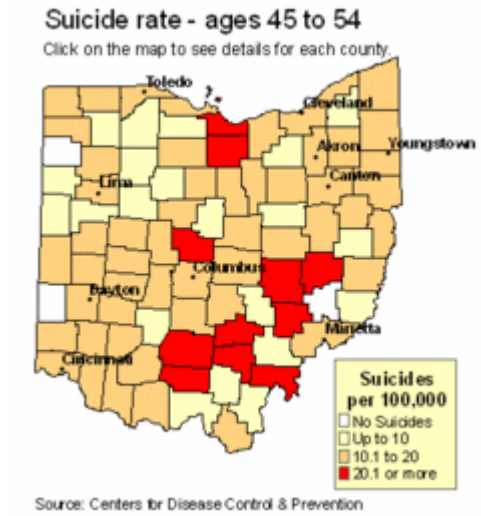


Boomers' suicide trend continues as they age

Posted by [Harlan Spector](#) March 27, 2008 08:10AM

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In the early 1980s, young adults had among the highest rates of suicide in Northeast Ohio. Today that same generation of boomers, now in their late 40s and early 50s, is behind a surge of suicides among middle-agers.

While the elderly are most likely to carry out suicides, there is growing recognition of boomers in crisis. Experts say disappearing jobs, fraying families, drug and alcohol addictions and untreated mental illness are eating away at the generation that supposedly has the best of everything.

Research has found that post-World War II children are prone to depression and other mood disorders. Then recently some startling numbers came out of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: The suicide rate among Americans aged 45-54 jumped about 20 percent from 1999 to 2004.

The news was no surprise to Dr. Joseph Calabrese, a psychiatrist and longtime director of the mood disorders program at University Hospitals Case Medical Center. People born in the 1950s and '60s have rates of bipolar disorder and major depression two and three times higher than previous generations, he said. Most are untreated or inadequately treated.

Calabrese said the surge in suicides among boomers follows the pattern of a troubled generation.

"I think it's real," he said. "It would be a stretch to prove it."

A Plain Dealer analysis found white middle-aged men in Ohio have especially high rates of suicide -- more than twice the overall national rate.

Attention is often focused on triggering events such as financial crisis or soured relationships. But mental illness underlies the vast majority of suicides, experts say. It's often compounded by substance abuse. Boomers have high rates of that, too.

In many cases, both problems are closely held secrets, unknown to family members until after the fact.

Carolyn Givens was busy running the Ohio Department of Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services when she found out her husband, Greg, was mentally ill and a substance abuser. In 2003, Greg drove to a park and slit his wrists. He was 50 and had lost his job a few days earlier, and had not told her. Police found him before he bled to death, and he survived.

"I missed signs," says Givens, who is now executive director of the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation. "I thought he was tired. He seemed very tired. I didn't know he was depressed."

Several experts said job loss is high on the list of traumas that push some down the darkest paths.

From her vantage point in Stark County, Carole Vesely has seen it firsthand. A recurring theme in suicide notes is a former breadwinner who can't support family and feels worthless, she said.

"When I interview people who have attempted suicide, the most classic statement I hear is, 'My family would be better off without me,'" she said.

University of Akron psychologist James Rogers said suicide trends are not well understood, but he said lack of job stability and the collapse of pension and health benefits play a big role in the middle-age phenomenon.

"My dad worked 35 years in the same place. A lot of folks our age grew up in that world, which has dramatically changed," said Rogers, who is president-elect of the American Association of Suicidology. "Those things have to contribute in some sense to a feeling of helplessness as we get older. Does it cause suicide? There's no one thing that causes suicide."

Loree Vick, a former local TV anchor and now media relations manager for University Hospitals, lost her husband, John, when he committed suicide three years ago. His was another case of a man who largely kept hidden the psychic pain of depression, and what Vick now believes was unrecognized bipolar

disorder. John lost his job as a business executive at age 51, and he began a two-year downward spiral.

"He was able to mask it by being successful, being with family, having things go well for him," said Vick, who has joined a local group called the Suicide Prevention Education Alliance, and who speaks publicly to cope with the emotional fallout.

"If you have a mental disease, you're less equipped to handle setbacks and traumas in your life. It becomes debilitating," Vick said.

There are roughly 30,000 suicides a year in the United States, almost twice the number of homicides. Overall, rates among different age groups have declined in Northeast Ohio in the past two decades, according to a Plain Dealer analysis. But researchers have a hard time explaining with certainty why rates go up and down among certain populations.

In Cuyahoga County, which averages about 160 suicides a year, an effort is under way to conduct psychological post-mortems. Information about mental health histories and events leading up to suicide could bring greater clarity to populations at risk and guide prevention programs.

"We'd have some greater insight into what's going on, because right now we don't know," said Rick Oliver, who oversees the county suicide hot line and sits on a county prevention task force.

The Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation hopes to raise money for pilot programs in Cuyahoga and Franklin counties, Givens said.

Calabrese of University Hospitals said the post-mortems would reveal "undiagnosed, untreated illness for a long time." In the past 19 years, three dozen patients treated in his mood disorders program have killed themselves, he said.

"I always go back and obsess about these things -- it was completely unpredictable," Calabrese said.

"My explanation is we got them too late. We get them after they've had illness for decades."