

Nearly 40,000 kids who lost a parent to COVID-19 need immediate support

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Approximately 40,000 children in the United States may have lost a parent to COVID-19 since February 2020, according to a statistical model created by a team of researchers. The researchers anticipate that without immediate interventions, the trauma from losing a parent could cast a shadow of mental health and economic problems well into the future for this vulnerable population.

In the researchers' model, for approximately every 13th COVID-related death, a child loses one parent. Children who lose a parent are at higher risk of a range of problems, including traumatic prolonged grief and depression, lower educational attainment, economic insecurity and [accidental death](#) or suicide, said Ashton Verdery, associate professor of sociology, demography and [social data analytics](#) and Institute for Computational and Data Sciences co-hire, Penn State.

"When we think of COVID-19 mortality, much of the conversation focuses on the fact that [older adults](#) are the populations at greatest risk. About 81% of deaths have been among those ages 65 and older according to the CDC (Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention)," said Verdery, who is also an affiliate of the Population Research Institute at Penn State. "However, that leaves 19% of deaths among those under 65—15% of deaths are among those in their 50s and early 60s and 3% are among those in their 40s. In these younger age groups, substantial numbers of people have children, for whom the loss of a parent is a potentially devastating challenge."

Three-quarters of the children who lost a parent are adolescents, but one quarter are elementary-aged children, Verdery said.

The statistics of parental death are grimmer for Black families, which have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic, according to the researchers, who report their findings in today's (April 5) issue of *JAMA Pediatrics*. The team estimated that 20% of the children who lost a parent are Black even though only 14% of children in the U.S. are Black.

The model also suggests that parental deaths due to COVID-19 will increase the country's total cases of parental bereavement by 18% to 20% over what happens in a typical year, further straining an already stretched system that does not connect all children who are eligible to adequate resources.

Historical comparison

As a historical comparison, the number of children who lost a parent to COVID-19 is about 13 times the approximate 3,000 children who lost a parent in attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. After those attacks, the federal government initiated several programs to support the families of the victims.

Parentally bereaved children in the pandemic may face unique challenges. The [social isolation](#), institutional strain and economic struggles caused by the pandemic may strain access to potential sources of support for children. Further, with many

children out of schools and less connected to other family and community supports, suffering children may be less likely to be recognized.

More information: *JAMA Pediatrics* (2021). [DOI: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.0161](https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.0161)

"Teachers are such a vital resource in terms of identifying and helping at-risk children, and it is harder for them to do that when schools are operating remotely and teachers are so overburdened, making it vital to resume in-person instruction safely and support worn-out educators," Verdery said.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

The researchers added that as pandemic deaths increase, that shadow of mental health and economic ills may only grow longer for children.

They suggest that equal—or greater—national efforts are needed to help children who have lost [parents](#) in the pandemic.

"I think the first thing we need to do is to proactively connect all children to the available supports they are entitled to, like Social Security child survivor benefits—research shows only about half of eligible children are connected to these programs in normal circumstances, but that those who do fare much better," said Verdery. "We should also consider expanding eligibility to these resources. Second, a national effort to identify and provide counseling and related resources to all children who lose a parent is vital."

Research suggests that brief, evidence-based interventions delivered widely could help prevent severe psychological problems, although some children may need longer-term support.

Using kinship networks of white and Black individuals, drawn from demographic simulations, the researchers estimate the expected number of children ages 0 to 17 who would lose a parent to COVID-19, called the parental bereavement multiplier. The model suggested that .078 [children](#) aged 0 to 17 years old would be parentally bereaved for each COVID-19 related [death](#), or about one for each 13 deaths. The team then used the multiplier to estimate the scope of parental bereavement based on various scenarios of COVID-19 casualty figures.

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