



“Addressing Deaths of Despair: Overdose, Suicide, and Liver Disease”

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Agenda



- ▶ **What are deaths of despair and how they are influenced.**
- ▶ **What role has the Covid Pandemic played in deaths of despair in the United States.**
- ▶ **What are best practice approaches to decreasing deaths of despair and increasing movement toward recovery.**

Deaths of Despair



- ▶ Deaths of despair are defined as deaths to drugs, alcohol, and suicide, and often are associated with socioeconomic factors. Unemployment during the Great Recession (December 2007–June 2009) was associated with an increase in suicide deaths and drug overdose deaths.
- ▶ Drug and Alcohol use disorders are often seen as isolative illnesses, that take a heavy emotional toll.
- ▶ Mental health illnesses are also very isolative in nature, with continued stigma experienced for those that struggle with both substance use and mental illness.

Deaths of Despair



- ▶ The expression “deaths of despair” was born after Princeton University economist Anne Case and Angus Deaton — Case’s colleague, husband and a Nobel laureate in economics — dug into U.S. death statistics and found that, during the 1900s, people’s life spans had generally lengthened from roughly 50 years to nearly 80. But then, near the end of the century, one segment of the population took a U-turn.

Deaths of Despair



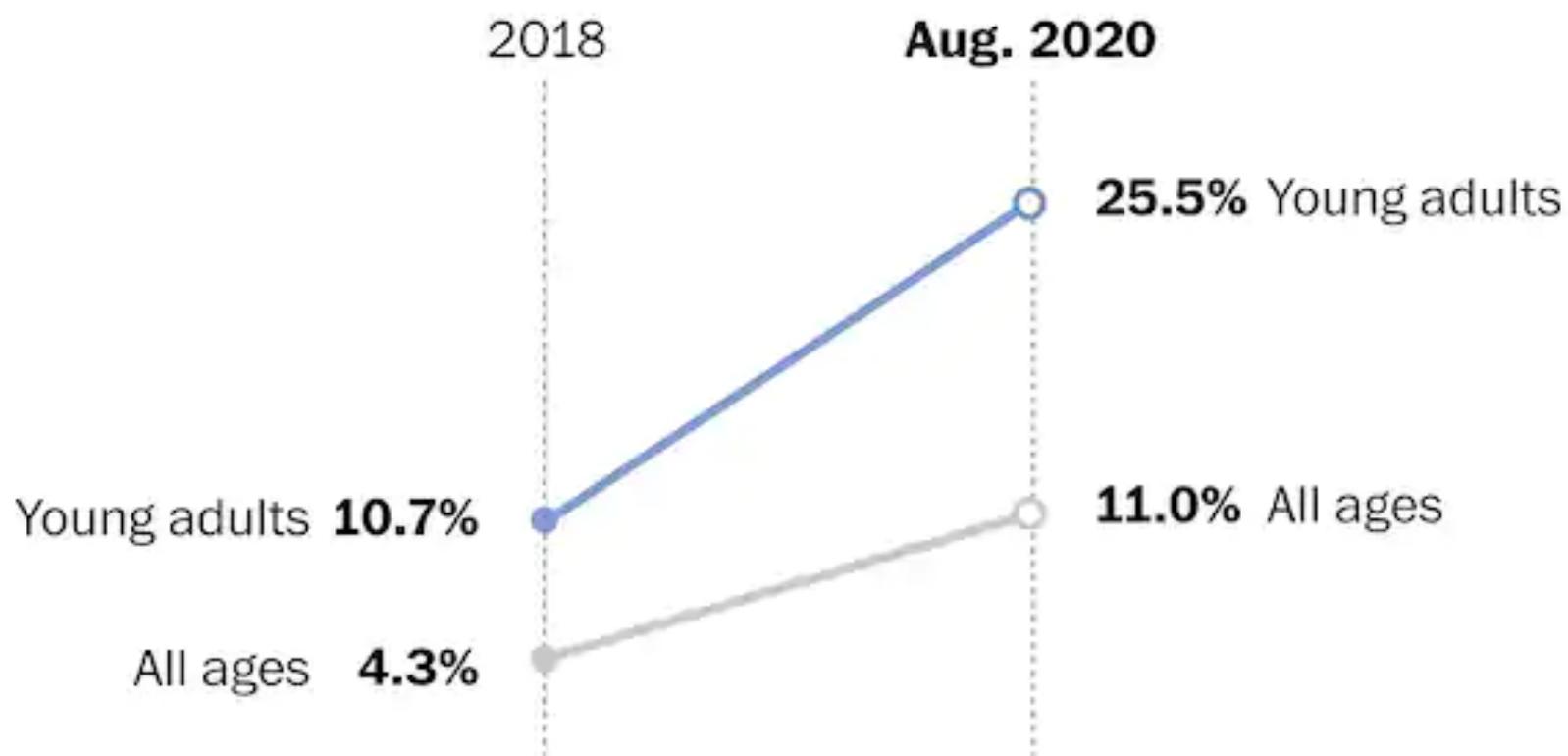
- ▶ Since the 1990s, mortality had risen sharply among middle-aged, non-Hispanic white people, especially those without a college degree, Case and Deaton reported in December 2015 in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences.
- ▶ The reason, to a large extent: White, working-class people ages 45 to 54 were drinking themselves to death with alcohol, accidentally overdosing on opioids and other drugs, and killing themselves, often by shooting or hanging. Vanishing jobs, disintegrating families and other social stressors had unleashed a rising tide of fatal despair, Case and Deaton concluded.

Deaths of Despair

- ▶ **Surging death rates from suicide, drug overdoses and alcoholism, what researchers refer to as "deaths of despair", are largely responsible for a consecutive three-year decline of life expectancy in the U.S. This constitutes the first three-year drop in life expectancy in the U.S. since the years 1915–1918.** (Koons, Cynthia (June 20, 2019). "Latest Suicide Data Show the Depth of U.S. Mental Health Crisis". Bloomberg. Retrieved July 5, 2019.

Suicidal thoughts increase during pandemic

The number of people who said they have seriously considered suicide in the past 30 days has increased most dramatically among the youngest adults (ages 18 to 24).

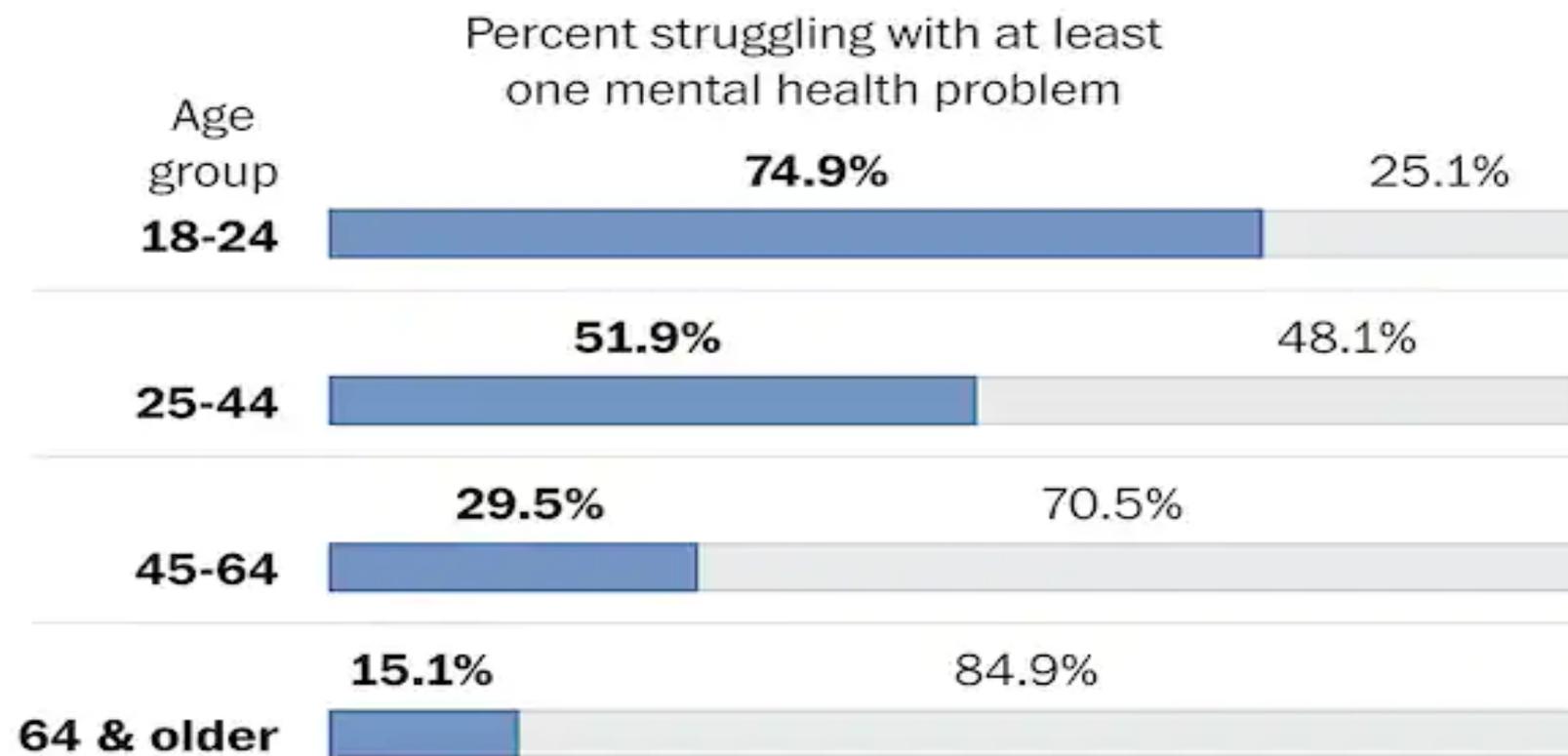


Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

AARON STECKELBERG AND WILLIAM WAN/THE WASHINGTON POST

Youngest have been hardest hit by pandemic's mental health problems

Three in 4 young adults are struggling with at least one mental health problem, such as anxiety and depressive disorders, trauma and stress disorders, or substance use disorder.



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

AARON STECKELBERG AND WILLIAM WAN/THE WASHINGTON POST

Suicide: The Silent Epidemic

- ▶ **Suicide** is the SECOND leading cause of death for ages 10-34. (2018 CDC WISQARS)
- ▶ **Suicide** is the SECOND leading cause of death for college-age youth and ages 12-18. (2018 CDC WISQARS)
- ▶ More teenagers and young adults die from suicide than from cancer, heart disease, AIDS, birth defects, stroke, pneumonia, influenza, and chronic lung disease, COMBINED!!

Suicide: The Silent Epidemic

- ▶ Suicide is the leading cause of death among people with substance use disorders (SUDs).
- ▶ Comorbidity—or co-occurring mental illness and substance abuse disorders—increases the risk even further
- ▶ Compared to the general population, people treated for alcohol abuse or dependence are at about ten times greater risk for suicide.
- ▶ Alcohol is present in about 30 to 40 percent of suicides and suicide attempts

Suicide: The Silent Epidemic

- ▶ In 2018, there were 48,344 suicides in the US, up from 42,773 in 2014, according to the CDC's National center for Health Statistics, (NCHS).
- ▶ On average, adjusted to age, the annual US suicide rate increased 24% between 1999 and 2014, from 10.5 to 13.0 suicides per 100,000 people, the highest rate recorded in 28 years.
- ▶ There were more than two and a half times as many suicides (48,344) in the US in 2018 as there were homicides (18,830)!

Substance Use Disorders: The Silent Epidemic

- ▶ 20.7 million adults had a Substance Use Disorder.
- ▶ 43.7 million adults had a Mental Health Disorder
- ▶ 8.4 million had comorbidity: SUD and MH

Kentucky sees dramatic increase in overdose deaths, fueled by 'horrible' isolation

- ▶ Fatal overdoses spiked by 50% in the state between September 2019 and September 2020 — the third highest state escalation in the country, behind Louisiana and the District of Columbia, preliminary data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show.
- ▶ Nationwide, the number of overdose deaths during that time went up by 29%. An estimated 90,237 people nationwide died from an overdose.
- ▶ The CDC reports Kentucky saw **1,956** fatal overdoses during that 12-month period, compared with **1,304** the year before. Neighboring West Virginia saw 1,287 fatal overdoses last year, up from 874 — an increase of more than 47 percent.

Covid-19 Pandemic and Substance Use



- ▶ Synthetic opioid-linked fatalities rose 38.4 percent when analyzing yearly rates from 2019 to 2020.
- ▶ Deaths involving cocaine — a substance sometimes mixed with fentanyl — have also increased by 26.5 percent. Other drugs seen in more overdose deaths include psychostimulants, namely methamphetamine, which increased by 34.8 percent, outpacing cocaine-related deaths.
- ▶ Logistical results of the pandemic, such as needing to isolate oneself and limited access to shared spaces that help people with substance abuse disorders cope, also contribute to a rise in overdose deaths.

Opioids and Suicide: Three Possible Links

- ▶ 1. High doses of Opiates offer increased access to a lethal means
- ▶ 2. Opioids have disinhibiting effects, increasing the likelihood of acting on suicidal impulses.
- ▶ 3. People who take higher opioid doses share other characteristics that explain the link to suicide (SAMHSA)
- ▶ Take Home: Adults who have an Opioid Use Disorder are 13x more likely to die by suicide than the general population. (Ilgen et al., 2016; 8Ashrafioun et al., 2017; 9Wilcox, Conner & Caine, 200

Change in Behavior



- ▶ "The isolation is causing people to lose boundaries on their behaviors," Miller explained.
- ▶ For example, with social norms on the back burner, some people are doing things they wouldn't normally -- like drinking in the middle of the day. If that becomes a habit during social isolation, it may be hard to break and could lead to alcohol abuse and possibly later health problems.

Alcohol Use Amplifies Suicide Risk

- ▶ Between 40-60% of those who die by suicide are intoxicated at the time of death
- ▶ 18-66% who die by suicide have some alcohol in their blood at the time of death
- ▶ Middle- or older-aged alcoholics at greater risk than younger alcoholics
- ▶ Alcohol use disorders are a significant risk factor for “medically serious” suicide attempts
- ▶ Conner; SAMHSA, 2010

Alcohol Use and Suicide

- ▶ More likely to be severely impaired because of comorbid psychiatric problems and other substance use disorders.
- ▶ More severely impaired due to alcohol-dependence characteristics.
- ▶ Have stronger family history of suicide attempts (first degree relatives).
- ▶ **“Alcohol dependence is a type of chronic suicide”**

Liquor Stores-Essential Business During the Pandemic





“Projected prevalence and mortality associated with alcohol-related liver disease in the USA, 2019–2040, June 2020”

- ▶ “Without substantial changes in drinking culture or interventions to address high-risk drinking, the disease burden and deaths due to alcohol-related liver disease will worsen in the USA. Additional interventions are urgently needed to reduce mortality and morbidity associated with alcohol-related liver disease.”
- ▶ Alcohol related liver disease is the leading indication for liver transplantation in the United States.

Cirrhosis and Liver Disease

- ▶ During 2009-2016, people aged 25-34 experienced the highest average annual increase in cirrhosis deaths (10.5%) driven predominately by alcohol related liver disease.
- ▶ Men had twice as many cirrhosis related deaths and four times as many liver cancer related deaths than women.
- ▶ These states experienced the fastest rise in cirrhosis and liver cancer related deaths!!
Kentucky 6.8%, New Mexico 6%, and Arkansas 5.7% (Cirrhosis and liver cancer mortality in the United States, 1999-2016, Journal: The BMJ).

Liver Disease



- ▶ For this study, University of Michigan researchers compared the actual number of new people put on the US organ transplant list from March 2020 to January 2021 with the projected numbers that were based on pre-pandemic data. They also looked at national monthly retail alcohol sales records between January 2016 and 2021.
- ▶ The results published in JAMA Network Open showed a positive correlation between the increase in the number of people on the waiting list for a liver due to alcoholic hepatitis and the increase in retail sales of alcohol during the pandemic.

Liver Disease

- ▶ From March 2016 to January 2021, researchers saw 51,488 more people were put on a waiting list for a liver and 32,320 liver transplants were performed due to alcoholic hepatitis. The number of people who needed a liver transplant for any other reason outside of alcoholic hepatitis remained about the same.
- ▶ A survey published Monday by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found that American adults had claimed that they drank about the same amount of alcohol during the pandemic, at least in the fourth quarter of 2020. Sales figures may suggest otherwise. Researchers on this study noted alcohol sales increased sharply starting in March 2020 and stayed at about the same elevated level for the rest of the year.



US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism from March to June 2020, comparing that data to the same months in 2018 and 2019. The research team also analyzed anonymous data from over 45 million digital devices, tracking visits to businesses where alcohol is sold.

- ▶ Sales of hard liquor, or spirits, rose nearly 11% on average in all states in the study between the months of March and June 2020 compared to prior years. Four states had substantial increases: In Texas, **Kentucky**, Virginia and Missouri, sales of liquor increased 20% to 40% during that time period.
- ▶ Texas, **Kentucky** and Virginia had "sustained increases in their sales of both spirits and wine in March, April, May, and June, which can be alarming signals for problematic alcohol use," the study found.

But What About Deaths of Despair???

- ▶ Deaths of despair have been on the rise for the last decade, and in the context of COVID-19, deaths of despair should be seen as **the epidemic within the pandemic.**



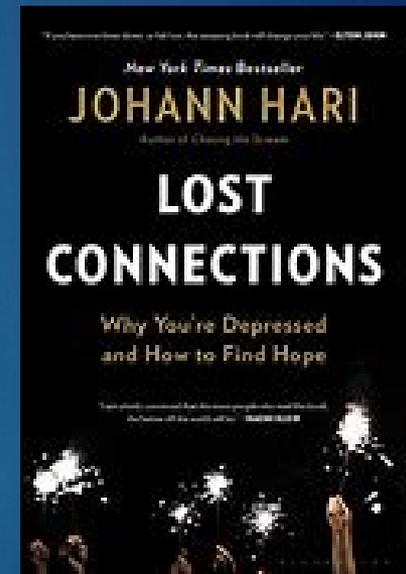
Solutions!



- ▶ Harvard physician Peter Green spoon wrote an article that describes how both COVID-19 and our public response increases risk of relapse and overdose for people in treatment for opioid use disorder.
- ▶ He identifies four factors that contribute to increased risk:
 - ▶ 1. Disruption in Treatment and Support
 - ▶ 2. Isolation-Related Stress
 - ▶ 3. Overwhelmed Healthcare System
 - ▶ 4. Social Determinants of Health.

Solutions: The Opposite of Addiction is Connection

- ▶ The pandemic has created the greatest forced isolation in our modern history. We are physically distant but must socially connect (Bergman et al, 2020).
- ▶ Connect Online: See friends and family by Zoom or phone. Feeling understood and sharing feelings of pain can help alleviate your personal struggle. “
- ▶ And I must admit, I have been calling more friends and family than ever, and it just feels good to talk to someone over the phone.”



Connection and Recovery



- ▶ Connection encourages social, physical, mental, and emotional contact and healing. When others empathize with us, validate our pain or positive experiences or find ways to soothe us when needed, we are able to develop a connection with them.
- ▶ **Earned Security:** Individuals who were not graced with this in childhood can learn to securely attach: Through Therapy, support groups, other healthy and healing relationships.

Solutions: Employment



- ▶ Central to many of the problems in our communities will be the need to find employment. The literature is clear that **unemployment is a risk factor for suicide and drug overdose as well as a decrease in overall health status.** To this end, policy solutions must focus on providing meaningful work to those who are unemployed.
- ▶ Service can be a powerful antidote to isolation and despair, and COVID-19 offers new and unique opportunities to employ a new workforce – whether that be through contact tracing – helping local public health department track the virus – or through community health services where a new corps of community members are employed to provide help to those in the most need.

Solutions: Integrated Health

- ▶ We must immediately engage all COVID-19 response and recovery efforts in mental health screening and treatment. It is not just the job of mental health clinicians, or even primary care, to find and treat all those suffering from the mental health impacts of unemployment, social isolation, and the fear of uncertainty.

Get People Care!!



- ▶ **Care**, especially primary and mental health care, has historically been fragmented. Individuals have had to work harder to get the care they need, and often that care is not delivered in a timely or evidence-based fashion.
- ▶ If COVID-19 has highlighted anything about our current delivery system, it's that asking people to come to a clinic or a hospital is not always the best approach. Policies that support creative opportunities for care delivered at home, virtually or in-person will provide comfort and safety.

Get People Care!!



- ▶ The idea of a home visit or a house call is not new, and for professions like primary care, it can be a major benefit for countless.
- ▶ The artificial walls we have created around who can be seen where, by whom, and for what, have not been proven to work effectively for mental health. Its time to consider policies that bring care to people as one avenue for mitigating despair and providing help to those who need it most.

Protective Factors



- ▶ “The vast majority of people I know in recovery often talk about this profound sense of re-establishing –and sometimes for the first time- a connection to a much larger community”-
Michael Botticelli, Director of Grayken Center for Addiction, Boston Medical Center
- ▶ **Connection!**

References

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- ▶ National Institute on Drug Abuse: <http://www.nida.nih.gov>
- ▶ (Wu et al, 2020; Grupe and Nitschke. 2013).
- ▶ (Ilgen et al., 2016; 8Ashrafioun et al., 2017; 9Wilcox, Conner & Caine, 200
- ▶ National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov>
- ▶ Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC): <http://www.sprc.org>
- ▶ Suicide Prevention Lifeline: <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>
- ▶ (Gould et al., 2005).

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Questions, comments, concerns!

- ▶ Thank You!!
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