

Homicide rate for youths hits a 30-year low

Nanci Hellmich, USATODAY 6:14 p.m. EDT July 11, 2013

Lower rate is true across all age, racial and ethnic groups.



(Photo: Scott Olson, Getty Images)

Government numbers out Thursday offer some good news about crime in the USA: The homicide rate for young people, ages 10 to 24, hit a 30-year low in 2010, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The lower rate of youth homicide — those killed by other people — was true across all age, racial and ethnic youth groups, say the findings published in CDC's "Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report."

The overall homicide rate in 2010 was 7.5 deaths per 100,000 people in that age group — the lowest rate since 1981. That translates to about 4,828 homicides in this age range.

"We were very pleased to see a promising decline that began in 1994 and has continued so that in 2010 we reached a 30-year low," says the paper's lead author, Corinne Ferdon, a behavioral scientist with the CDC.

Over the 30-year study period, nearly 80% of youth homicides were firearm-related, she says. Firearm homicides are declining but at a lower pace than non-firearm homicides, she says.

"Even though we have seen this promising decline, youth homicide is still among the top three leading causes of death for our young people. This age group is disproportionately affected by it — about 13 young people die every day from homicide," she says. Homicides rank behind motor vehicle crashes and suicide, respectively, as leading causes of death in this group.

The homicide rates for some young people who are at higher risk — male and African-American youths — are declining but at a slower rate than for their peers, Ferdon says.

The researchers did not compare homicide rates between youths and other age groups.

Among the findings:

- The youth homicide rate was 12.7 people per 100,000 for males; 28.8 per 100,000 for black youths; 7.9 per 100,000 for Hispanic youths; and 2.1 per 100,000 for white youths.
- The overall youth homicide rate rose from 8.7 people per 100,000 in 1985 to a high of 15.9 people per 100,000 in 1993.
- Deaths from homicides in this age group resulted in an estimated \$9 billion in lost productivity and medical costs in 2010.

Ferdon says the lower rates of homicide may be partly due to the "hard work" being done in communities, schools and families to take a comprehensive approach to prevent violence. This includes teaching youths good communications skills and how to solve problems in non-violent ways, helping families set rules and monitor children's activities and friends and community approaches that enhance safety, she says.

"I see this as very positive news that people need to pay attention to — rather than only pay attention to the bad headline news," says Daniel Webster, deputy director for research for the Johns Hopkins Center for the Prevention of Youth Violence.

Homicide and violence among youths tends to be cyclical, going up and down over time, he says. The dramatic increases in youth homicides occurred from 1986 to 1993, followed by similarly rapid decreases during 1995-1999, he says.

Webster says that it's "an enormous success" that there wasn't an increase in homicides from 2000 to 2010 given the social and economic conditions of the time.

In 2007-08, there was an economic downturn that led to home foreclosures, family disruptions, stress, the budgets for youth programs being cut and fewer law enforcement resources, he says. On top of that you have the "huge consumption in violent video games," he says.

"You have a lot of factors at play that you might expect would make violence increase, but it didn't. This is encouraging that it has continued to decline despite a set of conditions that might have caused it to increase."

Caroline Fichtenberg, director of research at the Children's Defense Fund, a non-profit child advocacy organization, adds, "For us, the key takeaway is that the rate is still way too high. What jumps out is that the vast majority of these deaths are gun deaths. A child or teen is shot every 30 minutes, and as a result of this there's a death every three hours and 15 minutes.

"We have a report that's coming out soon, and one of the things we found is that U.S. children and teens are 32 times more likely to die in a gun homicide than children and teens in other high-income countries."