

'Deaths of despair' soaring among Gen Z & millennials: 'It's the economy, stupid'

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Young Americans are killing themselves in record numbers, the victims of a confluence of economic and sociological factors that have singled them out - even above a nationwide surge in so-called "deaths of despair."

Suicide rates among teens and young adults aged 15 to 24 - the older end of "*Generation Z*" - spiked in 2017, reaching their highest point since 2000, according to a study published Tuesday in the *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. They've risen 51 percent in the past 10 years, buoyed by rising rates of anxiety and depression along with social media and drug use, and the figures may be even higher, since some intentional overdoses are not counted as suicides.

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Young men saw the steepest rise in deaths, according to the JAMA study, though women are catching up to them at an alarming pace. Teens and young adults report higher rates of anxiety and depression than previous generations, and multiple [studies](#) in recent years have shown that social media use exacerbates both conditions, creating a self-perpetuating feedback loop that can have tragic consequences.

But Generation Z is simply following in the footsteps of its predecessors. The much-maligned millennial generation, defined by the Census Bureau as those born between 1982 and 2000

(meaning some are included in the JAMA study), are also killing themselves in record numbers. Drug-related deaths among ages 18 to 34 have increased 108 percent since 2007, while alcohol-related deaths are up 69 percent and suicides are up 35 percent, according to a [report](#) published last week by Trust for America's Health. While millennials have long been written off as entitled, spoiled snowflakes, the media and society are belatedly realizing that they aren't just layabouts unmotivated to exit their parents' basement - this "*despair*" has a cause, and it's primarily economic.

The rise of millennial and Gen Z "*deaths of despair*" can be traced to the yawning gap between reality and expectations. Raised on the myths of the American Dream, these are the first Americans to experience a markedly lower standard of living than their parents, the Baby Boomers who grew prosperous on the fruits of the postwar economic boom. The national debt has ballooned, driven by two decades of an unwinnable war whose cost is [poised](#) to top \$6 trillion, and the Pentagon's budget has swollen to an unprecedented size even as cuts to social services have decimated what little social safety net Americans could once count on. Multiple rounds of tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations destroyed the government's revenue base, and perhaps unsurprisingly, economic inequality has grown to [exceed](#) even the rates seen during the Great Depression.

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And even these concerns are beside the point for a generation that left college already shackled with student loan debt that can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars and cannot be canceled even by declaring bankruptcy. Millennials who graduated in the aftermath of the 2008 crash entered the "*real world*" to find no jobs waiting for them. Lucky if they could find an unpaid internship or a waitressing gig, they were forced to retreat back into their parents' basements, a crushing blow for anyone but particularly for a generation told since birth that they were special, that they could do anything they wanted, that the world was their oyster.

The US, perhaps uniquely in the developed world, views poverty as a sin, and many millennials suffer in silence, believing they are the only ones in their peer group to "*flunk out*" of the "*real world*." Instead of finding support from friends and family, they take advantage of the ready availability of alcohol and opioids, a factor that has caused the number of "*deaths of despair*" to skyrocket. Some economically-depressed states, like West Virginia, have seen drug overdoses increase more than fivefold in the last 12 years, according to a [report](#) published earlier this month by the Commonwealth Fund, and many more have seen their number double and triple. That pharmaceutical companies flooded the market with opioids at the same time the rise of social media devastated the quality and complexity of human relationships is a particularly deadly coincidence.

Since 1996, the average net worth of "*consumers*" under 35 has declined 35 percent, according to management consultancy Deloitte. Advertisers are starting to realize that targeting this group, while it may seem like a savvy marketing decision - they constitute a quarter of the US population, after all - doesn't make [sense](#), since they can't afford to buy anything. Student debt is up 160 percent since 2004 for the under-30 population, and the home-ownership rate for millennials is only 37 percent - fully eight percentage points lower than their parents. Fully 89 percent would *liketo* own a home, according to a [survey](#) conducted last year, but nearly half have zero dollars in savings - let alone the 20 percent most mortgages require for a down payment.

Young people aren't the only ones afflicted by the "*deaths of despair*" phenomenon. Life expectancy nationwide is down for the third year in a row, and a report from Trust for America's Health published last year projects that this "*epidemic*" - which they define as drug and alcohol deaths plus suicide - is on track to kill more than 1.6 million people by 2025 if it continues to grow at its current rate. As the Baby Boomers start to retire only to find they cannot live on their meager savings - assuming they still have any - they, too, are killing themselves more often, with suicide [rates](#) up 40 percent from 2007 to 2015.

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This is not only a young people's problem, nor is it an easy one to solve, but acknowledging the systemic poverty afflicting the "*richest country in the world*" - where two-thirds of the population doesn't have [enough](#) saved to cover a \$500 crisis - is a good place to start.
