

Utah's jail suicide rate remains at twice the national average

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Inmates share common living spaces with individual double-bunked cells inside the Davis County Jail in Farmington on Dec. 18, 2002.

Utah's rate of suicide in county jails has remained at almost twice the national average, according to the latest statistics released by the federal government.

A U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics report made public this week showed that Utah had 85 jail suicides per 100,000 inmates in 2015-19, compared with the national average of 48. Among the 11 Western states, Utah trailed only Colorado, which had 93 suicides per 100,000.

The toll for the most recent five-year period continued a trend that has seen Utah near the top of the jail suicide death rate since 2000. The report showed Utah's rate of deaths was 80 over the 20-year period, compared to the national average of 43. Over the two decades, Utah was eclipsed only by Montana, which had a 120 rate. Montana suffered deaths at a rate of 179 per 100,000 inmates in 2010-14, but from 2015-19, its rate fell to 79, below Utah's.

Utah's county jail deaths became a major issue in 2016, when a record 25 inmates died, many by suicide. The grim outcome spurred efforts by civil liberties groups to gain public access to jail inspection data — a fight won in 2nd District Court this year, when the American Civil Liberties Union of Utah and the Disability Law Center prevailed in a civil suit to obtain the records.

The Utah Legislature in 2018 ordered annual collection of jail death data from the jails and also began reviewing drug withdrawal death and suicide prevention measures undertaken in the county lockups.

Federal data is not yet available for 2020. The state's own annual report on jail deaths is expected to be completed by November, Angelo Perillo, data coordinator for the Utah Commission on Criminal and Juvenile Justice, said Friday. The report will catalog jail deaths through the end of 2020.

The state's 2019 report said the county jail death rate for all causes was 148 per 100,000 inmates, compared with the national average of 130. More than half of the 11 deaths reported statewide were suicides. "It becomes clear that suicide, as a preventable cause of death, still has a long way to improvement," the report said.

In 2015-19, Utah had 31 reported jail suicides, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics report.

Officials in Weber and Davis counties say they continually review policies and procedures to reduce suicide risks among inmates. Steps taken since the controversies of 2016 include more extensive suicide risk screening and monitoring of inmates.

Sheriff's officials also have reported successful interventions by jail personnel that prevented suicides. For example, Davis County Jail deputies and medical personnel on Sept. 2 saved the life of a 27-year-old inmate who inflicted a severe neck injury upon himself, the sheriff's office reported.

"The sheriff's office takes the life and care of each individual in our custody very seriously," Chief Deputy Arnold Butcher said in a prepared statement. "We are saddened that this

individual felt he needed to take these steps; however, we are so grateful our staff found him in time, rendered appropriate life-saving measures, and were able to get him to the appropriate medical professionals. We are committed to seeing that he receive appropriate mental health services and we strongly encourage anyone struggling with stress, mental health and/or thoughts of suicide, to reach out and seek help.”

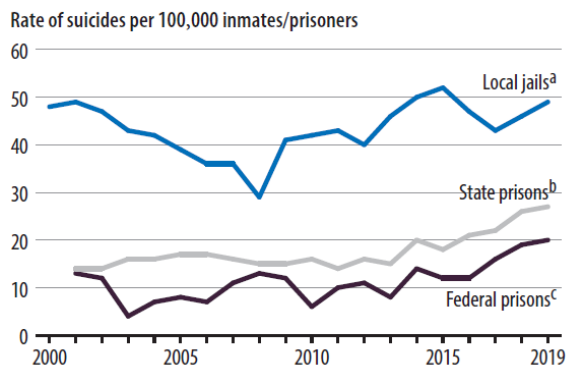
The [National Suicide Prevention Lifeline](#) can be reached at 800-273-8255.

The Davis jail, which led the state with six jail deaths in 2016, went three years without any. But it reported three in 2020, all suicides, and three in 2021, including one suicide and two medical issues.

In Weber County, one inmate died in 2018, a suicide, followed by two in 2019, one a suicide and the other a drug overdose. There were four deaths in 2020, including two suicides, a medical issue and one deemed of suspicious cause.

The federal report said that in the most recent five-year period, 12% of jail suicides nationwide occurred during the first day of incarceration.

Rate of suicides per 100,000 inmates in local jails and 100,000 prisoners in state and federal prisons, 2000–2019



Percent of suicides in local jails, by time served between admission and death, 2000–04 and 2015–19

