

Childhood bereavement is a critical issue and an increasingly important 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.<sup>1,2</sup> Understanding the number of children impacted by death is essential to help every bereaved child find hope and healing.

The COVID-19 pandemic devastated U.S. families, resulting in more than 1.1 million excess deaths to date.<sup>3</sup> In addition to COVID-19 deaths, there has been a striking increase in other deaths. This increased mortality has important implications for childhood bereavement. Research demonstrates that experiencing the death of parent during childhood puts children at risk of early mortality.<sup>4,5,6</sup> Isolating the impact of the pandemic is important to develop adequate programming that can meet the increased demand for bereavement services.

## COVID-19 Pandemic Impact on Childhood Bereavement

This report highlights specific causes of death exacerbated by the pandemic that precipitate grief in childhood to inform best practices and approaches to care. Cause of death is important to examine for the following reasons:

- While childhood bereavement is not unique to the pandemic, the significant increase in bereavement due to the pandemic is unique.
- Children bereaved due to pandemic-related deaths may experience stigma based on where, when, and how the death occurred.
- Isolation and disruption created by COVID-19 safety measures affected how children grieve, such as interruptions or adaptations made to mourning rituals and practices.




## Why focus on parent death only?

- Children are three to five times more likely to experience the death of a parent in childhood than the death of a sibling.
- COVID-19 deaths for children under age 18 are rare; there were 141 in 2020.

## CBEM

The Childhood Bereavement Estimation Model (CBEM)<sup>7</sup> 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 supplemental report provides point-in-time snapshots of the number of children under age 18 who experienced a parent death in each individual year from 2016 through 2020 using data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) WONDER.<sup>8,\*</sup>

These snapshot analyses allow for comparisons between the pandemic's first year (2020) and years prior to the onset of COVID-19. Findings show notable increases in 2020 for some death causes beyond those directly attributed to COVID-19. These increases reflect adverse impacts on childhood bereavement. Specifically, this report highlights deaths due to the following causes, referred to as pandemic-related deaths:

-  Accidental drug
-  Homicide by gunshot
-  COVID-19

For more general information on childhood bereavement by leading causes of death please see the [CBEM Leading Causes of Death Report](#).

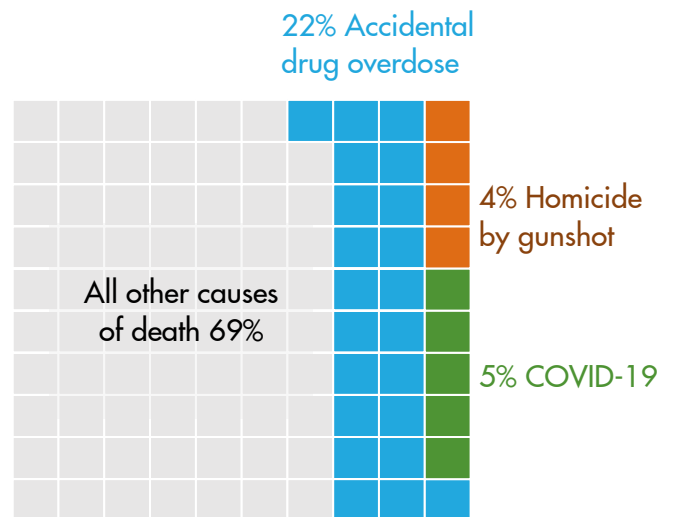
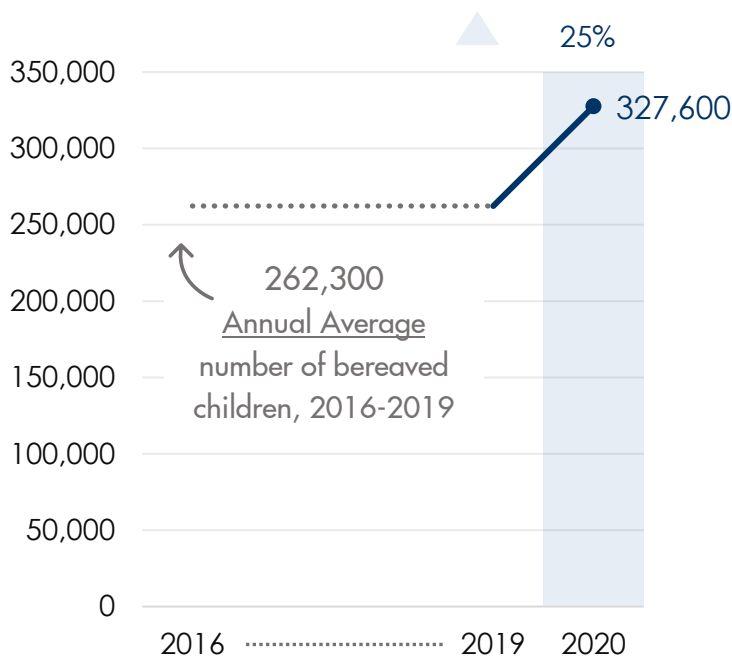
\*This measure is different from the Current and Projected results in the Standard State and National CBEM reports. These results (snapshot, current, projected) should not be used in combination.

## Putting the Pandemic in Perspective

- ✓ Average life expectancy in the U.S. fell sharply in 2020 and 2021, resulting in the largest two-year decline since the early 1920s.<sup>9</sup>
- ✓ Millions of children were bereaved before COVID-19. The pandemic elevated the topic like never before. Childhood bereavement will continue long after the pandemic fades. We must ensure our response outlives the pandemic.
- ✓ While COVID-19-related bereavement dominated news cycles, pandemic stress and isolation contributed to increased mortality in other causes of death that drove up childhood bereavement.
- ✓ As a nation, our approach to addressing the pandemic must include services and supports for *all* grieving children.

CBEM results highlight an overall increase of 65,300 bereaved children in 2020 compared to the previous four-year annual average.

2020 Landscape of childhood bereavement due to all causes of death.

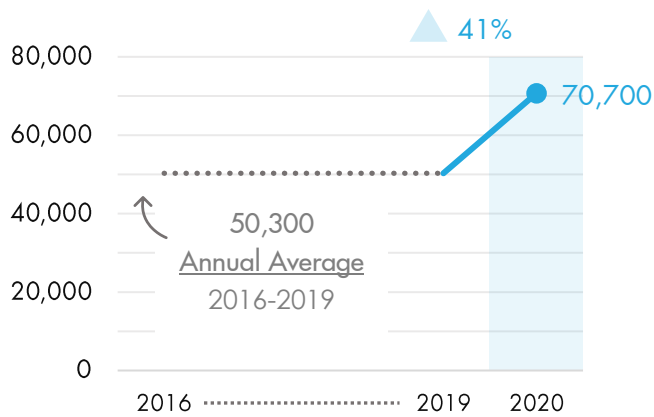




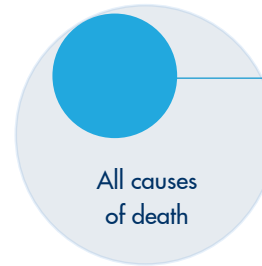
### Children Newly Bereaved due to Parent Death from Accidental Drug Overdose

CBEM results below compare the number of children newly bereaved by a parent accidental overdose death in pre-COVID years (2016-2019) and the first year of the pandemic (2020). The data include a snapshot estimate that accounts for accidental overdose deaths in the year referenced. **Parent death from an accidental drug overdose accounts for 22% of childhood bereavement in 2020.**

CBEM results reflect an increase of 20,400 bereaved children in 2020 due to a parent accidental overdose death compared to the previous four-year average.



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



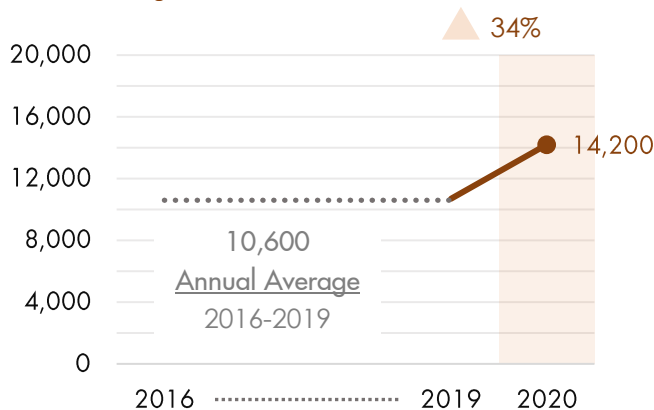
1 in 5 children newly bereaved by the death of a parent in 2020 experienced an accidental overdose death.



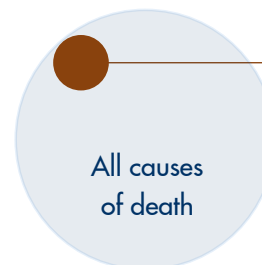
### Children Newly Bereaved due to Parent Death from Homicide by Gunshot

CBEM results below compare the number of children newly bereaved by a parent homicide by gunshot in pre-COVID years (2016-2019) and the first year of the pandemic (2020). The data include a snapshot estimate that accounts for homicides by gunshot in the year referenced. **Parent death from a homicide by gunshot is relatively rare, accounting for 4% of childhood bereavement in 2020.**

CBEM results reflect an increase in 3,600 bereaved children in 2020 due to a parent homicide by gunshot compared to the previous four-year annual average.



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



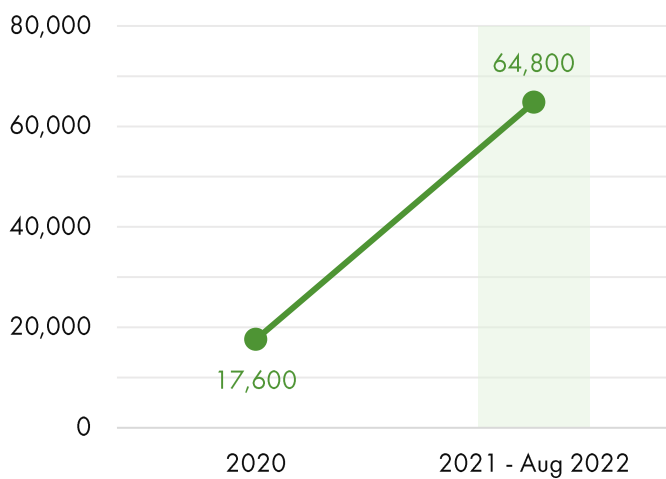
This section includes validated 2020 data and preliminary data from January 1, 2021 to August 10, 2022. Preliminary COVID-19 mortality data are released by the CDC to help track pandemic impact. Combined with errors in cause of death coding, these data may represent an undercount. CBEM results for “2021 to August 2022” are initial findings that are subject to change once CDC validates and finalizes the data. 2020 U.S. population estimates are used for the 2021 to August 2022 period absent validated population data for the period from WONDER.



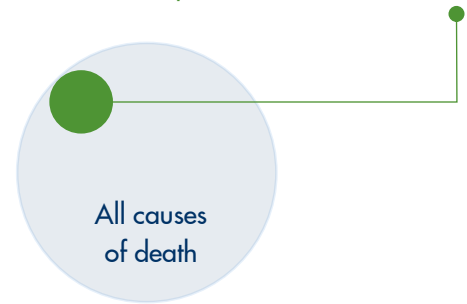
### Children Newly Bereaved due to Parent Death from COVID-19

CBEM results below display the number of children newly bereaved by the death of a parent from COVID-19. The data include a snapshot estimate that accounts for parent deaths due to COVID-19 in the year referenced. **Parent death from COVID-19 is relatively rare, accounting for 5% of childhood bereavement in 2020.**

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



Relative proportion of the number of children bereaved in 2020 due to a parent COVID-19 death.



### Sources

<sup>1</sup> Nickerson et al. (2013). Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 5(2), 119-127.

<sup>2</sup> Pynoos et al. (2014). Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy, 6(Suppl 1), S9-S17.

<sup>3</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics (CDC NCHS). 2022. Excess Deaths Associated with COVID-19. [https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid19/excess\\_deaths.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/nvss/vsrr/covid19/excess_deaths.htm). Accessed August 12, 2022.

<sup>4</sup> Rostila et al. (2011). Journal of Marriage and Family, 73(1), 236-249.

<sup>5</sup> Smith et al. (2014). Social Science & Medicine (1982), 119, 180-190.

<sup>6</sup> Li et al. (2014). PLoS Medicine. (2014). 11(7): e1001679.

<sup>7</sup> Burns et al. (2020). American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 90(4), 391-405.

<sup>8</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, CDC WONDER

<sup>9</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. Life Expectancy in the U.S. Dropped for the Second Year in a Row in 2021.

[https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs\\_press\\_releases/2022/20220831.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/pressroom/nchs_press_releases/2022/20220831.htm) Accessed September 6, 2022.