

Suicidal thoughts surged as people struggled with finances and isolation during COVID-19

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The sudden economic fallout at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic affected millions of people and contributed to a three-fold rise in persistent or elevated depression in the United States. But the extent of

this toll on mental health is still coming to light.

Now, a new study led by Boston University School of Public Health (BUSPH) researchers reveals that suicidal thoughts increased substantially, as well, during the pandemic.

Published in the journal *PLOS One*, the study found that [suicidal ideation](#) was nearly five times higher at the start of the pandemic and disproportionately affected people living in [low-income households](#). People who had difficulty paying rent or who felt lonely—two problems that intensified during COVID due to social distancing to reduce spread of COVID-19 and the unprecedented shock to the economy—also reported a substantial rise in suicidal thoughts.

The study provides valuable insight into the short- and long-term mental [health](#) effects of the pandemic. As people continue to experience multiple COVID-related stressors, the researchers emphasize the need for policies and programs that provide financial and [social support](#), particularly to vulnerable populations.

"Everyone felt the toll of mental distress from the challenges of the pandemic and unemployment crisis, and people who are [low-income](#) and housing insecure were most impacted," says study lead and corresponding author Dr. Julia Raifman, assistant professor of health law, policy & management at BUSPH. "Policies and programs that help people stay in their homes and avoid economic hardship may make a big difference for improving mental health. It is also key to ensure that there are [mental health services](#) and supports for low-income children and adults."

For the study, Raifman and colleagues examined nationally representative survey data on demographics, suicidality, and a variety of pandemic-related stressors, including COVID-19 illness and

bereavement, income, job loss, financial distress, loneliness, and more. The data included responses from more than 1,400 participants in the COVID-19 Life Stressors Impact on Mental Health and Well-Being (CLIMB) survey from March 31, 2020 to April 13, 2020, and more than 5,000 participants in the 2017-2018 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES).

The prevalence of [suicidal thoughts](#) increased from 3.4 percent in 2017-2018 pre-pandemic, to 16.3 percent after the start of the pandemic. The spike was greatest among participants who earned less than \$20,000 each year, Hispanic participants, and participants ages 18 to 29. Suicidal ideation also burdened 31 percent of people who had trouble paying their rent, and 25 percent of people who struggled with loneliness.

"It was striking that around a quarter of low-income persons, Hispanic persons, and people ages 18-29 years reported suicidal ideation in 2020," says study co-author Dr. Catherine Ettman, postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Mental Health at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "These findings add evidence to the growing body of work showing the mental health disparities experienced during the pandemic across asset and demographic groups. The early pandemic particularly affected the mental health of young people, persons with low assets, and groups that have been traditionally marginalized by society."

Job loss was not associated with suicidal ideation in the CLIMB survey, but further research could provide insight into the potential effects of prolonged COVID-related unemployment, and whether suicidality risks differ by wealth. In previous work, the researchers found links between assets and mental health, suggesting that people with higher income and savings are less likely to experience depression, a risk factor for suicidality.

"We are now starting to see the long term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic," says study coauthor Dr. Salma Abdalla, research fellow at BUSPH. "The effects of the pandemic will be felt for a long time, particularly for young persons who will navigate the health and [mental health](#) consequences of this moment across the life course."

Policies that target populations experiencing [financial distress](#) and [social isolation](#) could serve as a valuable tool for [suicide prevention](#), as well as policies that strengthen firearm restrictions—the primary means of suicide deaths—the researchers say.

"I hope we may see more research on how policies and programs that jointly maximize health and economic well-being," Dr. Raifman says. "After the period when we conducted this study, Congress implemented stimulus checks, the expanded child tax credit, and unemployment insurance expansion that led to record reductions in poverty—benefiting health and reducing economic hardship for millions of Americans. This shows us the best of what is possible with policies, and I hope we will see more enduring federal and state investments in similar policies."

More information: Julia Raifman et al, Economic precarity, loneliness, and suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic, *PLOS ONE* (2022). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0275973](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0275973)

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