

# Racial/ethnic disparities in loss of parents due to drug overdoses and firearms

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Drug- and opioid-related mortality in the United States (U.S.) has been steadily growing for decades with an even more rapid increase in recent years. In 2022, 107,081 people died of an accidental overdose. Similarly, firearm mortality has been rising over the last decade. Gun-related deaths reached 48,830 in 2021, an increase of 8% from 2020. More recently, research has found increases in both gun-related mortality and opioid-related mortality among kids with gun-related mortality as the number one cause of death. But beyond the direct impacts of increased mortality, children are potentially doubly affected by premature adult deaths, through experiencing the loss of a parent. And the substantial mortality disparities across racial/ethnic lines translates to substantially different exposure to deaths in the family.

In this paper, we estimate children’s experience of parental loss due to firearms and drugs in the U.S. during the period 1999-2020, focusing on differences by race/ethnic groups. We use a variant of the matrix kinship model developed by Caswell and colleagues to estimate the magnitude of parental loss due to both drug overdoses and gun-related deaths.

Over the period 1999-2020, 673,125 and 389,946 children aged less than 18 years old have lost one or more parents due to drugs and firearms, respectively. In the year 2020, 3.42% non-Hispanic Black, 2.51% of non-Hispanic White, and 1.35%% of Hispanic children experienced the loss of a parent. While non-Hispanic white children are most impacted by parental loss due to drugs, the percent of non-Hispanic black population losing a parent due to firearms is substantially higher than the other race/ethnic groups considered. The chance of losing a mother and father is 3.26 and 2.71 times higher in 2020 relative to 1999, respectively. The probability is however close to three times higher for father at 0.017 against 0.006 for mother in 2020.

To conclude, studying child bereavement has implications at both the individual level — loss of kin has been shown to have educational, economic, and medical implications for children — but also at the population level, as a children who lose a parent may require support from the foster care system. As such, to fully understand the extent impact of drug overdoses and gun-related deaths on children, we need to focus not only on direct deaths but also on potential kin loss and subsequent effects.

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