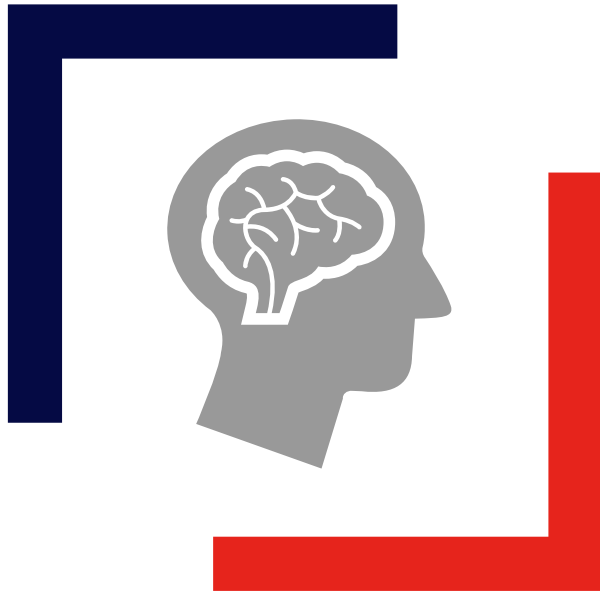


09

Section



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# Mental Health

# Mental Health

**Introduction.** Mental health refers to our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It is more than just happiness. It reflects how we think and feel, manage stress, relate to others, and make decisions. Mental health is essential for human thriving and has rightfully received much more attention in recent years.

**Summary of Results.** The United States is near the bottom of higher-income countries on every mental health measure we examined: depression and anxiety, fatal overdoses, and suicide. We are also getting steadily worse on these measures over time, overall and relative to other countries. These negative trends do not just reflect increased reporting of mental health disorders. They point to an actual decline in our well-being. America is doing worse in mental health than any other topic in this report.



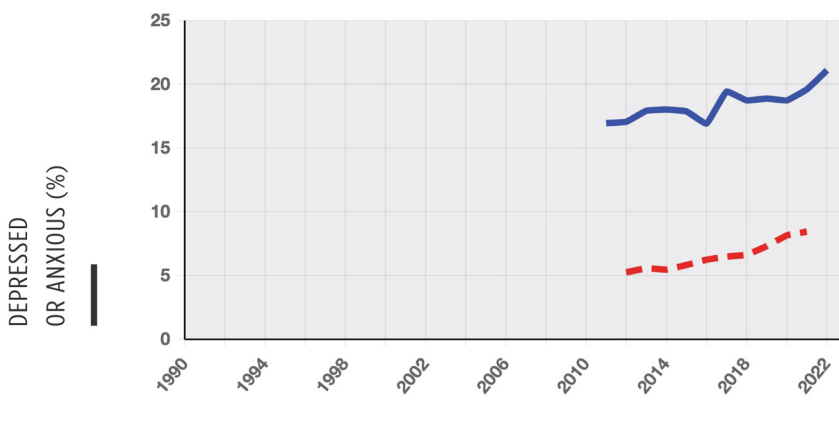
## Depression and Anxiety

**Specific measure:** Our measure of anxiety is the percentage of adults who report being nervous “all of the time” or “most of the time” over the past month. (Source: Authors’ analysis of National Surveys on Drug Use and Health). Our depression measure is the percentage of adults who report that they have been clinically diagnosed with depression. (Source: Authors’ analysis of Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System Survey).

|                |                                   |                  |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| National Trend | % of countries the US outperforms | Intl. Rank Trend |
| ↓              | 11%                               | ↓                |

**Why did we include this measure?** We chose this measure because it encompasses many disorders and is more representative of the state of anxiety today. Depression is another common mental illness and is equally debilitating. Depression and anxiety can also affect physical health and contribute to the risk of addiction.

Figure 20: Depression and Anxiety (National Trend)



### How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:**  
 Depression: Percent prevalence of depressive disorders. (Source: Authors’ analysis of Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation data).  
 Anxiety: Percent prevalence of anxiety disorders. (Source: Authors’ analysis of Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:**  
 Depression: 12% (out of 114 countries)  
 Anxiety: 10% (out of 115 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:**  
 Depression: ↓ Anxiety: ↓

**What do the data show?** On both anxiety and depression measures, we are among the worst among high-income countries, ranking near the bottom, just below Monaco, Finland, and Gabon on depression and just below Peru, Greece, and Cyprus on anxiety. We are also getting worse over time, both overall and relative to other countries.

**What might explain these patterns?** These patterns may reflect increased reporting of anxiety and depression and increased public awareness of mental health, but there is general consensus that people are more anxious and depressed than they used to be. The next two measures (suicides and fatal overdoses), which are based on actual behavior rather than self-reports, also suggest a decline in mental health. We consider other explanations of this decline below and discuss common patterns we see with our other mental health measures.

The depression rates in Figure 20 are higher than the anxiety rates. One reason for this is that the depression surveys ask about whether people have ever been diagnosed, while the anxiety surveys ask only about the past month. This makes it difficult to compare the levels of these two measures, so we focus on each separate trend.



## Fatal Overdoses

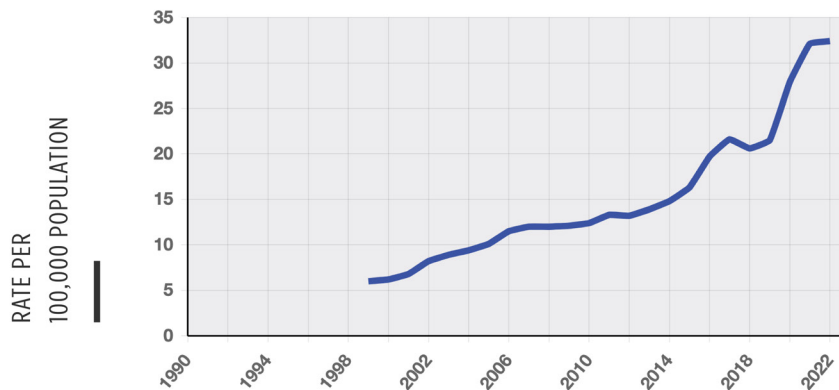
**Specific measure:** Deaths per 100,000 population from drug overdoses. (Source: Authors' analysis of Centers for Disease Control data).

|                |                                   |                  |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| National Trend | % of countries the US outperforms | Intl. Rank Trend |
| ↓              | 0%                                | ↓                |

**Why did we include this measure?** Fatal overdoses are a concern not only because of the direct loss of life but also because the use of powerful drugs reflects a broader problem with addiction. Most people who use these drugs do not die from them but do get addicted and this can physically change how our brains and bodies work in ways that make it difficult to stop using them. The fact that so many are using such high-risk drugs reflects a broader mental health crisis.

The most common drugs leading to overdose are opioids (including fentanyl, oxycodone, and heroin), stimulants (including cocaine and methamphetamines, commonly called “meth”), and sedatives (including Xanax and Valium). We focus on fatal overdoses because these reflect more extreme drug use and because they are measured more accurately than nonfatal overdoses. (When overdoses are judged to be intentional, they are also counted as suicides, which we discuss separately below.)

Figure 21: Fatal Overdoses (National Trend)



### How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** Deaths per 100,000 population from drug use disorders. (Source: Authors' analysis of Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 0% (out of 115 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

**What do the data show?** We come in last among the world's high-income countries and are getting worse each year. There are some signs that opioid overdoses may be tapering off, but they are still very high by historical standards.

**What might explain these patterns?** The primary cause of the rise in fatal overdoses appears to be increased supply and use of powerful drugs. This is partially driven by the increased availability of drugs and drug combinations that produce stronger effects and pose greater risks. Drugs like fentanyl are becoming more accessible and are far more potent than heroin and morphine, for example. The illicit production of such drugs also means that users often do not know what they are consuming. Illicit drugs are often mixed with cheaper and more dangerous drugs that users are not aware of. The rise in overdoses may also be related to the declining mental health shown in other measures in this section as well as under the Life Satisfaction section.



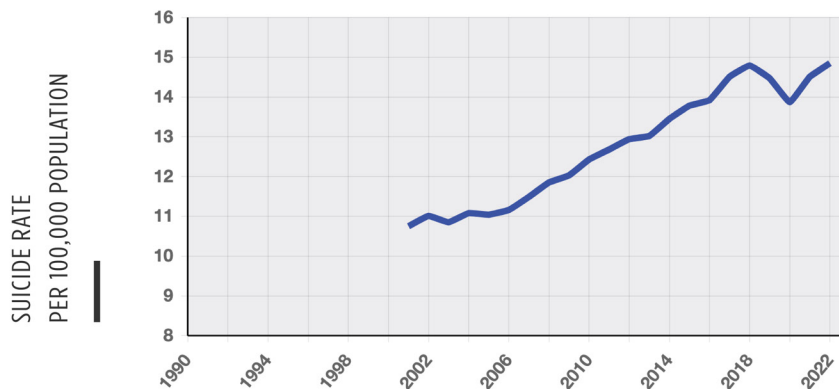
## Suicide Rate

**Specific measure:** Suicide rate per 100,000 people. (Source: Centers for Disease Control).

|                |                                   |                  |
|----------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| National Trend | % of countries the US outperforms | Intl. Rank Trend |
| ↓              | 16%                               | ↓                |

**Why did we include this measure?** Suicide is arguably the most extreme indicator of mental illness. Suicide is also consistently and accurately measured over time.

Figure 22: Suicide Rate (National Trend)



### How does the US rank globally?

- **Specific Measure:** (Same as above.) (Source: Authors' analysis of World Health Organization data).
- **Percentage of countries the US outperforms:** 16% (out of 106 countries)
- **International Rank Trend:** ↓

**What do the data show?** US suicides have been generally rising, overall and relative to other countries, ranking just below Botswana, Japan, and Finland. A steep, temporary drop in suicides occurred in 2020, coinciding with the COVID pandemic, but these numbers are once again at an all-time high.

**What might explain these patterns?** The US suicide rate is higher than almost every other country in part because of the much broader availability of guns, which are, by far, the most common means of suicide. Our suicide rate is also likely rising over time because of a decline in mental health and a rise in isolation and distress reflected in the other measures.

When we look across all these mental health measures, along with survey-based measures in Life Satisfaction and other sections, it is clear that our mental health is poor and getting worse. The causes of mental illness are many and complex, but some potential reasons include social media, social isolation, economic disparity, and increased access to addictive substances and behaviors.

**Related Topics:** The patterns here are consistent with other measures of how people feel about their lives. The most similar measure is youth depression (see the Children and Families section), which is also worsening. We also see declines in current life satisfaction and increased social isolation (see the Life Satisfaction section). Declines in mental health are also associated with declining trust in other people and institutions (see the Social Capital and Trust sections).

\*For more information about data sources and treatments, see the Data Notes section.\*



*Board and Public Support for this Topic and Measures*

|                                 | <i>Support from Board</i> | <i>Support from Public</i> |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Mental Health (as topic)</i> | 100%                      | 79%                        |
| <i>Depression and Anxiety</i>   | 79%                       | 66%                        |
| <i>Fatal Overdoses</i>          | 86%                       | 70%                        |
| <i>Suicide Rate</i>             | 93%                       | 74%                        |

**Other Measures Considered:** The board also considered, but did not include, other measures, including substance abuse and time spent alone. The public supported substance abuse but not time spent alone.