

Parental deaths due to guns or drugs harmed nearly 100,000 US kids in 2020: Study

May 6 2024, by Ernie Mundell



Nearly 100,000 U.S. children lost a parent in 2020 to gun violence or

drug overdose, a three-fold rise since 1999, according to a new study.

Overall, these two causes made up nearly a quarter (23%) of parental losses in 2020, almost double the level cited in 1999, according to a team who reported its findings May 4 in the [Journal of the American Medical Association](#) (*JAMA*).

"US youth are at high and increasing risk of experiencing parental [death](#) by drugs or firearms," a team led by Mathew Kiang of the Stanford University School of Medicine concluded.

In the study, Kiang's team noted that, "the U.S. is experiencing dual overlapping public health crises of drug poisoning ... and firearm deaths. Since 1999, more than 1 million residents of the U.S. have died by fatal drug poisonings and more than 750,000 by firearms."

Just how much is all this affecting the nation's children?

To find out, the researchers combed through federal death statistics, fertility data and [population demographics](#) to estimate how many [parents](#) lost their lives to drugs or [gun violence](#) in recent years.

Many of these parents died young: The study found the average age of fatal drug overdose or gun injury to a parent was just 42. Fathers were three times more likely to die from these causes than mothers.

Drug overdose deaths are rising especially fast among people in their 30s or 40s, the researchers noted. Approximately 72,800 kids lost a parent to a [drug overdose](#) in 2020, more than four times the 16,000 children who suffered such a tragedy in 1999.

Deaths to parents stemming from gun violence also rose by 39% during that period, Kiang's team reported. That's significantly higher than the

24% rise in the number of kids who lost a mother or father from other causes during that time.

Black children were three times more likely to lose a parent to drugs or gun violence compared to kids as a whole.

All of this means serious mental harm to more and more American children who are grieving these losses, said Robin Gurwitch, a psychologist and professor at the Duke University School of Medicine.

The shame around having a parent die from drugs or gun violence is part of the problem, she told CNN.

"When it can't be talked about openly and freely, it makes it harder for children to get the support they need," said Gurwitch, who was not involved in the new study.

"For children who hold those things inside, the risk of it leaking out into everything from severe behavior challenges to bereavement disorders to other types of mental health challenges—*anxiety, depression or their own substance abuse—goes way up.*"

More information: Benjamin-Samuel Schlüter et al, Youth Experiencing Parental Death Due to Drug Poisoning and Firearm Violence in the US, 1999-2020, *JAMA* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jama.2024.8391](https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2024.8391)

There's information on helping kids deal with grief at the [Child Mind Institute](#).

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