

Study finds workplace injuries increase risk of death by suicide, drug overdose

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In the US, life expectancy has fallen for the total population for the past three years for which data is available, from 2015 through 2017. Death rates in the younger age groups in particular drove this decline, with increases in 2016 and 2017 for those aged 25–44. These figures point to an intensifying social crisis, with many of the younger age group dying from “deaths of despair,” including drug and alcohol abuse and suicide.

A critical study conducted by the Boston University School of Public Health and the US Social Security Administration, published in the *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* in July, examines the complex interaction of several factors that affect an increasing number of workers in the US: depression, prescription drug use, early death and workplace injuries.

The study linked New Mexico workers’ compensation data for 100,806 workers injured between 1994 and 2000 with Social Security Administration earnings and mortality data through 2013 and National Death Index cause of death data. The workers’ data came from all industries, including agriculture, fishing and forestry; construction; retail trade; services; mining and extracting; and others.

The study found that workers who were injured at work were at significantly higher risk of death from suicide and/or drug overdose, as well as other serious health consequences, both mental and physical, as a result of losing work time and income from a work-related injury.

The study made note of the alarming increase in drug overdose deaths and suicides in the US over the past two decades. Deaths in the US from opioid overdose in 2015 were recorded as 2.5 times higher than in 2000, with an astonishing 13 percent increase between 2015 and 2016. Even more concerning is the increasing suicide rate, which rose by 30 percent from 1999 to

2016. Suicide has remained the tenth most frequent cause of death in the US since 2008.

The authors found that work-related or occupational injuries typically involve acute and chronic pain. In one study cited by the authors, 42 percent of workers with back injuries were prescribed opioids within one year of their injury. Sixteen percent continued the opioid use for one year, with the dose increasing substantially over time, resulting in a form of “medically managed” addiction.

Work-related injuries that require more than one week off, defined as “lost-time injuries” in the study, were found overall to have more negative consequences for workers’ long-term physical and mental health and well-being. Depression, one of the most well-documented consequences of work-related injuries, is strongly associated with a greater risk of suicide.

The study found that lost-time injuries took their toll on the life expectancy of workers, increasing the risk of mortality from both suicide and drug-related causes. Men who experienced such injuries were found to have a 72 percent greater risk of suicide and 29 percent greater risk of drug-induced death, while women were found to have a 92 percent greater risk of suicide and 33 percent greater risk of drug-induced death.

The differences between men and women in increased risk of “death of despair” following an occupational injury were not examined, but the data shows that regardless of gender, workers who are injured on the job are at substantially higher risk of death due to suicide or drug overdose.

Workers injured on job are more likely to have lasting disabilities. Thirty-four percent of compensated injuries that caused workers to take one or more weeks off resulted in the payment of permanent disability

benefits.

The authors also found other long-term health effects of lost-time occupational injuries, including an increased risk of chronic disease, mortality from circulatory diseases in men, reduction in physical activity, and weight gain.

Other negative life consequences of workplace injury were increased risk of re-injury and reduced earnings, both of which are thought to have an effect on workers' mental health.

The study found a relationship between work-related injuries and the rapid growth of deaths caused by suicide and drug overdose among workers in New Mexico. There is a chance similar results may be discovered if the study is replicated in other US states that have a higher-than-average rate of opioid-related deaths.

Opioid deaths accounted for 57 percent of all drug-related deaths in New Mexico in 2016–2017. Overall death rates from opioid use in New Mexico were higher than the US average during the years spanning 1999 to 2017.

New Mexico has one of the highest poverty rates and lowest median household incomes per worker of any of the US states. The state's official poverty rate was 18.2 percent in 2017, well above the US official poverty rate of 12.3 percent. Its median household income is \$46,744, well below the US median of \$59,039. Just two states, Louisiana and Mississippi, have higher poverty rates than New Mexico.

The *World Socialist Web Site* wrote last month about a *Washington Post* report which found that between 2006 and 2012, multi-billion-dollar drug manufacturers and distributors flooded the US with opioid painkillers, saturating the most economically devastated states and deliberately fueling an opioid addiction crisis in order to reap immense profits.

In addition to the correlation between workplace injuries and the rising rate of suicide and drug-induced death, the rate of deaths directly resulting from workplace injuries has been on the rise since 2009.

There has been a significant increase in the number of workplace deaths as a direct result of on-the-job drug use. The Bureau of Labor Statistics found in its Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries that unintentional overdoses from non-medical use of alcohol or other drugs rose by 25 percent from 2016 to

2017 (217 to 272), the fifth consecutive year that unintentional overdose workplace fatalities rose by 25 percent—a shocking number that points to widespread social misery and decades of depressed living conditions faced by working people.

The deteriorating living conditions workers face—falling life expectancy, increased risk of death from suicide or drug overdose, rising rates of work-related injury and death, higher rates of depression—are the consequences of capitalism. These conditions are the result of decades of cuts to wages, benefits, healthcare, social services and workplace safety programs that workers had secured in the course of bitter struggles.

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