

# Suicide in Iowa

## Key Points

- Deaths by suicide increased overall between 2015 and 2020, especially among men, certain age groups, and specific racial and ethnic groups in Iowa.
- Younger Iowans (18-25) were more likely to experience suicidal ideation and suicide attempts and lower suicide mortality rates than older age groups. Although alarming, this also provides more opportunities for intervention and prevention.
- Death by suicide is preventable. The Iowa Department of Public Health has created [The Iowa Plan for Suicide Prevention 2022-2027](#) that provides a framework for local and state prevention efforts.

Iowa ranked as the 21<sup>st</sup> highest suicide rate among all U.S. states in 2019 (AAS, 2020). In 2020, suicide was the eighth leading cause of death among all ages and the second leading cause of death among those aged 15-34 in Iowa. Suicide is many times more common than homicide in Iowa, with each suicide affecting the whole community (IDPH, 2022). As the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) describes, “Each person who dies by suicide leaves behind 135 people who knew that person.” (SAMHSA, 2022)

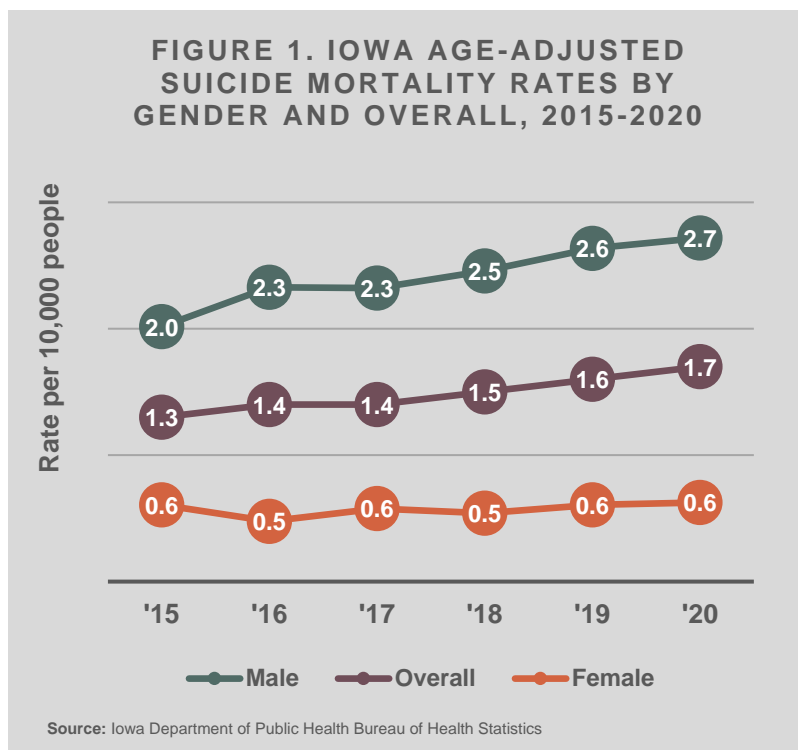
This brief describes the populations within Iowa for whom the rate of deaths by suicide increased, the estimated prevalence of suicidal ideation and attempts, and the potential points of intervention to prevent suicide in Iowa.

## Deaths by Suicide Increased in Iowa

The age-adjusted rate of death by suicide among people in Iowa rose steadily between 2015 and 2020 (see Figure 1). In 2015, the age-adjusted rate of death by suicide was 1.3 per 10,000 people in Iowa and rose by 31% to 1.7 per 10,000 people in Iowa in 2020. The overall increase in deaths by suicide was not uniform, as certain age groups and racial and ethnic groups experienced much higher relative increases than other groups did.

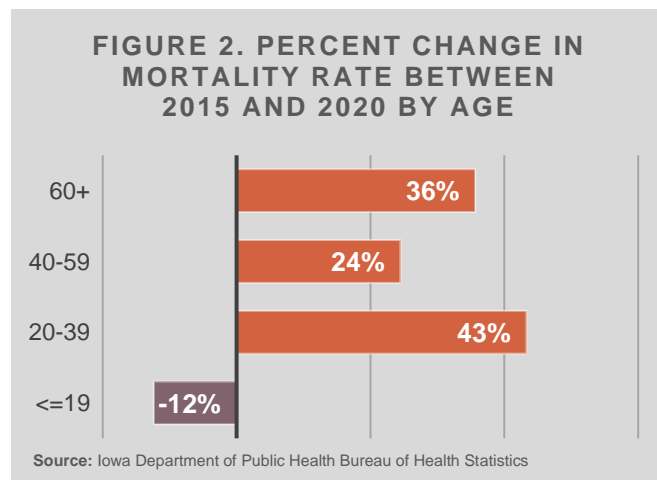
### *Deaths by Suicide Increased among Men*

Figure 1 illustrates that the age-adjusted rate of death by suicide has increased by 35% among men from a rate of 2 per 10,000 men in 2015 to 2.7 per 10,000 men in 2020. During the same period, the age-adjusted death by suicide rate among women remained stable.

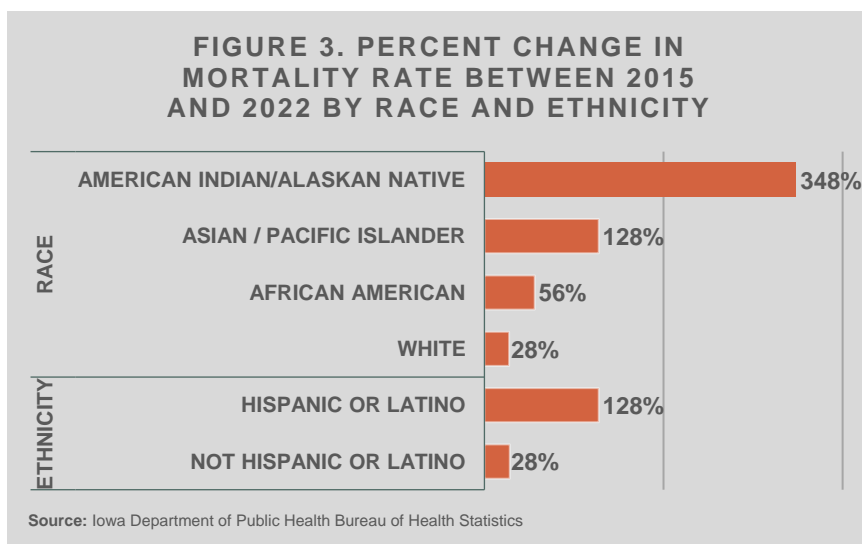


### Deaths by Suicide Increased among Adults 20 Years Old and Older

Age-specific rates indicate an increase in death by suicide among those aged 20 years and older between 2015 and 2020 in Iowa (see Figure 2). The rate of age-specific mortality due to suicide among those aged 20-39 was 1.8 per 10,000 in 2015 and rose 43% to 2.6 per 10,000 in 2020. Similarly, rates of death by suicide for people in Iowa aged 40-59 rose 24% from 2.0 per 10,000 in 2015 to 2.4 per 10,000 in 2020. For people in Iowa 60 years and older, the suicide mortality rate rose from 1.2 to 1.7 per 10,000 (or 36%) from 2015 to 2020. For those aged 19 and under, the suicide mortality rate decreased by 12% from 0.5 per 10,000 people in 2015 to 0.4 per 10,000 people in 2020.



### Deaths by Suicide Increased among all Reported Racial and Ethnic Groups in Iowa



As Figure 3 indicates, among people in Iowa who were Hispanic or Latino, the rate of death by suicide rose 128% from 0.4 per 10,000 people in 2015 to 1.0 per 10,000 in 2020. Among people who were Non-Hispanic or Latino, the death by suicide rate rose 29% from 1.4 per 10,000 people in 2015 to 1.8 per 10,000 people in 2020 (see Figure 3).

Race-specific suicide mortality rates among people in Iowa rose among all races reported by the Bureau of Vital Records mortality data between 2015 and 2020 (see Figure 3). Among

people who were white, the suicide rate rose by 28% (1.4 to 1.8 per 10,000 people from 2015 to 2020) and the suicide rate among people who were African American or Black in Iowa rose 56% (0.5 to 0.8 per 10,000 people from 2015 in 2020). The suicide rate among people who were Asian/Pacific Islander in Iowa rose 128% (0.4 per 10,000 people in 2015 to 0.8 per 10,000 in 2020) and the suicide rate among people who were American Indian/Alaskan Native in Iowa rose 348% (from 0.6 per 10,000 in 2015 to 2.5 in 2020).

In 2015, death by suicide accounted for around 1.5% of all deaths among American Indian/Alaskan Native communities in Iowa, but increased to 4.6% in 2020, further demonstrating that the problem of suicide increased between 2015 and 2020 among American Indian/Alaskan Native peoples in Iowa.

## Suicidal Ideation and Attempts

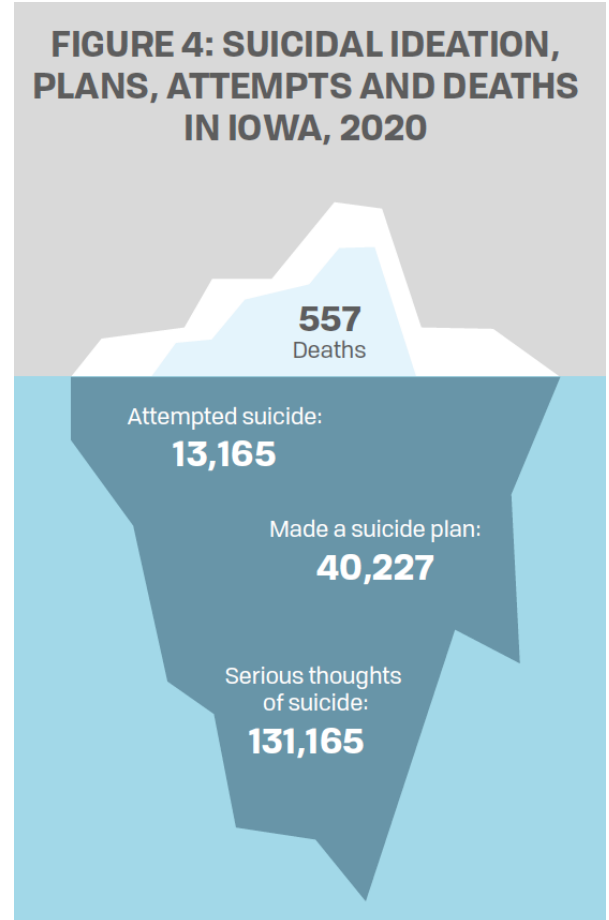
Those who die by suicide represent a fraction of those who consider or attempt suicide (Han et al., 2016). One national study found that from 2008 to 2011 in the United States, there was one death by suicide for every 31 adults that attempted suicide within the past 12 months. Even more people experience suicidal ideation, which is a broad term that describes “a range of contemplations, wishes and preoccupations with death and suicide” (Harmer et al., 2021).

## Suicidal Ideation, Plans, and Attempts among Adults and Youth

The National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) estimated 4.8% of people aged 18 years and older in the U.S. experienced serious thoughts of suicide within the past year (for combined years 2019-2020<sup>1</sup>). Of the 4.8% of people that experienced serious thoughts of suicide, an estimated 1.3% of people aged 18 years and older made a suicide plan in the past year and an estimated 0.52% attempted suicide in the past 12 months (for combined years 2019 and 2020).

The Iowa prevalence estimates for serious thoughts of suicide, making plans for suicide, and attempting suicide were slightly higher than the national estimates, but this difference was not statistically significant. Based on the NSDUH estimates for the combined years of 2019 and 2020, 131,165 adults in Iowa (aged 18 years and older) experienced serious thoughts of suicide, 40,227 adults in Iowa made a suicide plan, and 13,165 adults in Iowa attempted suicide in the last 12 months in 2020 (see Figure 4).

Alarming, the NSDUH data indicate that younger age groups in Iowa experienced significantly higher estimated prevalence of serious thoughts of suicide, suicidal plans and suicide attempts than their older Iowa counterparts in collection years 2019 and 2020. The estimated prevalence of serious thoughts of suicide among younger adults aged 18-25 was 12% vs. 5.4% among the overall average of all adults aged 18 years and older. Applying these estimates to the Iowa population in 2020 translates to an estimated 42,519 Iowans aged 18-25 experiencing serious thoughts of suicide, 16,419 of which made a suicide plan (4.63%), and an estimated 5,107 that attempted suicide (1.44%). As Figure 4 demonstrates, there is more to the issue of suicide than meets the eye.



## A Pebble in a Pond

Not only is suicide a major public health issue that is more prevalent than mortality data indicate, exposure to one death by suicide has been found to affect entire communities. A systematic review of research from 1990 to 2014 demonstrated that the risk of suicidal behaviors among those exposed to suicide was significantly higher than those unexposed (Maple et al., 2017).

*“A suicide is like a pebble in a pond. The waves ripple outward.”*  
National Alliance on Mental Illness

One study estimated that on average, 115 people are exposed per one suicide, and those exposed are twice as likely as those who have not been exposed to suicide to have diagnosable depression, almost twice as likely to have diagnosable anxiety, and more likely to report suicide ideation (9% vs. 5%). This study also found that those closest to the descendant are at increased risk of depression and anxiety, and more likely to develop posttraumatic stress disorder (Cerel et al, 2016). As the National Alliance on Mental Illness describes, “A suicide is like a pebble in a pond. The waves ripple outward.” In other words, one death by suicide affects the whole community.

<sup>1</sup>The COVID-19 pandemic impacted data collection for the year 2020, so the collection years of 2019 and 2020 were combined. For more information, see this report: <https://www.samhsa.gov/data/sites/default/files/reports/rpt35341/2020NSDUHsaeMethodology112421/NSDUHsaeMethodology2020.pdf>

## Suicide Prevention in Iowa

The [Iowa Plan for Suicide Prevention](#) identifies suicide prevention priorities, statewide suicide prevention efforts and provides strategies that coalitions, organizations, state agencies and communities can use to address those priorities. The Iowa Suicide Prevention Planning Group is a group of individuals from across the state working to prevent suicide in Iowa. The group meets quarterly to gain knowledge of best practices in suicide prevention, share resources and events that are happening across the state. For more information about this group, please contact Keri Neblett, Suicide Prevention Director at [keri.neblett@idph.iowa.gov](mailto:keri.neblett@idph.iowa.gov).

[Your Life Iowa](#) is an integrated system for information and resources for concerns about alcohol, drugs, gambling, mental health and suicide. Crisis counselors are available 24/7 via phone, chat and text to provide free, confidential support.

### *Additional Resources for Suicide Prevention in Iowa*

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention \(AFSP\) - Iowa Chapter](#)  
[National Alliance on Mental Illness Iowa](#)  
[Iowa Department of Human Services \(DHS\) MHDS Crisis Services](#)

**YOUR LIFE IOWA**  
**CALL: (855) 581-8111**  
**TEXT: (855) 895-8398**  
**LIVE CHAT: YOURLIFEIOWA.ORG**

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