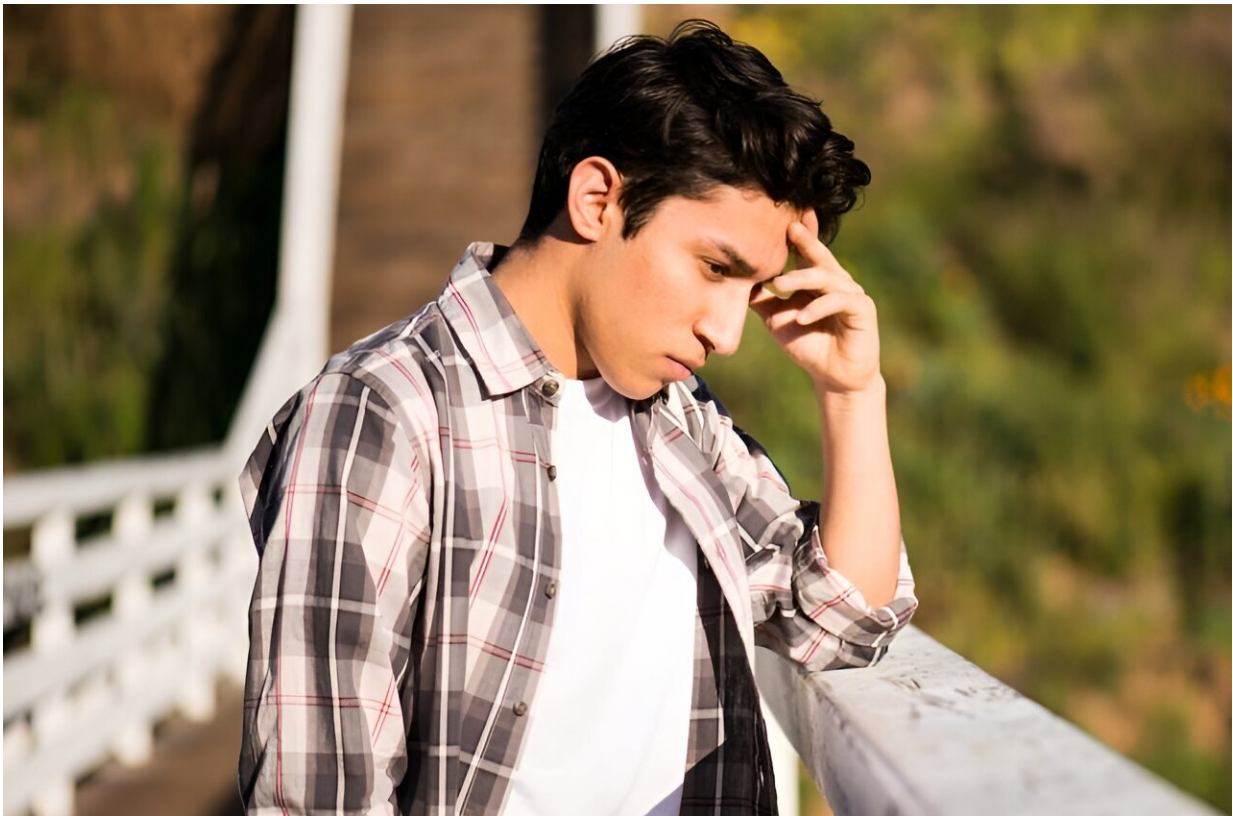


Steady rise in US suicides among adolescents, teens

March 29 2024, by Ernie Mundell



U.S. rates of suicide by all methods rose steadily for adolescents between 1999 and 2020, a new analysis shows.

During those two decades, over 47,000 Americans between the ages 10 and 19 lost their lives to suicide, the report found, and there have been sharp increases year by year.

Girls and minority adolescents have charted especially steep increases in suicides, said a team led by Cameron Ormiston, of the U.S. National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities.

"An overall increasing trend was observed across all demographics," the researchers wrote in a study published March 29 in the journal *JAMA Network Open*.

The findings were based on federal death certificate data from 1999 through 2020.

By race, sex and means of suicide, some troubling trends stood out.

For example, while deaths from drug (or other substance) overdose rose by 2.7% per year between 1999 and 2020 among all adolescents, it rose by 4.5% per year among girls, specifically.

That trend has only accelerated in recent years: Between 2011 and 2020, suicides by overdose jumped 12.6% per year among female adolescents, Ormiston's group reported.

All of this suggests that "adolescents are finding more lethal means of poisonings, contributing to an increase in deaths by suicide," they said.

And while suicides using guns rose 5.3% per year during 1999 to 2020 among boys, it increased even more rapidly (7.8% per year) among girls.

Although older teen boys have traditionally had higher suicide rates than girls, "recent evidence suggests these gaps may be closing as [suicide rates](#)

are increasing more rapidly among female adolescents than male adolescents," the researchers said.

However, it was among minority kids that the most dramatic, troubling increases were seen.

For example, between 2012 and 2020, suicide deaths using firearms jumped 14.5% per year among Black adolescents, with similar trends noted among Hispanic, American Indian/Alaska Native and Asian American adolescents, the study found.

"The recent, rapidly accelerating rates of firearm suicide among Black, Hispanic or Latino, and American Indian and Alaska Native adolescents are concerning," Ormiston's group said.

What's driving the rise in these tragedies?

Dr. Robert Dicker is associate director of child and adolescent psychology for Northwell Health's Zucker Hillside Hospital and Cohen Children's Medical Center in Great Neck, N.Y. Reviewing the findings, he said that, "Sadly, I could say that the results were not surprising."

As to factors driving the trends, Dicker said one obvious culprit is the pressures put on kids by social media.

"As [social media](#) became a primary area of teenage communication, that is when there was an increase in mood disorders, depression and suicide," he noted.

Economic downturns that strained families during the years covered by the data could be another factor, Dicker added. Adolescents are also facing more anxieties over scholastic achievement now than in decades past.

Then there's the increasing political polarization of American society.

"From my readings and from my work with teenagers, a lot of concern has been expressed around the future of our planet and global warming, conflicts between countries, and again the polarization here in the United States," Dicker said. "I think they all add to tremendous stress."

Minority youth are hardest hit, he believes, because of factors such as "systemic racism and cultural disenfranchisement," and the ease of access to guns in some communities.

Too often, guns are stored unsafely at home in white and Black families alike, Ormiston's team noted. That can lead to impulsive decisions by troubled youth, with sometimes fatal consequences.

"Ensuring the parents of at-risk youth are counseled on gun safety and safe storage practices may reduce youth firearm suicide," the study authors said.

Better outreach (for example, school-based suicide prevention programs) and access to mental health counseling could help all adolescents, but especially at-risk minority teens.

For example, "Black youth are often mislabeled as having [behavioral problems](#) rather than requiring [mental health services](#), which can lead to failures in identifying suicide risk and providing adequate care," the researchers said.

The study data only extended to 2020, at the beginning of the pandemic.

Dicker believes things may have only gotten worse in the years since.

"I think the rates of anxiety and depression in youth have increased over

these years," he said. "Suicide attempts have increased in this adolescent population. Visits to emergency departments have increased within this population. So, I can't say for sure, but I think if this study was extended, I think we would see even further worsening."

More information: If you or someone you know is struggling with mental health, reach out for help. Dial or text 988 or visit 988lifeline.org for free, confidential support.

Cameron K. Ormiston et al, Trends in Adolescent Suicide by Method in the US, 1999-2020, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.4427](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2024.4427)

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