



August 28, 2018

## US Deaths From Drug Overdose, Suicide Surpass Diabetes

By **Sadhana Bharanidharan**

Experts believe that by categorizing both suicide and substance-related poisonings under deaths by self-injury, patients can benefit from combined and coordinated efforts of prevention.

Self-injury mortality has surpassed diabetes as the seventh leading cause of death in the United States, according to a new report. Deaths in this category are caused by drug or alcohol intoxication as well as all methods of suicide.

The study titled “Mortality in the United States from self-injury surpasses diabetes: a prevention imperative” was published in the journal *Injury Prevention* on Aug.27.

“Deaths from suicide and drug overdose are rising, and they happen at a younger age than deaths from diabetes,” said Ian Rockett, lead author of the report and a professor emeritus of epidemiology at West Virginia University.

Researchers estimated 29.1 deaths from suicide or drug overdose per 100,000 Americans in the year 2016. This was compared to deaths caused by diabetes, found to be 24.8 deaths per 100,000 Americans. The increase in the former was considered significant as both death rates were nearly equal in 2014, just two years before.

Among several factors, as many would suspect, these numbers can be attributed to the growing opioid epidemic in the U.S., which has accounted for a significant increase in drug overdose deaths. What the authors of the new report propose is that drug overdose deaths should be categorized under self-injury deaths just like suicide is.

“We’re so entrenched in separating suicide from drug overdose or alcohol poisoning deaths that people can’t wrap their heads around the idea that they are related,” said co-author [Dr. Hilary S. Connery](#), clinical director of the Division of Alcohol and Drug Abuse at [McLean Hospital](#), Massachusetts.

She noted how suicidal behavior and substance abuse share a lot of the same risk factors. Past studies have shown childhood trauma and untreated depression can be strong predictors of future death due to suicide or alcohol and drug poisoning.

Whether intentional, unintentional or undetermined, combining all such forms of self-injury into one category can shed a much-needed spotlight on mental health and improve preventative efforts in clinical care.

While patients diagnosed with depression and related disorders will benefit from substance abuse screenings, the mental health of patients receiving treatment for alcohol and drug abuse will also be prioritized more.

Such coordination is patchy at the moment, Rockett noted. In an example, he described a scenario where a patient is being treated in the emergency department for a drug overdose, but may or may not be referred to mental health services.

“Turning the tide will require coalescence and coordination of upstream efforts through both governmental policies and community prevention initiatives, with a focus on common risks for diverse outcomes,” the authors