're our future. It's very important to stop the intergenerational transmission of trauma and mental health issues."

Still, the declines are encouraging for [suicide prevention](#) organizations, said Murtha.

"We are definitely starting to feel that the work that is being done around suicide prevention in the community is starting to be recognized," she said. "Things like putting guidance in place, offering strategies and looking for warning signs when someone is circling, educational programming we offer through workplaces and schools, that's how we break the stigma. With the pandemic came a lot of open and honest dialogue amongst our communities and with each other, and heightened awareness at the national level."

And although the days of social distancing may be coming to an end soon as vaccination appointments are now available to anyone over age 16, it's important to continue to reach out and check on each other,

Murtha said.

"We have to remind each other that it's OK to not be OK," she said. "It's OK to reach out for help. When we go back to normal, we still have to ask open-ended caring, loving questions, like, 'How can I help you? How are you feeling?' We still have to make sure everybody is OK."

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