



# MENTAL ILLNESS LINKED TO SHORTER LIFE SPANS

ORANGE COUNTY HEALTH CARE AGENCY  
RESEARCH & PLANNING



An analysis of a special, multiple causes of death file from the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) showed that Orange County residents who had any mention of a serious mental illness on their 2010 death certificate died almost 18 years earlier compared to those residents with no mention of mental illness. Indeed, the average age at death for residents with a documented mental illness was 58.5 years, compared to 76.2 years among deaths to residents without any mention of a mental illness. The markedly shorter life span of the mentally ill is a critical behavioral and public health concern, as it is often due to unhealthy behaviors such as drug/alcohol abuse and/or tobacco use, poor diet, physical inactivity, and thus largely preventable. Moreover, the challenges the mentally ill face in managing chronic physical health conditions can also lead to premature mortality.

## PREMATURE DEATHS FOR MENTALLY ILL

78% of those with mental illness died prematurely (before age 75 years; n= 439 of 562). In contrast, only 36% of all deaths to County residents without any mention of mental illness were premature (n= 5,901 of 16,548). *Mental illness* here includes serious mental illnesses such as major depression, bipolar, and schizophrenia, as well as substance use disorders.

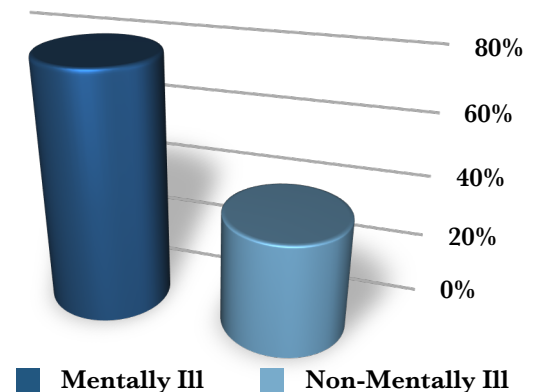
## LEADING CAUSES OF PREMATURE DEATHS FOR MENTALLY ILL

A total of 10,243 years of potential life were lost (YPLL-75) before age 75 as a result of the 439 premature deaths to those with a mental illness.

The #1 cause, accounting for 29% of the premature deaths among the mentally ill, was accidents or unintentional injuries (n=128) and contributed to a loss of 3,883 person years. All 100% of these deaths were premature (< 75 years) and the majority (81%) in this category were due to accidental poisoning or overdose.

## LEADING CAUSES OF PREMATURE DEATH FOR MENTALLY ILL

Pre-mature Death Rank	Leading Causes of Premature Death (before age 75 years)	Number of Premature Deaths	Percent Premature	Years of potential life lost (YPLL-75)
	<b>All Causes - Premature Death</b>	<b>439</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>10,243</b>
1	Accidental (Unintentional)	128	100%	3,883
2	Heart Disease	79	74%	1,679
3	Suicide	50	91%	1,360
4	Cancer	49	77%	667
5	Chronic Lower Respiratory Dis.	18	46%	238



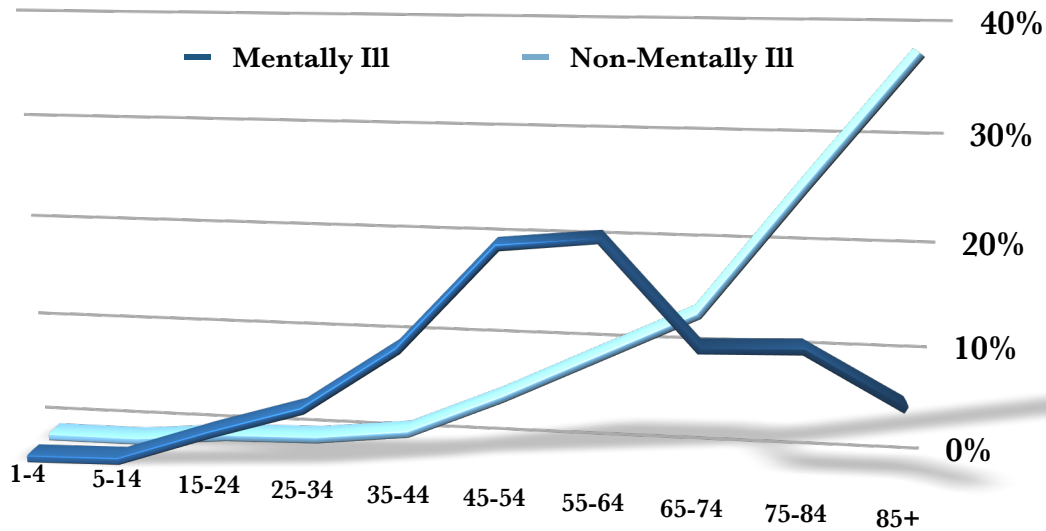
The second leading cause of premature death was heart disease (n=79). On average, among residents who died of heart disease, those with mental illness were seven years younger (average age 53.7) than those without any mention of mental illness (average age 61.2).

The third leading cause was intentional self-harm or suicide (n=50); about two thirds of those were due to intentional self-poisoning by drugs (64%).

Cancer was the fourth leading cause of premature death (n=49), almost half being lung cancer (49%).

The fifth leading cause was chronic lower respiratory disease (n=18); most (n=16) due to COPD and emphysema.

## AGE DIFFERENCES IN DEATH FOR MENTALLY ILL VERSUS NON-MENTALLY ILL



The percentage of deaths by age group for residents with a mental illness are compared to those without a known mental illness. For those with mental illness, the peak percentage of deaths occurred between 45-54 and 55-64 years of age (21.5% and 22.4%, respectively). Conversely, for non-mentally ill, the percentage of deaths systematically increased with age, with the highest percentages for those 75-84 years (26.4%) and 85+ years (37.9%).

### CONCLUSIONS

Based on these data, residents who died prematurely (before age 75) were over six times more likely to have had a mental illness diagnosis (OR: 6.4, 95% CI: 5.25 - 7.89). Thus, residents who died prematurely with any mention of mental illness lost on average 23.3 years, compared to 16.3 years lost to those without any mention of mental illness.

The average age at death for residents with any mention of mental illness was 58.5 years, compared to 76.2 years among deaths to those without any known mental health diagnosis. This 18 year difference is in keeping with the findings of other national and international studies that reported people with a serious mental illness die much younger.

Of all deaths to people with a mental illness, 70% were due to causes that can be viewed as preventable. Among this group, unnatural causes (including accidents and suicide) accounted for 33% of the deaths, which was seven times higher than for those without any mention of a mental illness (4%). Notably, 100% of the unintentional injury deaths and 91% of suicides in this group were premature, occurring to those younger than 75 years of age.

Deaths due to heart disease accounted for 19% of all deaths with any mention of mental illness, and three in four of those were before age 75. Many of the risk factors, such as smoking, diabetes, cholesterol levels associated with coronary heart disease are modifiable with behavior changes and proper administration of medication.

Cancer caused about 11% of deaths for this group, and one half of those were due to lung cancer. Chronic lower respiratory disease accounted for about 7% of deaths for this group, mostly COPD and emphysema. Smoking, which is an avoidable risk factor, is highly linked to lung cancers in the United States, as are COPD and emphysema.

In addition to the treatment of mental illness, efforts aimed at enabling the mentally ill to better manage chronic physical health conditions and promoting more healthful behaviors such as regular physical activity, eating a healthy diet, smoking cessation and prevention/treatment of drug/alcohol abuse will help improve quality and years of life for this population in Orange County.