

Understanding suicide

Suicide is a serious public health concern that causes immeasurable pain, suffering and loss to individuals, families and communities nationwide. The causes of suicide are complex and determined by multiple combinations of factors, such as mental illness, substance use, painful losses, exposure to violence and social isolation.

Nearly 50,000 people in the United States die from suicide annually. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) notes this equates to about one person every 11 minutes, exceeding the rate of death from homicide and AIDS combined. More people die by suicide than from automobile accidents.

The suicide rate has been rising over the past decade, with much of the increase driven by suicides in mid-life, where the majority of all suicides in the United States now occur.

After declining in 2019 and 2020, CDC statistics show suicide deaths increased by approximately 5% in the United States in 2021. The provisional estimates released today indicate that suicide deaths further increased in 2022, rising from 48,183 deaths in 2021 to an estimated 49,449 deaths in 2022, an increase of approximately 2.6%. More than half of these deaths occur by use of a firearm.

More men died by suicide than women in 2021; white males accounted for 69.68% of suicide deaths. In 2021, the suicide rates were higher among adults ages 25 to 34 years (19.48 per 100,000) and 75 to 84 years (19.56 per 100,000), with the rate highest among adults ages 85 years or older (22.39 per 100,000).

In 2021, suicide was among the top leading causes of death for people ages 10-64. Suicide was the second leading cause of death for people ages 10-14 and 20-34.

The CDC estimates that 12.3 million American adults seriously thought about suicide, 3.5 million planned a suicide attempt and 1.7 million attempted suicide in 2021.

Suicidal thoughts are also a significant concern. Having serious thoughts of suicide increases the risk of a person making an actual suicide attempt. Among high school students, more than 17% (approximately 2.5 million 9th through 12th graders) have seriously considered suicide, more than 13% have made a suicide plan and more than 8% have attempted suicide.

Alcohol and drug use are second only to depression and other mood disorders as the most frequent risk factors for suicide. Suicide touches all ages, backgrounds and racial and ethnic groups in all parts of the country. However, some populations are at higher risk for suicidal behavior. For example, the emotional toll of a person's suicide can put surviving family, friends and other loved ones at greater risk of dying by suicide.

The Center for Suicide Prevention notes that for decades, researchers have asserted that six people are greatly affected by each suicide death. Research by Dr. Julie Cerel and her team at the University of Kentucky found in 2019 that up to 135 people are affected to some degree by every person lost to suicide. That number includes all people who have known the deceased.

Help is available

There is strong evidence that mental health treatment can effectively reduce the risk of suicide. However, before treatment can be effective, the warning signs of suicide must be recognized. These include:

- Talking about feeling hopeless, worthless, “trapped” or having no reason to keep living
- Making a will, giving away personal possessions or trying to “get affairs in order”
- Researching means to do self-harm, such as how to buy a gun or access dangerous medications
- Sleeping too little or too much
- Eating too little or too much
- Showing signs of despair or having significant mood swings
- Acting agitated, anxious or aggressive
- Avoiding other people, including loved ones; spending more time than usual alone
- Behaving recklessly
- Drinking alcohol or using drugs excessively
- Experiencing a severe life stressor, such as the death of a spouse, the loss of a job or a traumatic event
- Demonstrating or having a history of suicidal behavior or attempts

If you or someone you know is thinking about suicide, call the National Suicide and Crisis Lifeline at 988 or 1-800-273-TALK (8255). If you or someone you know is in an immediate medical crisis, please call 911.

Source: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration