

US suicide rate increasing: Largest increase seen in middle-aged white women

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The rate of suicide in the United States is increasing for the first time in a decade, according to a new report from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Center for Injury Research and Policy. The increase in the overall suicide rate between 1999 and 2005 was due primarily to an increase in suicides among whites aged 40-64, with white middle-aged women experiencing the largest annual increase. Whereas the overall suicide rate rose 0.7 percent during this time period, the rate among middle-aged white men rose 2.7 percent annually and 3.9 percent among middle-aged women. By contrast, suicide in blacks decreased significantly over the study's time period, and remained stable among Asian and Native Americans. The results are published online at the website of the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* and will be published in the December print edition of the journal.

The researchers also conducted a detailed analysis of suicide methods across specific population groups. While firearms remain the predominant method, the rate of firearm suicides decreased during the study period. Suicide by hanging or suffocation increased markedly with a 6.3 percent annual increase among men, and a 2.3 percent annual increase among women. Hanging/suffocation accounted for 22 percent of all suicides by 2005, surpassing poisoning at 18 percent.

"The results underscore a change in the epidemiology of suicide, with middle-aged whites emerging as a new high-risk group," said study co-author Susan P. Baker, MPH, a professor with the Bloomberg School's Center for Injury Research and Policy. "Historically, suicide prevention programs have focused on groups considered to be at highest risk—teens and young adults of both genders as well as elderly white men. This research tells us we need to refocus our resources to develop prevention programs for men and women in their middle years."

Baker along with colleagues Guoqing Hu, PhD, Holly Wilcox, PhD, Lawrence Wissow, MD, MPH, analyzed data from the Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS) mortality reports, which provides data on deaths according to cause and intent of injury by age, race, gender and state. WISQARS mortality data are based on annual data files of the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

The reasons for the increase in the suicide rate are not fully understood. "While it would be straightforward to attribute the results to a rise in so-called mid-life crises, recent studies find that middle age is mostly a time of relative security and emotional wellbeing," said Baker. "Further research is warranted to explore societal changes that may be disproportionately affecting the middle-aged in this country."

Source: Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health

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