

Will Suicide Send You to Hell?

Most Americans believe they are seeing an epidemic in the United States of people taking their own lives.

But most Americans don't view suicide as a selfish choice, and they don't believe it sends people to hell, LifeWay Research finds.

"Americans are responding with compassion to a tragedy that touches many families," said Scott McConnell, LifeWay Research vice president. "For example, as researchers learn more about the effects of mental illness, people may be more likely to react to suicide with mercy."

In a phone survey of 1,000 Americans, LifeWay Research found more than a third (36 percent) have had a friend or relative commit suicide, and 56 percent describe suicide as an epidemic in the United States.

Concern is highest among the oldest half of the millennial generation, those 25 to 34 years old. This age group is more likely than others to perceive an epidemic of suicide (66 percent), say suicide is selfish (45 percent), and believe those who commit suicide go to hell (27 percent, matching 35- to 44-year-olds).

Federal data show suicides have been on the rise since 2005. This is not unprecedented; suicide rates were almost as high in the mid-1980s. And globally, the United States isn't even in the top 50.

But among 25- to 34-year-olds, suicide is the second leading cause of death. "In a young and generally healthy population, it's understandable this would be a concern—many millennials will know of friends and acquaintances who have either

committed suicide or been impacted by those who have,” said McConnell.

Not a Path to Hell

Fewer than a quarter of Americans (23 percent) say people who take their own lives go to hell. More than 6 in 10 Americans say suicide does not lead to hell, and 16 percent are not sure.

However, Christians (27 percent)—and particularly evangelicals (32 percent)—are more likely than others to believe suicide leads to damnation.

Catholics believe more firmly than Protestants that suicide does not send people to hell, with 63 percent of Catholics and 54 percent of Protestants taking that stance. Protestants (19 percent) are more likely to indicate they don’t know whether people who commit suicide go to hell compared to Catholics (12 percent).

“The finality of suicide makes people wonder about its consequences,” said McConnell. “Most churches teach suicide is wrong, but many also acknowledge God’s mercy and sovereignty.”

Fewer than 4 in 10 Americans (36 percent) say people who commit suicide are selfish. The number rises for Christians (39 percent) and particularly for evangelicals (44 percent).

LifeWay Research also found differences by race. One-fourth of African-Americans say a friend or family member has committed suicide, compared to 39 percent of whites. African-Americans are more likely than others to believe suicide is selfish (44 percent) and sends people to hell (38 percent). In comparison, 19 percent of whites and 25 percent of Hispanics say people who commit suicide go to hell.

Effect of mental illness

Americans were disconcerted by last year’s suicide of comedian

Robin Williams, McConnell noted. Williams hanged himself in August, about seven weeks before LifeWay Research began its survey.

“Experts say mental illness affects 90 percent of people who die by suicide,” McConnell said. “Robin Williams fit that pattern—before he died, he had been seeking treatment for depression.”

Suicide and mental illness have been taboo topics in many churches, McConnell said. In previous studies by LifeWay Research, two-thirds of Protestant pastors said they speak to their churches about mental illness once a year or less, and 65 percent of family members of someone with mental illness say churches should do more to talk about mental illness so the topic is not so taboo.

In recent years, some have begun speaking out. McConnell said Pastor Rick Warren has spoken publicly about the suicide death of his son Matthew, and church leader Frank Page released a book about his daughter Melissa’s suicide.

“For too long, many Christians have viewed mental illness as a character flaw rather than a medical condition,” McConnell said. “It’s encouraging to see the culture begin to change. Open discussion of suicide and mental health in churches can make the difference of life or death.