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PUBLIC HEALTH

## Cayuga County officials: Suicide, mental health stats show need is still high

David Wilcox

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The Cayuga County Community Mental Health Center at 146 North St., Auburn.

Kevin Rivoli, The Citizen

David Wilcox

**T**he number of suicides in Cayuga County last year fell about 35% from highs in the first years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But other statistics, along with the eight local people who took their own lives in 2022, signify formidable challenges that continue to face mental health care providers in the area.

Cayuga County Coroner Dr. Adam Duckett told The Citizen those eight people ranged in age from 16 to 81. Suicide, and providing care for the mental health problems that precipitate it, are currently his biggest concerns **as a primary care physician**, he said. Even though the pandemic is subsiding, the stress, anxiety and other emotional problems it caused do not appear to be doing the same.

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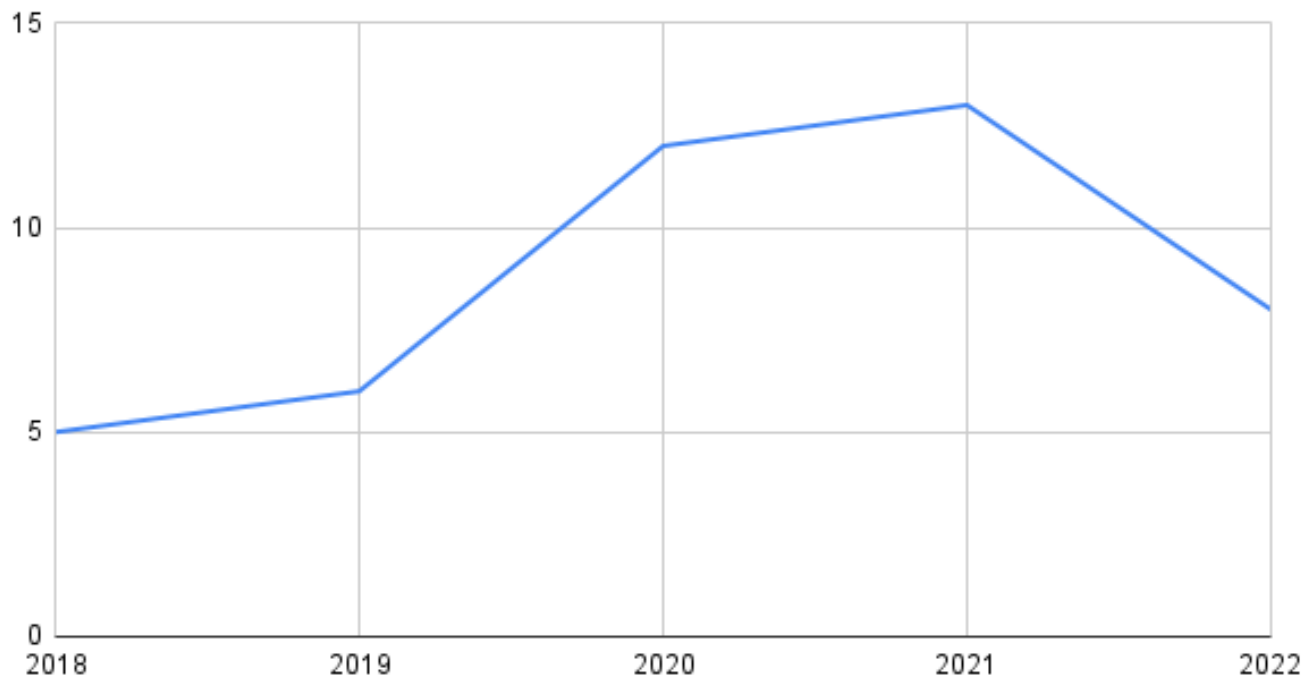
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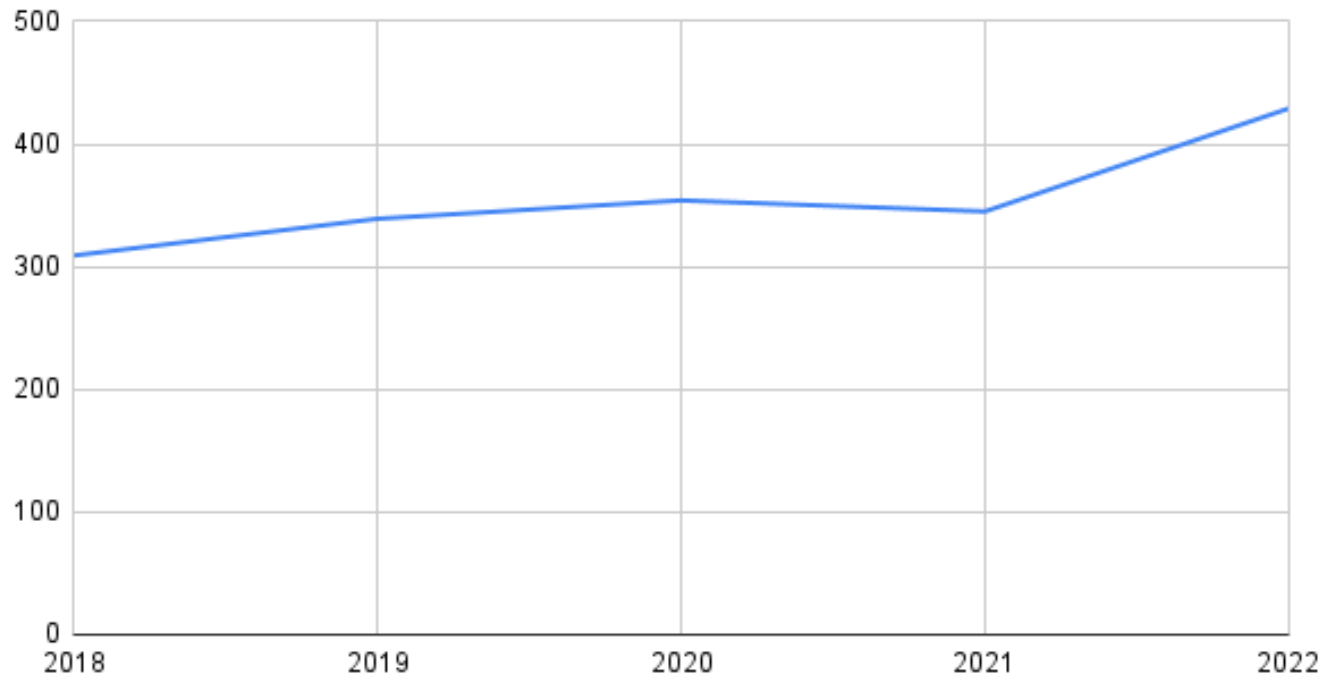
"The number's still too high," Duckett said, referring to the county's suicide rate before the pandemic began in March 2020. "We're not meeting the need."

## Cayuga County suicides



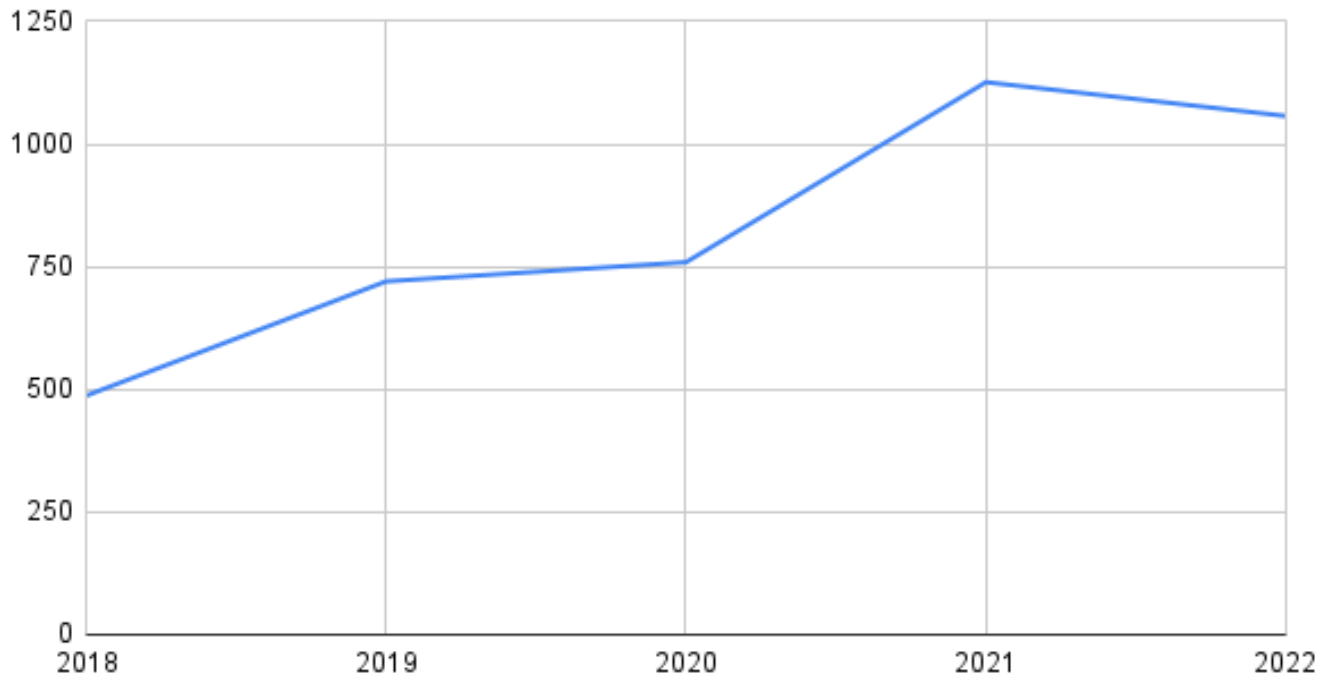
The eight suicides are down from last year's recent high of 13, which followed 12 in 2020, six in 2019 and five in 2018. Those numbers fall on both sides of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's national suicide rate of about 14 per 100,000 people — last year the local rate was 10.5, while in 2021 and 2020 it was 17.1 and 15.8 — and mostly above New York state's rate of 8.

## Auburn Police Department mental health investigations



Similarly, the Auburn Police Department's number of suicide attempt investigations last year was down 17%, 204 investigations after 245 in 2021, which followed 232 in 2020, 190 in 2019 and 221 in 2018. Mental health investigations, however, spiked 24% to 429, the highest number since 2017, when there were 465. The department's number hovered around 350 the previous three years.

## Cayuga County Community Mental Health Center crisis visits



Numbers from the Cayuga County Community Mental Health Center were just as mixed. Director of Community Services Lauren Walsh reported there were 1,607 intakes last year after 1,616 in 2021, 1,487 in 2020, 1,715 in 2019 and 1,515 in 2018. Crisis visits, meanwhile, dropped 6% to 1,057 in 2022 after 1,126 in 2021. That was a high following 759 in 2020, 720 in 2019 and 487 in 2018.

The numbers that most concern Walsh, she told *The Citizen*, are the North Street facility's youth intakes and crisis visits. Both rose last year: Intakes of individuals 18 and younger were up 19% to 230 from 187 in 2021, and crisis visits for the same age group were up 11% to 172 from 153 in 2021. She believes the numbers show that while children are back in school full-time, the isolation they experienced learning from home during the early years of the pandemic continues to affect them in the form of anxiety, depression and at-risk behaviors like self-harm and substance use.

The center's high numbers could also be due to COVID-19 in a different way, Walsh continued. Messaging has normalized seeking help for mental health problems over the last couple years, weakening the stigma that would have stopped many people

previously. So as much as the problems themselves may have increased, the willingness to seek help for them may have increased as well.

"That was the hope: 'Life is hard, here we are in the middle of a pandemic,'" she said. "People need help, they can't always do it on their own. But help is out there, even in our community."

The center may itself receive help from New York, as Gov. Kathy Hochul has **included** a \$1 billion multi-year plan to overhaul the state's continuum of mental health care in her 2024 budget proposal.

Considering the rising number of youth coming to the center, Walsh said she's glad to see the plan's \$20 million expansion of mental health services in schools. The county has one satellite at the Union Springs Central School District and is working with other rural districts to provide training and support. One area of success has been training school staff in dialectical behavior therapy, an evidence-based intervention that provides skills to cope with problems ranging from substance use and suicidal ideation to interpersonal difficulties. The center will teach more school staff in March.

Another part of Hochul's budget proposal will restore behavioral health beds that were removed to treat COVID-19 patients, Walsh said. But there remains a shortage of local beds for youth, particularly adolescents. Depending on the intensity of their problems, they may have to go to the Auburn Community Hospital emergency room, or to Syracuse or Ithaca for inpatient treatment.

Walsh would also like to see the state invest more in the mental health care workforce. As the need continues to rise, so has an increase in vacancies in master's level therapist positions, she said. Duckett agreed, noting that the county leads a monthly meeting where stabilized patients are offloaded back to physicians like him so as to free up their mental health care providers.

A similar difficulty finding staff has delayed the expansion of the county's Mobile Crisis Team to daytime hours. Syracuse nonprofit Liberty Resources operates the after-hours team, which assists law enforcement with situations involving possible mental health problems. But, with federal funding, the Community Mental Health Center has **hoped to start** a daytime team soon, Walsh said.

"Staff retention in this demanding field is very important, especially locally," she said. "Our mental health clinic continues to provide same-day access to services to so many of our residents."

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## To learn more

For more information on HEALing Cayuga, visit [cayugacounty.us/1575/Healing-Cayuga](https://cayugacounty.us/1575/Healing-Cayuga). To access its overdose dashboard, visit [cayugacounty.us/1634/Overdose-Data-Reports-Trends](https://cayugacounty.us/1634/Overdose-Data-Reports-Trends).

### Substance abuse and addiction resources

Cayuga Counseling Services: (315) 253-9795 or [cayugacounseling.org/mental-health-services](https://cayugacounseling.org/mental-health-services)

Confidential Help for Alcohol and Drugs (CHAD): (315) 253-9786 or [chadcounseling.org](https://chadcounseling.org)

East Hill Medical Center: (315) 253-8477 or [easthillmedical.com](https://easthillmedical.com)

Friends of Recovery New York online recovery group list: <https://for-ny.org/get-help>

Nick's Ride 4 Friends: (315) 246-6485 or [nicksride4friends.org](https://nicksride4friends.org)

NYS Office of Addiction Services and Supports hotline: 1-877-8-HOPENY

Syracuse Recovery Services: (315) 282-5351 or [srsrecovery.org](https://srsrecovery.org)

Unity House of Cayuga County: (315) 253-6227 or [unityhouse.com](https://unityhouse.com)