

# One in five suicides involve intimate partner problems, study finds

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One in five suicides involved intimate partner problems, according to a new study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the University of Georgia.

Published in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, the study found that mental health problems; life stressors, such as unemployment and family problems; and recent legal issues were more common among suicides related to intimate partner problems. Intimate partner problems include divorce, separation, romantic breakups, arguments, conflict and [intimate partner violence](#).

"I think people hear the term intimate partner problems and go straight to intimate partner violence. That is a component of intimate partner problems, but it's not just about violence," said Lt. Cmdr. Ayana Stanley, lead author of the study, which grew out of her doctoral research at UGA's College of Public Health. Stanley is a U.S. public health service officer and program coordinator in CDC's Division of Violence Prevention.

"Romantic partners experience other kinds of relationship stressors, such as general hostility, arguments and jealousy," she said. "By sharing resources for seeking help, we send a strong message that every life has value, there is hope, and that seeking help is a sign of strength."

The suicides that did not involve intimate partner problems were more likely to involve individuals who were older on average. And those suicides were more likely to be preceded by physical health problems or crime, such as the person being involved with drug dealing or robbery.

## **Suicide is a leading cause of death among Americans**

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the United States, with more than 48,000 Americans dying by suicide in 2021, according to the CDC.

That's about one death every 11 minutes.

While previous research has shown a connection between suicides and intimate partner problems, the present study is the first to use data from 48 states; Washington, D.C.; and Puerto Rico to examine factors that were associated with intimate partner problem-related suicides.

The study analyzed data from CDC's [National Violent Death Reporting System](#).

The database links information about the "who, when, where and how" from all types of violent deaths across 48 states (plus incomplete data from the remaining states) and provides insights into why they occurred.

It also includes law enforcement interviews with [family members](#), friends and others who knew the victim, in addition to medical examiner reports, death certificates and toxicology reports.

## **Mental health problems common among intimate partner problem-related suicides**

The researchers examined 18 factors organized into three broad categories: health-related issues, for example whether the deceased was experiencing mental health problems or substance misuse; life stressors, including the suicide of a friend or family member, financial problems, and interpersonal violence as either the victim or abuser; and recent serious crimes or legal problems that may have contributed to the suicide.

Of the 402,391 suicides of Americans aged 18 years and older during the study period, 20% involved intimate partner problems. Almost half of those individuals were between the ages of 25 and 44. The majority were white and male with at least a high school education.

These individuals were also significantly more likely to experience [mental health problems](#) than those whose suicides did not involve intimate partner problems. Suicides involving intimate partner problems were also more likely to involve interpersonal violence perpetration and victimization, arguments, [financial problems](#), job problems, family problems and recent legal problems.

Individuals whose suicide did not involve intimate partner problems averaged around age 45. However, 15% of them were 65 or older. Black individuals, women, those with less than a high school education and unmarried individuals were significantly more common in this group as well.

"Understanding the precipitating factors to suicide is key," said Pamela Orpinas, co-author of the study and a professor in UGA's College of Public Health. "They give us an idea of what we can do in terms of prevention."

## **Online prevention resources, systemic change needed to reduce suicide risk factors**

CDC has published a number of resources that can help address the many factors associated with suicide.

These resources can help prevent suicide risk in the first place as well as programs, policies and practices that can help people who may be thinking about suicide or who have attempted. These resources include the Suicide Prevention Resource for Action, a compilation of the best available evidence, and other resources on suicide prevention, mental health and intimate partner violence prevention.

The researchers also suggest upstream, systemic changes that could



reduce certain risk factors such as lack of housing and income instability.

"Programs that strengthen economic support can potentially reduce the risk of intimate partner problem-related [suicides](#)," the study said.

"Strengthening household financial security by providing [unemployment benefits](#), temporary assistance, livable wages, medical benefits, and retirement and disability insurance ... could both reduce tension in an intimate partner relationship and buffer the risk of suicide."

The study was co-authored by Tatiana Aguilar of the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill and Kristin Holland of CDC's Division of Violence Prevention.

**More information:** Ayana R. Stanley et al, Precipitating Circumstances Associated With Intimate Partner Problem–Related Suicides, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2023.03.011](#)

Provided by University of Georgia

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