

US deaths fell this year, but not to pre-COVID levels

December 14 2022, by Mike Stobbe



A visitor sits on a bench to look artist Suzanne Brennan Firstenberg's "In America: Remember," a temporary art installation made up of white flags to commemorate Americans who have died of COVID-19, on the National Mall in Washington on Oct. 2, 2021. The number of U.S. deaths has dropped in 2022 after soaring for two years during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it still is much higher than the levels before the coronavirus hit. Credit: AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana, File

The number of U.S. deaths dropped this year, but there are still more than there were before the coronavirus hit.

Preliminary data—through the first 11 months of the year—indicates 2022 will see fewer deaths than the previous two COVID-19 pandemic years. Current reports suggest deaths may be down about 3% from 2020 and about 7% vs. 2021.

U.S. deaths usually rise year-to-year, in part because the nation's population has been growing. The pandemic accelerated that trend, making last year the deadliest in U.S. history, with more than 3.4 million dying. If [current trends](#) continue, this year will mark the first annual decline in deaths since 2009.

It will be months before [health officials](#) have a full tally. The October and November numbers are not yet complete and a late-December surge could change the final picture, said Farida Ahmad, who leads mortality surveillance at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

If the decline does hold, it will still be a far cry from where the nation was before the coronavirus appeared. This year's count is likely to end up at least 13% higher than what it was in 2019.

"We're (still) definitely worse off than we were before the pandemic," said Amira Roess, a George Mason University professor of epidemiology and global health.



The Navy hospital ship USNS Comfort passes lower Manhattan on its way to docking in New York on March 30, 2020. It's expected to bolster a besieged health care system by treating non-coronavirus patients while hospitals treat people with COVID-19. The number of U.S. deaths has dropped in 2022 after soaring for two years during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it still is much higher than the levels before the coronavirus hit. Credit: AP Photo/Seth Wenig, File

Once again, most of the annual change is due to the ebb and flow of COVID-19, which has killed more than 1,080,000 Americans since it first was recognized in the U.S. in early 2020.

This year started off horribly, with about 73,000 COVID deaths in January alone—the third deadliest month from COVID-19 since the pandemic began. For 2022, "the bulk of mortality was concentrated

during that omicron wave at the beginning of the year," said Iliya Gutin, a University of Texas researcher tracking COVID-19 mortality.

Monthly COVID-19 deaths dropped below 4,000 in April and averaged about 16,000 per month through November. The monthly average for 2021 was more than double that.

COVID-19 will nevertheless end up as the nation's third leading cause of death this year, just as it was in 2020 and 2021—behind the perennial leader, [heart disease](#), and cancer.

Heart disease deaths, which have tended to surge in tandem with COVID-19 deaths, are on track to be down from 2021, Ahmad said. And it's not clear whether the number of cancer deaths will change, based on preliminary data.



A patient arrives in an ambulance cared for by medical workers wearing personal protective equipment due to COVID-19 concerns outside NYU Langone Medical Center on April 13, 2020, in New York. The number of U.S. deaths has dropped in 2022 after soaring for two years during the COVID-19 pandemic, but it still is much higher than the levels before the coronavirus hit. Credit: AP Photo/John Minchillo, File

There may be some relatively good news regarding [drug overdose deaths](#), which hit an all-time high last year. Provisional overdose [death](#) data posted by the CDC on Wednesday—through the first seven months of this year—suggests overdose deaths stopped climbing early this year, around last winter's end.

Also Wednesday, the CDC released its first report on deaths involving long COVID—long-term symptoms after a person has recovered from coronavirus infection. The CDC estimates that about 3,500 deaths from January 2020 through June 2022 involved long COVID. That's about 1% of deaths in which COVID was deemed the underlying or contributing cause.

Experts believe pharmaceutical weapons against the coronavirus have been making a difference. The Commonwealth Fund this week released a modeling study that concluded the U.S. COVID-19 vaccination program prevented more than 3.2 million deaths.

"We all really would expect that the number of deaths—and the number of severe cases—would decrease, due to a combination of immunity from natural infection and vaccination ... and treatment," Roess said.

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