

TOP STORY

Suicide victims getting younger as numbers increase

By Michael Wetzel Staff Writer Aug 12, 2018



Scott Norwood holds a picture of his late daughter, Marlee, as he sits in her bedroom. [JERONIMO NISA/DECATUR DAILY]

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Suicide prevention help

Suicide prevention help

Phone numbers to call if you are having suicidal thoughts:

- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 800-273-8255.

- Crisis Services of North

Scott Norwood's life dramatically changed March 12 when his 13-year-old daughter

"It's been devastating... servant and poet

Sutton's death in... The Centers for... death by suicide





Norwood believes cyber-bullying on social media played a large role his daughter's decision to commit suicide.

He said Marlee had been communicating with two or three people on Snapchat for days leading up to and the morning of her suicide.

He said she was upset following a social media chat the previous week. After her death, he said the Alabama Bureau of Investigation was not able to retrieve the messages from Snapchat.

"The pressures of social media, the kids are exposed to it 24/7," he said. "This is evil stuff. There should be age restrictions on smartphones, which are really mini-computers. We don't allow 10- to 12-year-olds to drive cars because they can't handle the responsibility. But we give them access to everything on the internet, which can be just as deadly, especially for kids who aren't mentally and emotionally mature enough to handle what's out there."

Norwood, Court
distorted picture





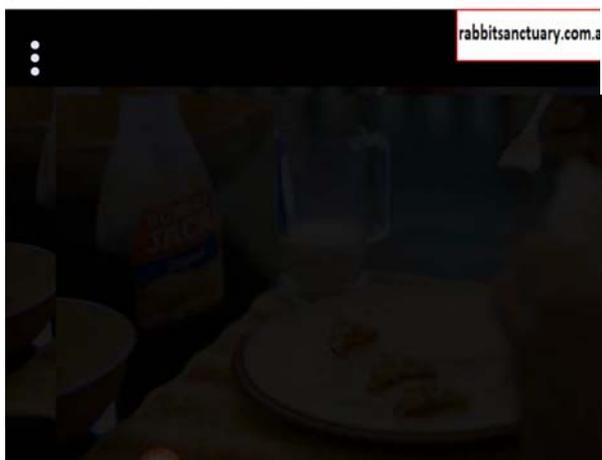
“I believe social media is everybody’s perfect world,” he said. “You see people smiling, on vacation, with their friends. They don’t post their bad moments. Then, take a child who is 12 or 13 seeing this all of the time. They don’t realize it’s not real life, that everybody struggles.”

He added the opioid epidemic has gotten out of control and is costing lives, too.

“I want to make opioid awareness available to our kids,” Norwood said at a political forum in May. “Twenty-five percent of our population is our children, and that 25 percent is our future.”

Law enforcement agencies and crisis counselors agree with Norwood.

“Facebook happy is not real life,” Morgan County Sheriff Ana Franklin said. “Most people don’t show their other side.”



Moulton Police Chief Lyndon McWhorter said young people are being bombarded with pressure from television and the internet, especially social media.

"We would all probably be better if we went back to the days of three channels on TV and one phone in the house," he said.

The suicide numbers locally are up.

Morgan County Coroner Jeff Chunn said he investigated 26 suicides in 2016 and 29 in 2017. Ten of the 2017 suicides occurred in Decatur, according to Decatur Police Department records.

So far in 2018, Chunn said, Morgan County has had 16 people take their lives, including two Aug. 3 and a murder-suicide Aug. 4. Decatur police have reported six this year.

"We've been staying pretty consistent the last couple of years, but I've seen an increase in the past five years," Chunn said. "There is no one reason for someone deciding to take their lives. We're hearing social pressure, mental illness and drug use."

Other experts add failing health, financial pressures, depression and relationship turmoil to the list.

In Lawrence County, Coroner Greg Randolph said he worked 20 suicides in 2017 in the county of 35,000 residents. So far in 2018, Randolph said the county has had 16 suicide deaths, including five in a 10-day period in March.

"Our numbers could be higher," he said. "They don't include drug overdose deaths."
Drug overdose

He said in 1995 there were fewer than 10 suicides and two drug overdoses.

Annual records



Nearby Madison County had 61 suicides in 2017, according to the coroner's records. That's an average of one every six days.

Chunn said in the early spring of 2016, Morgan County experienced 14 suicides in a 45-day period. "The next year, we had 15 during the same time span," he said. "There's no explaining it."

According to the CDC's 2016 figures, the latest available, Alabama experienced 788 suicides, which averages to one death every 11 hours.

Figures show Alabama had 12.39 people per 100,000 take their lives in 2007. That number for 2016 was 15.6. Alabama ranks 24th nationally in that statistic. Wyoming was first with 29.2 deaths per 100,000.

In 2016, about 45,000 Americans age 10 and over died by suicide, according to the CDC. Nationally, the number of suicides per 100,000 has risen from 11.27 in 2007 to 13.42 in 2016.

Franklin said her deputies responded to 145 suicide calls in 2017 and at least 75 so far this year.

"We are seeing more and more young people, mostly high school students, contemplating suicide," she said. "Substance abuse, especially with opioids and prescription painkillers, drugs that are fairly easy to obtain, have been the person's choice in a lot of cases we are seeing."

In a study for the American Journal of Public Health in February 2017, doctors Jennifer Brennan Braden, Mark J. Edlund and Mark D. Sullivan authored a study that found the number of suicides has doubled in the last decade.

"These analyses were designed to assess suicidal thoughts and behaviors," the report.

Lawrence County



opioids must increase before suicide rates fall.

“We’re seeing opioids playing a larger role in the deaths,” he said. “In many suicides, when we dig a little deeper, we find they’re drug-related. The opioid explosion has just come upon us. Our jail population is up because of it. In the past six to eight months, the jail population has jumped from about 115 to about 180.

“I’ve talked with surrounding counties, and they’re having the same problems. So many are getting addicted to opioids, and it is leading to this.”

Decatur's Connie Kane, crisis counseling program manager for the Crisis Services of North Alabama, said her agency saw a large spike in suicide counseling calls in the days following the suicide hanging deaths of fashion designer Kate Spade and traveling chef and author Anthony Bourdain in early June.

Kane said her agency received 3,679 calls to its suicide prevention phone line in 2017. She said calls this year through July 31 are at 2,478.

“People call and sometimes just need somebody to listen to them,” Kane said. “They are in so much agony sometimes, they can’t problem-solve. They will tell us what is hurting them and we can allow their problem to be validated. We try to get them calmed down and disable their plan.”

Kane, a master's-level therapist, said family violence and sexual abuse are also contributing factors leading to suicides.

“Also, people with bipolar diagnosis are more likely to have a higher risk for s

She said she ha
from children as

“Most frequently
a relationship b
reported death,



under-reported crimes. Anybody is at risk for suicide. You don't have to have a mental health issue. You can have a job loss, get expelled from school. The problem might seem so overwhelming that you can't deal with it and you do an impulsive act."

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention said the national suicide rate for men is 3½ times higher than for women.

"Women tend to seek out help more often," Kane said.

"About 15 years ago, we used to see suicides mainly from people in their 30s, 40s or 50s," Lawrence County Assistant Coroner Kris Long said. "Now we're seeing more people ages 15 to 30. The young people spend most of their time at home and school.

"There is a certain amount of bullying going on. Peer pressure, cyber bullying just adds to it."

Authorities said the number of notes being left by suicide victims is decreasing.

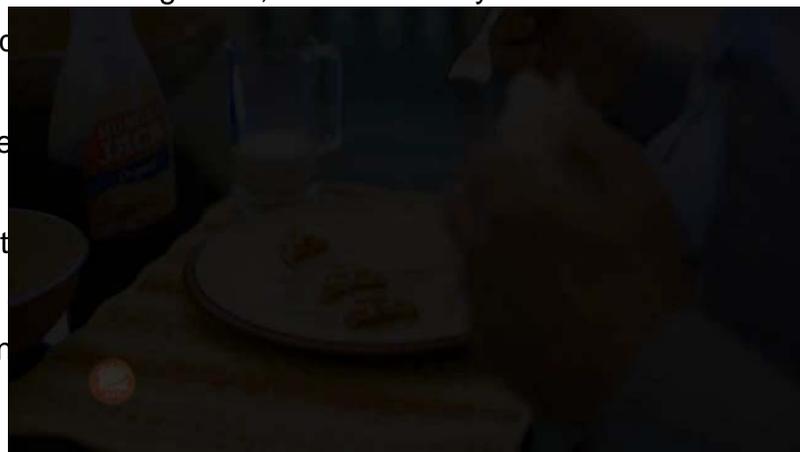
"That's extra tough on the loved ones," Franklin said. "Most family members want to know the reason, and it helps with closure for them."

Authorities said handguns are the No. 1 method in committing suicides. Hangings, especially with younger people who may not have access to guns, are generally second, with drug overdose quickly moving up the list.

"We're probably seeing 2-to-1 handgun deaths to other forms, but drug overdoses are running close, too. Some may have been accidental, we don't know."

But Kane said even

"We feel very stressed," Kane said. "It's making that com



Kane said her agency is providing suicide prevention education programs this year for Morgan, Hartselle and Limestone school systems.

She added that calls to the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline tripled after rap singer Logic featured a Grammy-nominated song that included the lifeline's crisis phone number, 1-800-273-8255, at January's Grammy awards.

Franklin and Mitchell would like to see more access to assistance programs.

"There's more talk about suicide prevention and mental health issues now," Franklin said. "It's been brought to the surface now. That's a good thing. But for many, if they don't have insurance or the resources, they can't afford to get help."

Mitchell said he favors the state setting up prisons dedicated to dealing with mental health and addiction issues.

Randolph said his ambulance service regularly transports mental patients to Decatur, Jasper, Birmingham and Tupelo, Mississippi, because Lawrence County doesn't have a mental health facility.

"We definitely need more awareness programs not just in the county but everywhere in the state," Randolph said.

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