Suicide in a Statewide Autism Population

September 27, 2019
News Type: Weekly Spark, Weekly Spark Research

Between 2013 and 2017, Utah’s suicide rate was significantly higher among individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) than in the non-ASD population. Females with ASD were three times more likely to die by suicide than females without ASD.

Researchers in Utah compared suicide death rates in ASD and non-ASD populations over a 20-year period. Using a variety of data sources, researchers collected information on people who died by suicide, including demographics, ASD status, and circumstances surrounding their death.

In total, the researchers found 49 individuals with ASD who died by suicide. In the first 15 years of the study period (1998 to 2012), the researchers found no difference in suicide rates between ASD and non-ASD populations. In more recent years (2013 to 2017), the ASD population had a significantly higher incidence of suicide death than the non-ASD population. This difference was particularly pronounced for females. People with ASD who died by suicide were significantly less likely than those without ASD to use firearms as a method of suicide.

This study was the first to examine the incidence of suicide death in a population-based sample of individuals with and without ASD in the U.S. It may be hard for coroners and medical examiners to determine intent in classifying suicide deaths for individuals with developmental disabilities, such as ASD. That means suicide rates in this population may be underreported. Additional research is needed to help clarify the unique needs of individuals with ASD related to suicide risk.
