

Veteran Suicide in New York State: The Latest Trends

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Veteran Suicide in New York State

Suicide among veterans is a persistent national challenge despite increased federal and state attention. Veteran suicide rates have risen steadily for years and peaked in 2018. Many predicted that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic could bring about a perfect storm of behavioral health and related challenges for the veteran population, leading to increases in suicide. Yet newly released data from 2020—the most recent year available—show that veteran suicide rates both nationally and in New York State remained stable and may have even dipped slightly.

While a stabilization of veteran suicide rates is welcome, there is still cause for concern. The current suicide rates among veterans—in the nation and in New York State—are still worse than they were 15 years ago. Furthermore, trends in the general population suggest that the recent stabilization in veteran suicide rates is fragile. Rising drug overdose deaths, firearm use in suicides, and nationwide increases in suicide deaths overall are warning signs that veteran suicides may rise again.^{1,2,3} In this data brief, we review the latest data from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and other sources to explore the current state of veteran suicide in New York State and nationally.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- The rate of veteran suicide in New York State appears to have stabilized in recent years, but warning signs suggest that progress is fragile.
- Suicide rates among veterans are twice as high as among the civilian population.
- Younger veterans (ages 18–54) experience the highest rates of suicide.
- New York veterans have had a dramatic increase in firearm use for suicide.

¹ Office of Budget Policy and Analysis, Office of the New York State Comptroller. Continuing Crisis: Drug Overdose Deaths in New York State, November 2022. <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/reports/continuing-crisis-drug-overdose-deaths-new-york>.

² Simon TR, Kegler SR, Zwald ML, et al. Notes from the Field: Increases in Firearm Homicide and Suicide Rates — United States, 2020–2021. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2022;71:1286–1287, October 7, 2022. https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/71/wr/mm7140a4.htm?s_cid=mm7140a4_w.

³ Curtin SC, Garnett MF, and Ahmad FB, Provisional Numbers and Rates of Suicide by Month and Demographic Characteristics: United States, 2021, National Vital Statistics System Vital Statistics Rapid Release Report No. 24, September 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr024.pdf>.



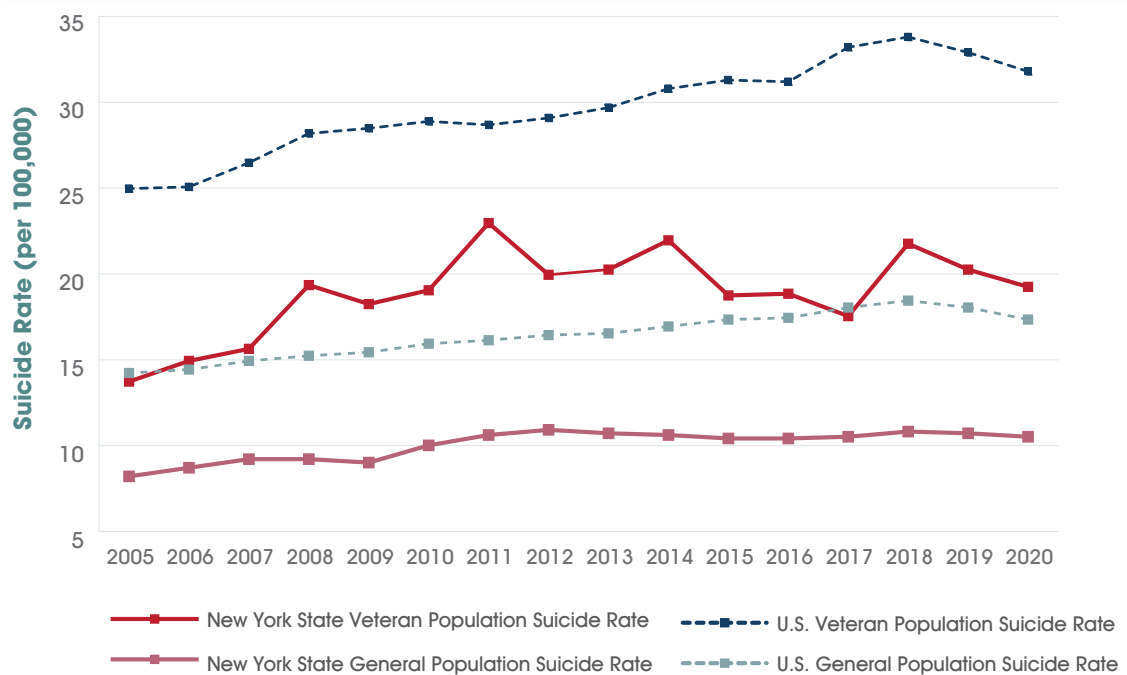
Veteran Suicide in New York State (continued)

VETERAN SUICIDE RATES HAVE RECENTLY STABILIZED, BUT ARE HIGHER THAN FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

The stabilization of veteran suicide rates in 2020 is cause for cautious optimism. But veteran suicides remain too common. In 2020, 6,146 veterans nationally died by suicide and 143 veterans in New York died by suicide that same year.

Furthermore, the decline in total veteran suicide numbers does not translate into a true downward trend because the size of the veteran population is also declining. Nationally, the number of veteran deaths by suicide in 2020 returned to being on par with the number in 2005. However, there were 5 million fewer veterans living in 2020 than in 2005 across the nation. Even as the number of veteran deaths by suicide has declined over time, the rate is much higher—nearly 32 per 100,000 veterans in 2020, compared with 25 per 100,000 in 2005. [\[See full data set.\]](#)

FIGURE 1. National and New York State Suicide Rate, Veterans and General Population, 2005–2020



That pattern is more exaggerated in New York State; its overall veteran population dropped by an even greater percentage than the nation's did during the same period. Consequently, although the number of veteran suicides has declined, New York State's veteran suicide



Veteran Suicide in New York State (continued)

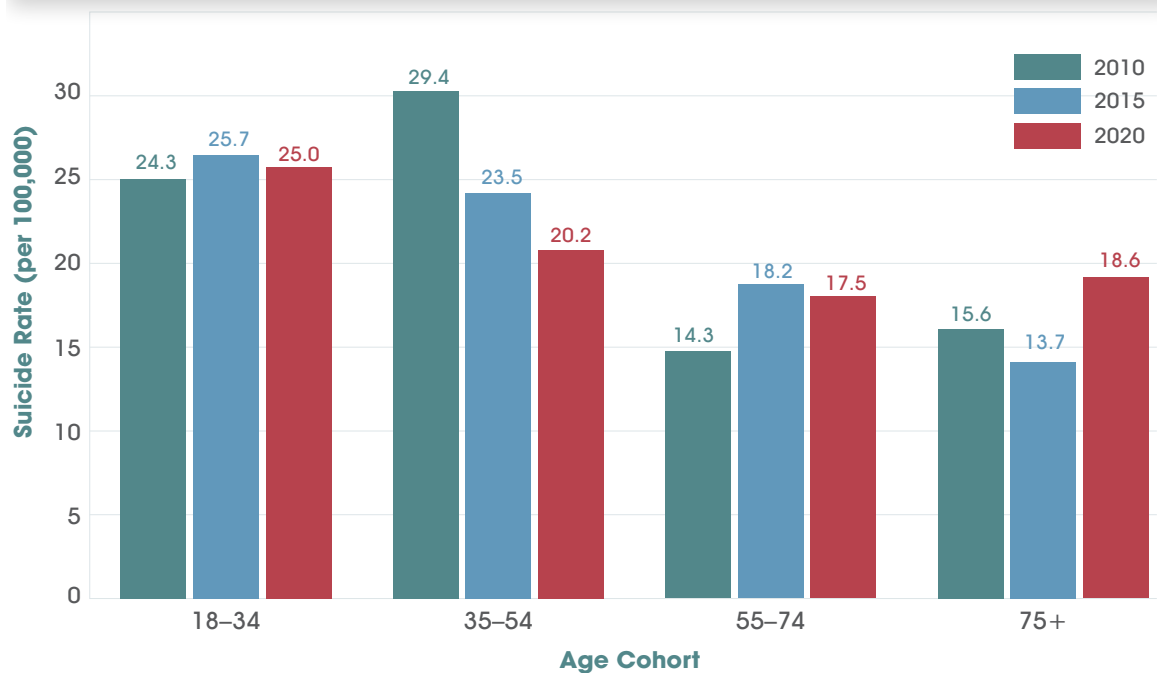
rates have increased over time from nearly 14 per 100,000 veterans in 2005 to 19 per 100,000 veterans in 2020. [\[See full data set.\]](#)

Both nationally and in New York State, suicide rates among veterans are twice as high as civilian rates—a disparity that has persisted for at least 15 years.

YOUNGER VETERANS CONTINUE TO EXPERIENCE THE HIGHEST RATES OF SUICIDE

In New York State, veteran suicide rates are highest among veterans ages 18–34. This age group has also been at highest risk for poor mental health outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic.^{4,5} The comparatively high rates of suicide among younger veterans suggests that prevention efforts should be tailored to meet the unique needs of post-9/11 veterans.

FIGURE 2. New York State Veteran Suicide Rate, by Age Cohort, 2010–2020



⁴ Czeisler MÉ, Lane RI, Petrosky E, et al. Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1049–1057, August 14, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>

⁵ Wilson JM, Lee J, Shook NJ. COVID-19 worries and mental health: the moderating effect of age. *Aging & Mental Health*, 25:7, 1289-1296, December 9, 2020, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13607863.2020.1856778>.

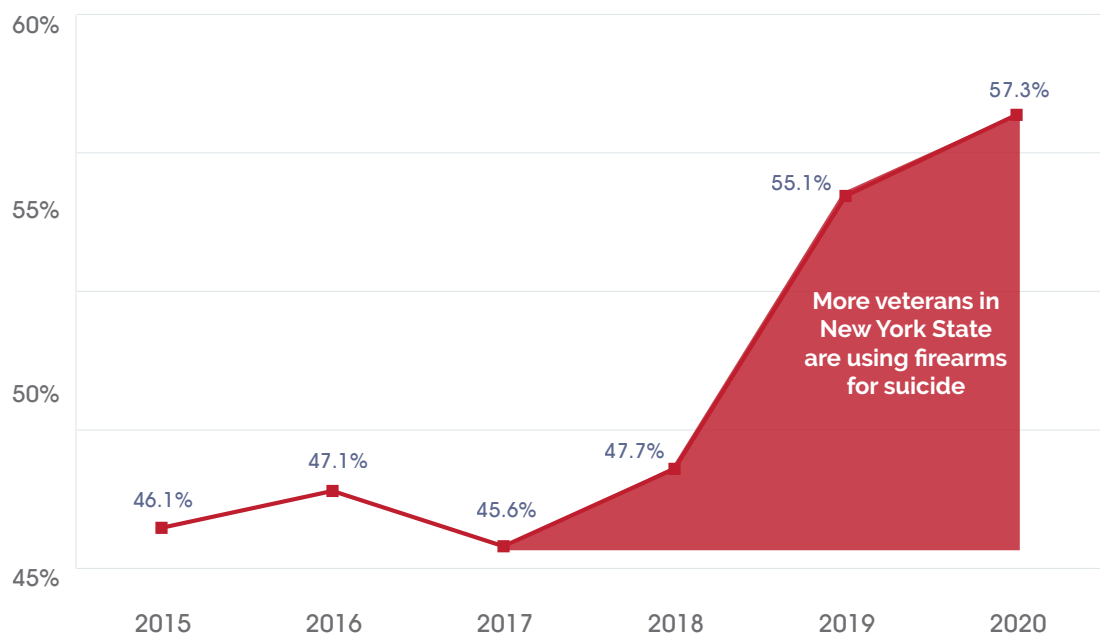


Veteran Suicide in New York State (continued)

NEW YORK VETERANS HAVE HAD A DRAMATIC INCREASE IN FIREARM USE FOR SUICIDE

Firearms are the most lethal method of suicide (85% of those who use firearms as a method of suicide die, compared with 5% of those who use other methods of suicide). The use of firearms as the method for suicide has increased over the last several years among both civilians and veterans in New York State and nationally, but the increase has been especially sharp among New York veterans. Since 2015, a 24% rise in New York veterans' use of firearms in suicides points to a need for swift and tailored interventions to address this specific method. During the same period, firearm usage for veteran suicide nationally increased 5.9%, with increases of about 2% among the general population both nationally and in New York State.⁶

FIGURE 3. Percentage of Veteran Suicides Using a Firearm in New York State, 2015–2020



⁶ See Appendix.



Veteran Suicide in New York State (continued)

THE LATEST NATIONAL DATA SUGGEST RECENT PROGRESS MAY BE FRAGILE

Newly released national data show concerning trends among the general population. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the general population showed increases in depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation in 2020.⁷ Suicidal ideation reached all-time highs in 2020 and 2021.⁸

When we see increases in overall suicide rates, based on historical trends, we can expect a concomitant increase in veteran suicide rates. Provisional data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show a 4% nationwide increase in suicide rates in 2021, approaching the earlier record high of 2018.⁹

INTENSIVE EFFORT AND COLLABORATION: AS IMPORTANT NOW AS BEFORE

After years of increases, a stabilization of veteran suicide rates is welcome. At present, government-supported efforts such as the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' National Strategy for Preventing Veteran Suicide, the Governor's Challenge to Prevent Suicide Among Veterans, and New York State's Suicide Prevention Task Force are focusing energy, attention, and financial resources to address the problem.

Community-based organizations are also engaged in important work to prevent veteran suicide. For example, Stop Soldier Suicide has been working to spread its Disrupt Veteran Suicide program throughout New York State. Organizations such as the Bronx Veterans Medical Research Foundation have created trainings for veterans, their family members, and caregivers to better understand and incorporate strategies for reducing access to firearms and other lethal means in moments of crisis. All of these programs are laudable, and they may ultimately lead to meaningful change over the long term.

It will be imperative to continue the focus of collaborative, targeted efforts to prevent veteran suicide. Warning signs on the horizon suggest that the recent stabilization of suicide rates could be fleeting. Now is the time to recommit our efforts to produce a genuine reversal and

⁷ Czeisler MÉ, Lane RI, Petrosky E, et al. Mental Health, Substance Use, and Suicidal Ideation During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 2020;69:1049–1057, August 14, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6932a1.htm>.

⁸ Mental Health America, Mental Health and COVID-19, April 2022. <https://mhanational.org/mental-health-and-covid-19-two-years-after-pandemic>.

⁹ Curtin SC, Garnett MF, and Ahmad FB, Provisional Numbers and Rates of Suicide by Month and Demographic Characteristics: United States, 2021, National Vital Statistics System Vital Statistics Rapid Release Report No. 24, September 2022. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr024.pdf>.



Veteran Suicide in New York State (continued)

decline in veteran suicide rates in New York State and across the nation. More effective and tailored efforts are especially needed to prevent suicide among post-9/11 veterans and to address the role of firearms in veteran suicide. Policymakers, health care providers, veterans service organizations, community-based organizations, educational institutions, advocates, and private funders all have a role to play in curbing veteran suicide and making sure our veterans have the resources they need to be healthy and safe.



Appendix

Data compiled from U.S. Department of Veterans' Affairs New York Veteran Suicide Data Sheet reports, 2014–2020. Latest report available at <https://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/docs/data-sheets/2020/2020-State-Data-Sheet-New-York-508.pdf>.

National veteran firearm usage per year:

2014 & 2015: 67%

2016: 69.4%

2017: 70.7%

2018: 69.4%

2019: 70.2%

2020: 71%

New York State veteran firearm usage per year:

2015: 46.1%

2016: 47.1%

2017: 45.6%

2018: 47.7%

2019: 55.1%

2020: 57.3%



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