

Childhood Bereavement is a Critical Issue and National Priority

The death of a parent, sibling, or other important person in a child’s life is one of the most frequently reported disruptive childhood experiences.^{1,2} Research demonstrates that experiencing the death of a parent during childhood puts children at risk for lifelong adversity.^{3,4,5} Understanding the number of children impacted by death is essential to help every bereaved child find hope and healing.

The Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM)⁶ approximates rates of U.S. children and youth who will experience the death of a parent or sibling by the time they reach adulthood. This CBEM Key Topic Report provides a point-in-time (Snapshot) perspective of the number of children under age 18 who experienced a parent death in each year from 2017 through 2021 using data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) WONDER.^{7,*}

COVID-19 Profoundly Changed our World

One undeniable impact relates to mortality. Increased mortality has important implications for childhood bereavement. The pandemic compounded existing annual bereavement rates that reflected more than 260,000 children under 18 becoming newly bereaved due to the death of a parent. In 2021, this number increased to more than 383,000 – surging nearly 50%. While COVID-19 directly accounts for a portion of the increase, other socially stigmatized causes also contributed, including overdose and homicide. These types of loss may accompany feelings of isolation, guilt, and uncertainty in grieving families.^{8,9}

The 2023 CBEM Key Topic Report builds on the 2022 report by comparing childhood bereavement rates attributed to socially stigmatized deaths before and after the onset of COVID-19 using CBEM Snapshot analyses.[†]

*This measure is different from the Current and Projected results in the standard [CBEM State and National reports](#). These results (Snapshot, Current, Projected) should not be combined.

† For more information on CBEM Snapshot analyses, see the [CBEM Technical Appendix](#).

Specifically, this report highlights deaths due to the following causes:



Accidental drug overdose



Homicide by gunshot



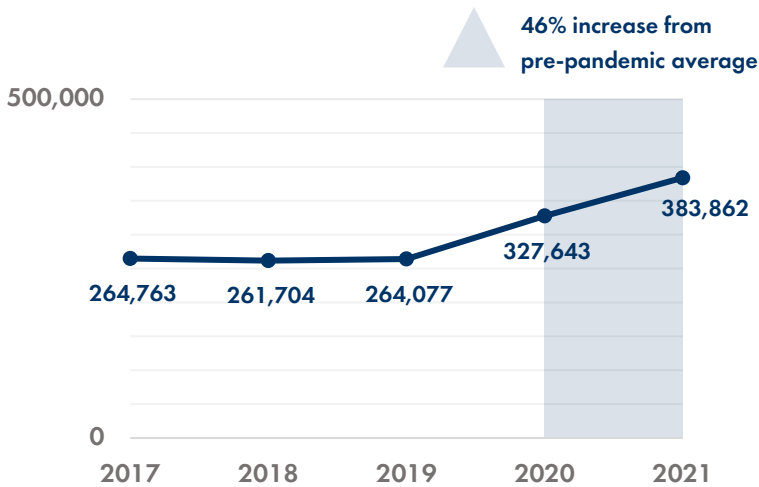
Suicide



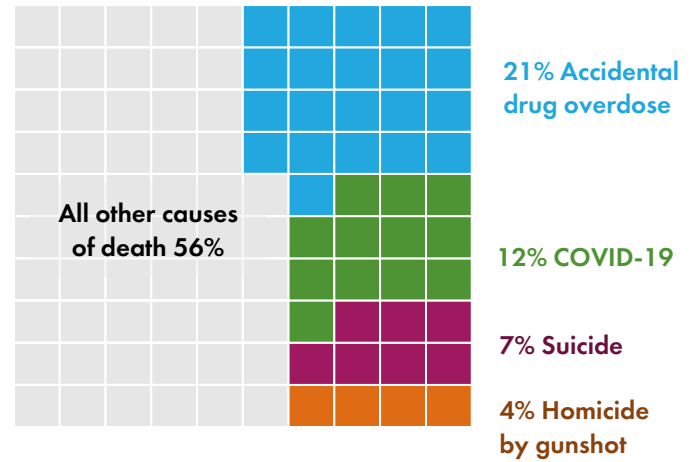
COVID-19



CBEM Snapshot results highlight an overall increase of 120,300 children bereaved in 2021 compared to pre-pandemic numbers.



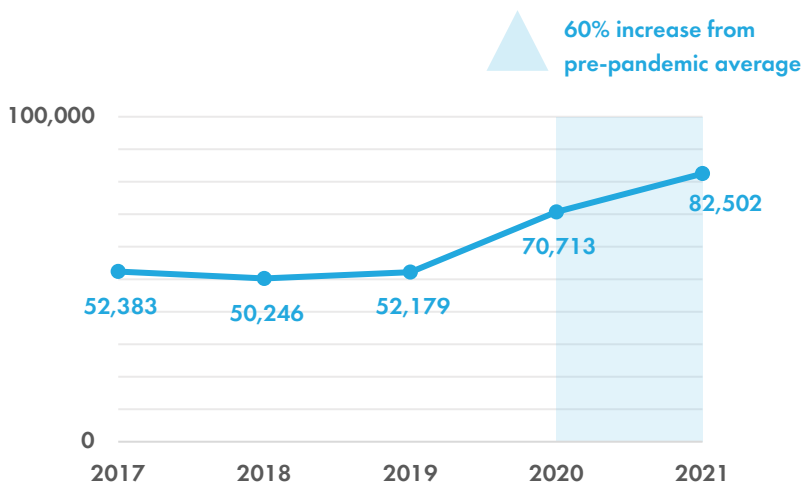
2021 Landscape of childhood bereavement due to a parent's death by cause.



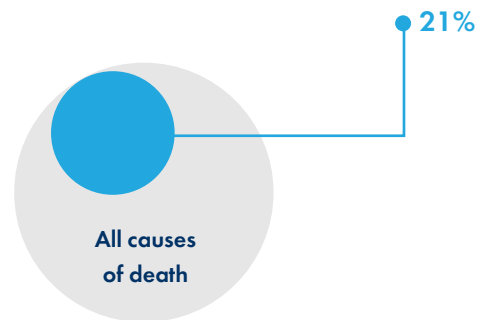
Children Newly Bereaved due to Parent Death from Accidental Drug Overdose

CBEM Snapshot results below compare the number of children newly bereaved by a parent accidental overdose death in pre-COVID years (2017-2019) and the first and second years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021).

CBEM Snapshot results reflect an increase of 30,900 children bereaved in 2021 due to a parent accidental overdose death compared to pre-pandemic numbers.



Relative proportion of the number of children bereaved due to a parent accidental overdose death.



1 in 5 children newly bereaved by a parent death in 2021 experienced an accidental overdose death.

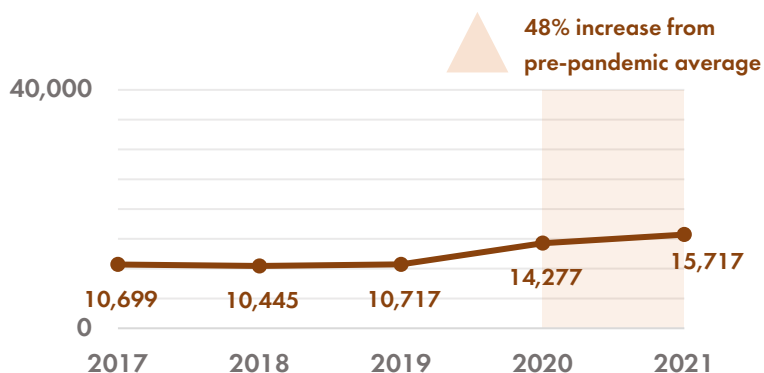




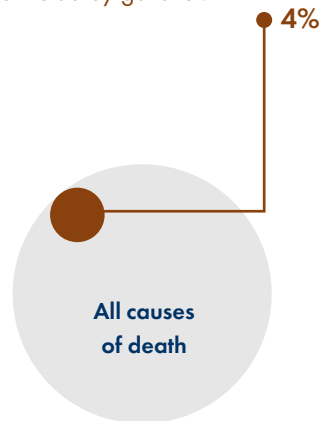
Children Newly Bereaved due to Parent Death from Homicide by Gunshot

CBEM Snapshot results below compare the number of children newly bereaved by a parent homicide by gunshot in pre-COVID years (2017-2019) and the first and second years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021). Parent death from a homicide by gunshot is relatively rare, accounting for 4% of childhood bereavement in 2021.

CBEM Snapshot results reflect an increase of 5,100 children bereaved in 2021 due to a parent homicide by gunshot compared to pre-pandemic numbers.



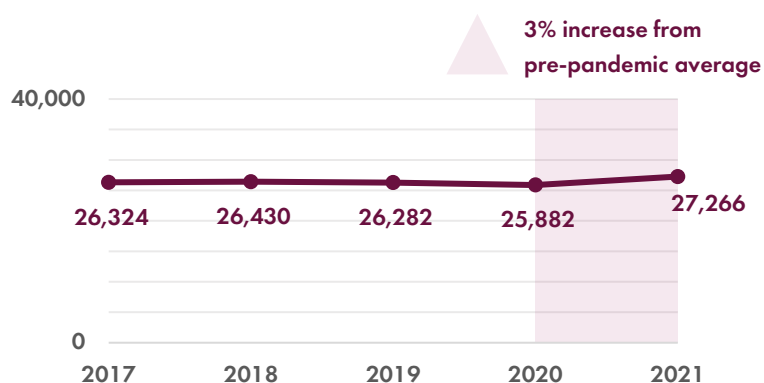
Relative portion of the number of children bereaved due to a parent homicide by gunshot.



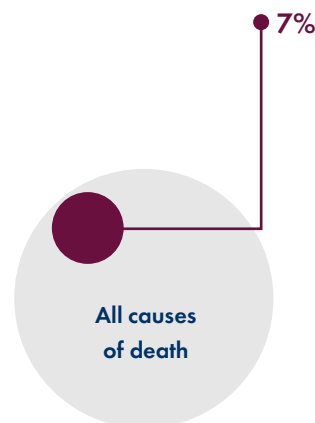
Children Newly Bereaved due to Parent Death by Suicide

CBEM Snapshot results below compare the number of children newly bereaved by a parent death by suicide in pre-COVID years (2017-2019) and the first and second years of the pandemic (2020 and 2021). Beginning in 2017, there was a year-over-year decrease in the number of children newly bereaved due to a parent suicide death. Unfortunately, in 2021 the number jumped to 27,200 children bereaved - the highest point in five years.

CBEM Snapshot results reflect an increase of 900 children bereaved in 2021 due to a parent death by suicide compared to pre-pandemic numbers.



Relative portion of the number of children bereaved due to a parent death by suicide.

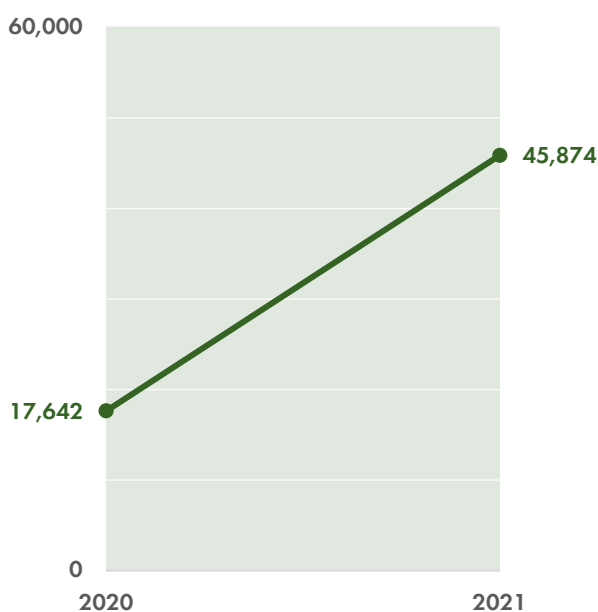




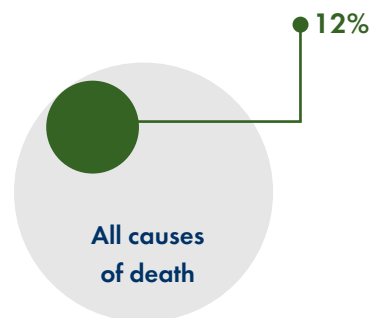
Children Newly Bereaved due to Parent Death from COVID-19

CBEM Snapshot results below display the number of children newly bereaved by the death of a parent from COVID-19.[‡] Children bereaved due to COVID-19 may experience stigma based on where, when, and how the death occurred.¹⁰ The number of children newly bereaved by a parent COVID death increased a staggering 160% in 2021 compared to 2020.

Number of children under 18 newly bereaved due to a parent COVID-19 death.



Relative proportion of the number of children bereaved in 2021 due to a parent COVID-19 death.



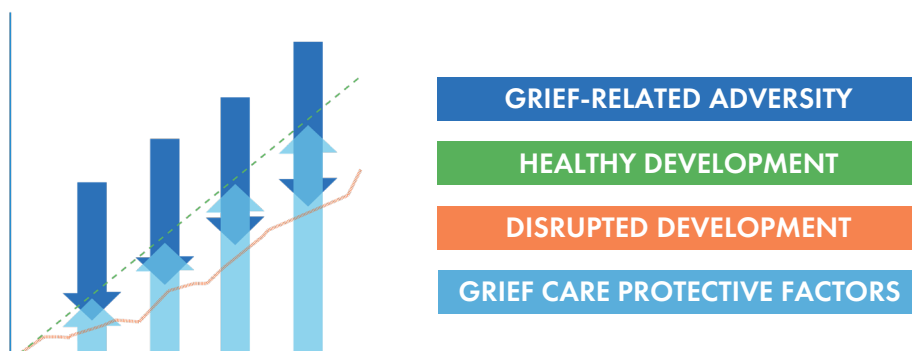
1 in 8 children newly bereaved by a parent death in 2021 experienced a COVID-19 death.



[‡] Preliminary data from January 1, 2022 – April 22, 2023 not referenced in this section’s graphics estimate an additional 11,906 children under age 18 were newly bereaved due to the death of a parent from COVID-19. Preliminary COVID-19 mortality data are released by the CDC to help track pandemic impact. Combined with errors in cause of death coding, these data may represent an undercount. CBEM results for 2022 to April 22, 2023 are initial findings that are subject to change once CDC validates and finalizes the data. 2021 U.S. population estimates from WONDER are used for the 2022 – April 2023 period.

The Cost of Inaction

Experiencing a significant death during childhood often results in profound stress and adversity that can derail a child’s development, but providing appropriate support to a grieving child can ease the impact and help keep a child’s development on track.



Graph adapted from: Harvard University Center on the Developing Child

Take Action to Support Grieving Kids

The increasing rates of childhood bereavement emphasize the need for attention to and action around this critical public health issue.

The following recommendations are offered:

-  Assess the size and scope of the issue by creating a national system for tracking childhood bereavement and related death causes with mechanisms for annual benchmarking.
-  Develop ongoing processes for screening children’s grief reactions and death loss experiences across systems and institutions (e.g., healthcare settings, schools).
-  Broaden awareness and advocacy efforts that promote grief education and ensure those coping with a death loss are met with sensitive support.
-  Promote research that seeks to understand the diverse needs of grieving children, including differences based on the cause of death, and translate these findings into practical, efficacious strategies that can be applied in settings where bereaved children and families are.
-  Strengthen workforce and community capacity to address bereavement by developing and providing specific training, tools, and resources.
-  Embed grief-informed knowledge throughout societal systems, including education, health care, criminal justice, finance, and government.
-  Provide and sustain an affordable continuum of care that addresses the broad spectrum of bereaved youth by establishing universally accessible and culturally relevant programming focused on reducing risks and promoting well-being.

The estimated 700,000 plus children under the age of 18 who experienced the death of a parent in 2020 and 2021 combined deserve wide-scale, societal understanding, sensitivity, and support. We must establish a comprehensive approach to developing and implementing resources and services to meet their needs. By uniting to invest in prevention, researchers, practitioners, educators, policymakers, and advocates can create social change that ensures a compassionate response to all grieving children and families nationwide.

Sources

- ¹ [Nickerson et al. \(2013\). Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 5\(2\), 119-127.](#)
- ² [Pynoos et al. \(2014\). Psychological trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 6\(Suppl 1\), S9-S17.](#)
- ³ [Rostila & Saarela \(2011\). Journal of Marriage and Family, 73\(1\), 236-249.](#)
- ⁴ [Smith et al. \(2014\). Social Science & Medicine, 119, 180-190.](#)
- ⁵ [Li et al. \(2014\). PLOS Medicine, 11\(7\): e1001679.](#)
- ⁶ [Burns et al. \(2023\). Frontiers in Pediatrics, 11.](#)
- ⁷ [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, CDC WONDER.](#)
- ⁸ [Goulah-Pabst \(2021\). OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying.](#)
- ⁹ [Dyregrov et. al. \(2020\). Addiction Research & Theory, 28\(5\), 415-424.](#)
- ¹⁰ [Slomski \(2021\). Journal of the American Medical Association. 326\(21\), 2117-2119.](#)



Judi's House/JAG Institute is a research-based nonprofit in Aurora, CO devoted solely to supporting grieving children and their families.



NEW YORK LIFE FOUNDATION

Judi's House/JAG Institute partnered with New York Life Foundation to create the Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM).