

Kansas suicide rate jumps more than 30 percent in one year

By Matt Sloan and Kristina Betinis
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The Annual Summary of Vital Statistics, recently published by the state of Kansas Department of Health and Environment, reports a sharp increase in the number of suicides in the state. The increase coincides with deep cuts to mental health services funding, which has been slashed more than 50 percent in some areas.

The report states, “In 2012, 505 Kansas residents died due to suicide, up 31.5 percent from 384 suicide deaths in 2011. Over four-fifths (81.8 percent) of suicide victims were male. The two age groups with the largest number of suicides were 45-54 (110 deaths) and 25-34 (87 deaths). The three most common methods of suicide were firearms (297 deaths), suffocation (113 deaths), and poisoning (69 deaths).”

The largest increases in suicides in Kansas occurred among white males, who already were the segment of the population most likely to take their own lives.

Last year, Johnson County—part of the Kansas City suburbs and home to the state’s more affluent residents—reported 92 suicides. Sedgwick County—a part of the Wichita metropolitan area, with a median income of about \$42,000 per year—had 88 suicides. According to Sedgwick County autopsy reports, there have been at least 37 confirmed suicides in 2013—a number that public health experts expect will increase.

The spike in suicides coincides with devastating reductions in state funding for mental health services. Marilyn Cook, executive director of Comcare of Sedgwick County, a public health service, told the *Wichita Eagle*, “Since 2009, the community mental health center in Sedgwick County has lost 53 percent of its state funding due to bipartisan budget cuts. This is a community problem and a public health problem, not just a mental health problem. Treatment dollars have gone down and more and more people are coming to us, a growing number without any other payment for

services.”

In 2012, Sedgwick County 911 dispatch received more than 2,400 calls related to suicide threats or attempts, according to the Sedgwick County Suicide Prevention Coalition, and Comprehensive Community Care of Sedgwick County responded to more than 61,000 crisis phone calls for suicide risk or urgent mental health help. Last year saw the highest suicide rate in Sedgwick County since the coalition began collecting data in 2001.

As it is in other states, funding for Kansas’s social services have been cut even as the population’s need for services increases. Federal funding for mental health care has been slashed nationwide, as part of a decades-long effort to cut costs by closing larger state mental health facilities, and having care administered by small community clinics.

“We did bring home a lot of people from state facilities and closed (state hospitals),” Cook said. “But when money is reduced by 53 percent it doesn’t make a lot of sense that we would have adequate resources to treat them. It’s costly and when it’s dramatically reduced, it’s a difficult situation.”

“We wonder if the economy is part of it, the number of people struggling with job loss,” she said. “But we don’t have any clear answers. If you asked people today if they feel any more stressed than 10 years ago, I think a lot of people would say, ‘Yes.’”

The high suicide rate in Kansas is directly related to the ongoing financial crisis. Since 2002, the poverty rate in Kansas has increased by 4.2 percentage points. About 14 percent of the state’s population live at or below the poverty line, which is \$23,050 a year for a family of four. That number has risen by nearly 80,000 people since before the recession began in 2008. Of those, 34,000 were children, whose poverty rate has

increased from 14.5 percent to nearly 19 percent, according to a report issued by the Annie E. Casey foundation.

Nationwide, the number of deaths by suicide has surpassed the number of deaths by motor vehicle in 2009, according to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), when more than 38,000 people committed suicide.

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