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Rising suicides, drug use a call to get involved

By [Bill Buley The Garden Island](#) | Thursday, November 29, 2018, 12:57 p.m.

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We all hear the stories of political turmoil in this country. The anger. The hate. The hostility. The intolerance. The narrow-mindedness.

All of that should take a backseat to a report that was released today. The suicide death rate last year was the highest it's been in at least 50 years, according to U.S. government records. There were more than 47,000 suicides, up from a little under 45,000 the year before.

Overall, according to the Associated Press story, there were more than 2.8 million U.S. deaths in 2017, or nearly 70,000 more than the previous year, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said. It was the most deaths in a single year since the government began counting more than a century ago.

"The increase partly reflects the nation's growing and aging population," AP reported. "But it's deaths in younger age groups — particularly middle-aged people — that have had the largest impact on calculations of life expectancy, experts said."

More people are taking their own lives. This is an area of huge concern on Kauai, where young people can be overwhelmed with hopelessness. It's also, as this report shows, an area of concern nationally.

In the nation's 10 leading causes of death, only the cancer death rate fell in 2017. Meanwhile, there were increases in seven others — suicide, stroke, diabetes, Alzheimer's, flu/pneumonia, chronic lower respiratory diseases and unintentional injuries.

In this era of medical breakthroughs, mantras to exercise and watch our diet, in this time of a rising economy, low unemployment and affordable health care, more people are suffering from illnesses and more people are committing suicide.

For decades, the AP reported, U.S. life expectancy was on the upswing, rising a few months nearly every year. Now it's trending the other way: It fell in 2015, stayed level in 2016, and declined again last year, the CDC said.

The nation is in the longest period of a generally declining life expectancy since the late 1910s, when World War I and the worst flu pandemic in modern history combined to kill nearly 1 million Americans. Life expectancy in 1918 was 39.

Aside from that, "we've never really seen anything like this," said Robert Anderson, who oversees CDC death statistics, in the AP story.

What some are finding is that people are losing hope.

Financial struggles, a widening income gap and divisive politics are all casting a pall over many Americans, said Dr. William Dietz, a disease prevention expert at George Washington University,

"I really do believe that people are increasingly hopeless, and that that leads to drug use, it leads potentially to suicide," he said.

Drug overdose deaths also continued to climb, surpassing 70,000 last year, in the midst of the deadliest drug overdose epidemic in U.S. history. The death rate rose 10 percent from the previous year, smaller than the 21 percent jump seen between 2016 and 2017, the AP reported.

That's not quite cause for celebration, said Dr. John Rowe, a professor of health policy and aging at Columbia University.

"Maybe it's starting to slow down, but it hasn't turned around yet," Rowe said. "I think it will take several years."

The CDC figures are based mainly on a review of 2017 death certificates. The life expectancy figure is based on current death trends and other factors.

The agency also said:

- A baby born last year in the U.S. is expected to live about 78 years and 7 months, on average. An American born in 2015 or 2016 was expected to live about a month longer, and one born in 2014 about two months longer than that.
- The suicide rate was 14 deaths per 100,000 people. That's the highest since at least 1975.
- The percentage of suicides due to drug overdose has been inching downward.
- Deaths from flu and pneumonia rose by about 6 percent. The 2017-2018 flu season was one of the worst in more than a decade, and some of the deaths from early in that season appeared in the new death rates.

- Death rates for heroin, methadone and prescription opioid painkillers were flat. But deaths from the powerful painkiller fentanyl and its close opioid cousins continued to soar in 2017.

The CDC did not discuss 2017 gun deaths in the reports released Thursday. But earlier CDC reports noted increased rates of suicide by gun and by suffocation or hanging.

Interesting to note is that, in Belgium, where euthanization of people is legal, 10,000 people have been legally killed by doctors in the past 15 years. Sad that the best they can offer to some people who have “unbearable and untreatable” suffering is to agree to kill them. Oh, it’s their choice, some will quickly point out. It’s their life to take if they want. Who are we to judge? So we agree to end their life.

So what can we do about all this? What are we going to do about more people taking their own lives, turning to drugs and battling depression?

Well, we can go about life as usual, which means taking care of ourselves and checking in on those within our limited circle of friends and family. We can continue to pat ourselves on the back because our lives are good. We can pretend we care but do nothing different. We can look the other way and pretend we don’t notice anything different.

Or we can try to look beyond that circle and try to connect with neighbors we haven’t spoken to in 10 years or call that relative we last saw at the family reunion six years ago. We can try to be respectful and courteous to others, even when we don’t agree with them on matters of politics and religion. We can, actually, at risk of failure, get involved.

In this day of divisiveness, people are becoming more narrow-minded and less tolerant of those who don’t see things in the same way, who don’t share the same opinion. Any change must start with each person.

Of course, there are those who will disagree and say that’s a simplistic view. Merely being nice and respectful isn’t going to do a darn thing to prevent people from using drugs and committing suicide, some will argue. Donating to fundraisers and volunteering at the humane society won’t change a thing, others will argue. Professional help is needed. More treatment centers. More counselors. More money. And so it goes.

We agree professionals, treatment centers, counselors and money can reduce drug use and suicide. But we believe there are better ways. It starts at home. All of us, whether we like it or not, can influence this island, this country, this world. How we influence it is up to us.