COVID-19 ISSUE BRIEF
Incidence of Suicide in Milwaukee County during the COVID-19 Pandemic
Exploring demographic trends during the pandemic compared to previous five years

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic is a serious public health threat, not only because people are at risk of contracting the virus, but because supplementary risk factors created by the pandemic can cause negative health outcomes. The fear, self-isolation, physical distancing, financial stressors and stigma of contracting COVID-19 are all risk factors that can have an impact on mental health and may make death by suicide an unintended consequence of the pandemic.²,⁷

A few municipalities across the country have reported increases in the number of individuals who have died by suicide or attempted suicide. Doctors at the John Muir Medical Center in Walnut Creek, California saw a year’s worth of suicide attempts in a four week period during their Shelter-in-Place order.⁴ In Fresno County, California, there were more reported suicides in the month of June than in any month in the last three years.⁶

The U.S. suicide rate has increased 35% since 1999, and in 2018, more than 48,000 Americans died by suicide, ranking it the 10th leading cause of death in the country.¹ In Milwaukee County since 2015, there have been nearly 250 deaths by suicide, which equates to at least one person dying by suicide in the county each week for the past five years.⁵

EXPLORING THE DATA

Figure 1: Deaths by suicide during COVID-19 pandemic period (March-June 2020) and during the same time period in the five years prior (2015-2019).
Milwaukee County had recorded fewer suicides in the period from March-June in 2020 (i.e. 35 suicides) than during that same time period in the four years prior.

Figure 2: Deaths by method of suicide in Milwaukee County, January to June 2020.
Most deaths by suicide in 2020 involved the use of a firearm, followed by deaths by suicide involving suffocation, which includes hanging, asphyxiation, or drowning. Other methods, including blunt force injuries and incise injuries, were the third most common method. This is different from the previous five years, in which poisoning, including any form of drug toxicity or CO poisoning, was the third most common method.

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LANGUAGE MATTERS!

Help destigmatize the language used to describe suicide

SAY: “Died by suicide,” “took their own life,” or “killed themselves”

INSTEAD OF: “Committed suicide,” “completed suicide,” or “successful suicide”

WHY: This language can imply that suicide is a crime or sin. In addition, words like “completed” and “successful” are often associated with positive outcome.

Adapted from Prevent Suicide Greater Milwaukee’s “Language Matters!”
In Milwaukee County between 2015-2019, 77.4% of deaths by suicide occurred among individuals identifying as White, 12.3% of deaths by suicide were among individuals identifying as Black or African American, and 5.9% of deaths by suicide were among individuals identifying as Hispanic/Latinx; all other racial groups made up less than 2% of deaths by suicide in the county. In 2020, these trends have been very similar.

Ultimately, despite the increased presence of risk factors for suicide, including economic distress, and overall stress related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Milwaukee County has not experienced an increase in the number of suicides between March and June 2020 in comparison to previous years.

However, suicide is still a serious issue in Milwaukee County that affects our community. Community leaders should continue to monitor suicide data and address risk factors that may increase the incidence of suicide because of the pandemic. It is important that local and national resources continue messaging to connect individuals experiencing stress and hopelessness to support. It is also important that resources continue to be more widely available via telehealth and other electronic methods.

If you are concerned about yourself or a loved one, call the Milwaukee County Crisis Line at 1-414-257-7222, The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255), or text the Hopeline at x741741. For imminent safety concerns, call 911.

**CITATIONS**


Notes: Data collection sources used in this brief did not collect gender data outside of the male/female binary, so we were unable to describe trends among other gender identities. Race/ethnicity data were from a combined field, so if an individual identified as Hispanic/Latinx, that was the reported race/ethnicity.

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