

Suicide prevalent among middle-aged in state, nation

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Alabama Suicides by Age Group, 2011



FACTS ABOUT SUICIDE

These are some findings from a recent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study on changes in suicide patterns from 1999 to 2010:

- Suicide rates among those aged 35 to 64 increased 28 percent.
- Suicide rates increased by 23 percent or more across all four major regions of the United States.
- The South had the third-highest increase among the four regions. The South remained second to the West in suicide rates.

- Suicide rates increased 81 percent for hanging/suffocation, compared with a 14 percent increase in firearms and a 24 percent increase in poisoning.
- Firearms and hanging/suffocation were the most common suicide methods among middle-aged men, while poisoning and firearms were the most common methods among middle-aged women.
- Suicide rates for those aged 10 to 34 and those aged 65 or older did not change significantly.

The people most likely to commit suicide, both in Alabama and across the nation, are middle-aged, and a recent national study found that suicide is only becoming more prevalent among people in that age range.

The study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention shows that suicides among people 35 to 64 increased 28 percent from 1999 to 2010.

Suicide rates among people in that age range increased in every state, according to the study.

The largest increases were a 48 percent increase among people 50 to 54 and a 49 percent increase among people 55 to 59.

The increases coincide with a general increase in overall suicides in Alabama since 2005, and some experts blame the uptick on both the economic downturn and a series of natural and manmade disasters.

First, three hurricanes hit the Alabama coast in a relatively short period of time, with Hurricane Ivan in 2004 and hurricanes Dennis and Katrina in 2005.

In 2010, the Deepwater Horizon disaster in the Gulf of Mexico caused the nation's worst offshore oil spill and put many people on the state's coast out of work.

Most recently, on April 27, 2011, 64 tornadoes struck the state, killing 254 people and causing \$1.5 billion in property damage.

The effect of disasters is often a form of post-traumatic stress disorder, said Debra Hodges, the research unit director of the Alabama Department of Public Health's injury prevention branch.

"Right after (the disaster) occurs, people are trying to make sure their families are safe and banding together with neighbors," Hodges said. "But it's later, and they realize that their life has changed and it may not be going back to the way it was before."

Hodges, who wrote her doctoral dissertation on suicide prevention, said that effect causes a delay in how disasters affect suicide rates.

Often, the impact of disasters isn't reflected in suicide rates for months or even a year or two.

Alabama's suicide rate rose from 11.5 per 100,000 people in 2005 to 14.2 per 100,000 in 2009. The rate declined slightly to 14.1 in 2010 and 13.4 in 2011, but Hodges called that decrease "statistically insignificant."

Statewide rates have been higher than national rates since 1990.

The CDC study found that the highest nationwide increases between 1999 and 2010 were among whites, Native Americans and Alaska natives.

There was a sharper increase among females than males, but the demographic with the highest suicide rate is still white males.

Hodges said that one of the causes of the higher rate among middle-aged people could be that many of them face the dual stresses of raising children and caring for aging parents.

That also could increase the financial pressure that people in that age range face.

The CDC study noted that suicide prevention programs traditionally have focused on teens and seniors and suggested that more efforts should be made to reach middle-aged people.

The state Department of Public Health recently received a youth suicide prevention grant, but Hodges said programs will include training for both youth and adults.

"One of the theories behind the program is just that it will spread from person to person even if it may be defined as a youth program," Hodges said, adding that the full-scale campaign will begin rolling out later this year.

The need for suicide prevention, meanwhile, is clear, Hodges said.

"Suicide has touched the lives of almost everyone in some way," she said.

Suicide is the nation's 10th leading cause of death, and the CDC study notes that suicide deaths surpassed deaths from motor vehicle crashes in 2010.

Suicides also likely are underreported, and events that might be considered accidents, such as drug overdoses and single-vehicle traffic crashes, could actually be suicides.

Coroners, Hodges noted, will not report a death as a suicide unless there is clear evidence that it is one.

Even with the presumed underreporting, suicides are much more prevalent than homicides statewide. In 2011, there were 644 suicides in Alabama, compared with 476 homicides.

The picture is slightly different in Montgomery County, where there was a recent drop in suicides, from 24 in 2010 to 13 in 2011. Unfortunately, that coincided with an increase in homicides, from 25 in 2010 to 31 in 2011.

Stan Bernard, clinical director with the Montgomery Mental Health Authority, said he "can't say one way or the other" whether the trend in Montgomery mirrored the CDC study regarding people age 35 to 64.

The authority provides help to people in crisis and at risk of suicide by directing them toward the proper care, Bernard said.

"We try to facilitate someone getting into treatment," he said.

Hodges said one of the most important aspects of suicide prevention is lifting the stigma around talking about suicide, including potential victims opening up about what is troubling them.

“Talking about their feelings is the best way to alleviate those feelings of despair and helplessness,” she said.

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