

Suicide ^[1]

Suicide

by Jay Mazzocchi, 2006; Revised November 2022; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, June 2023

Suicide in North Carolina, as in every state, affects a small but significant percentage of the population. The frequency of the tragedy has in the last few decades reflected nationwide trends, with large increases in several age and gender groups. In the early 2000s North Carolina ranked twenty-first among states in the overall suicide rate, with an occurrence of 12.7 suicides per 100,000 people. An average of 960 North Carolinians commit suicide each year. These relatively high numbers are alarming since in the not-so-distant past, the state's suicide rate was well below the national average.

Historically, suicide has occurred less frequently in the South than in any other region of the nation. This has been viewed as a consequence of southern culture, with its traditional emphasis on religious values, individualistic spirit, and respect for personal honor. In particular, *Christianity* ^[2]'s condemnation of suicide as an unforgivable sin—an act of defiance toward God that leaves no opportunity for repentance or contrition—made it a wholly unacceptable escape from life's troubles for early North Carolinians and other colonists. Suicide was considered a grave felony, and although *colonial* ^[3] authorities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were obviously unable to punish the felons themselves, they found retribution in other ways. For example, a suicide victim's body may have been pierced with a stake and shamefully buried, with all of the victim's belongings forfeited to the king (even when the person had dependents). Those related to the victim were often treated as pariahs within the community.

The harsh nature of such legal and social reactions to suicide reflected early North Carolinians' views on the crime and generally worked as an effective deterrent to would-be suicides. Only the most desperate, depressed, or impacted by mental illness took their own lives. For example, in the mid-1800s a group of enslaved people in North Carolina reportedly committed suicide to avoid what they believed to be imminent, severe punishment. Others did so simply to end a life of pure misery.

A relatively low suicide rate continued in North Carolina and throughout the South well into the twentieth century. However, as North Carolina and other southern states became more urbanized, their suicide rates increased. In general, the latter half of the twentieth century saw a dramatic rise in North Carolina's suicide rate as its population—and its prosperity—increased. In 1972 white males in North Carolina, many of them farmers, killed themselves 48 percent more frequently than they had ten years earlier. This "suicide boom" did not reverse in succeeding decades. Between 1980 and 1995 the state's overall suicide rate increased 13 percent, from 11.2 to 12.6 suicides per 100,000 people. While the suicide rate among *blacks* ^[4] across most age groups remained low, there were major increases in suicide among younger blacks. For instance, during this period suicide among blacks aged 10-14 rose a frightening 233 percent. Overall, teen suicides increased as well at a smaller but still alarming rate.

Since suicide is a personal and often secretive act, it is nearly impossible to find a blanket cause for its increase in frequency in North Carolina. Nevertheless, various economic and cultural changes in the state have greatly affected many North Carolinians. Primarily, the steady move from an agrarian to an industrial culture—with all its inherent stress—disrupted the traditional lifestyles of many citizens. The great increase in rural suicides in the eastern part of the state, for example, came as many *farmers* ^[5] struggled economically, watching their sons and daughters leave their farms for the cities and taking with them the dream of continuing the family business. Additionally, as the modern world becomes more technologically advanced, traditional Christianity has ceased to inform the lives of many people. Significant moral obstacles to suicide have therefore largely been removed. The disintegration of familial relationships, the stress resulting from economic pressures, the wide availability of alcohol and drugs, and other societal changes are also considered important factors in the state's suicide rate.

References:

Kathryn B. Surles, *Suicide in North Carolina*, State Center for Health Studies Report, no. 110 (1998).

Leslie Wayne, "A Rising Tide of Suicide," *Raleigh News and Observer*, 29 Aug. 1971.

Additional Resources:

North Carolina Suicide Prevention Resource: <http://www.sprc.org/states/north-carolina> ^[6]

Suicide in North Carolina: Deaths, Hospitalizations, and Youth Survey Results by Dorothee Schmid, North Carolina Public Health: <http://www.schs.state.nc.us/schs/pdf/schs140.pdf> ^[7]

Subjects:

Culture ^[8]

Authors:

Mazzocchi, Jay ^[9]

From:

Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.^[10]

1 January 2006 | Mazzocchi, Jay

Source URL:<https://ncpedia.org/suicide>

Links

[1] <https://ncpedia.org/suicide> [2] <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/115240/Christianity> [3] <https://ncpedia.org/colonial-period-overview> [4] <https://ncpedia.org/african-americans/introduction> [5] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/farmers> [6] <http://www.sprc.org/states/north-carolina> [7] <http://www.schs.state.nc.us/schs/pdf/schs140.pdf> [8] <https://ncpedia.org/category/subjects/culture> [9] <https://ncpedia.org/category/authors/mazzocchi-jay> [10] <https://ncpedia.org/category/entry-source/encyclopedia->