

Youth Suicide

How often do young people actually take their own lives?

Here is the most recent data for three age groups for the period from 1981 to 2005:

United States			
Suicide Rates, By Age Group: 1981-2005			
(Suicides per 100,000 in age group per year)			
YEAR	10-14 Year-Olds	15-19 Year-Olds	20-24 Year-Olds
1981	0.89	8.62	15.65
1982	1.09	8.67	15.2
1983	1.09	8.65	14.64
1984	1.29	8.94	15.49
1985	1.62	9.87	15.39
1986	1.52	10.08	15.54
1987	1.53	10.17	14.97
1988	1.44	11.13	14.6
1989	1.41	11.08	14.86
1990	1.5	11.14	15.1
1991	1.49	11	14.83
1992	1.67	10.71	14.83
1993	1.68	10.78	15.61
1994	1.67	10.9	16.12
1995	1.72	10.29	15.81
1996	1.53	9.6	14.21
1997	1.55	9.29	13.31
1998	1.6	8.76	13.2
1999	1.2	8.04	12.3
2000	1.46	8.02	12.51
2001	1.3	7.95	11.93
2002	1.23	7.44	12.28
2003	1.15	7.26	12.07
2004	1.34	8.2	12.48
2005	1.29	7.66	12.35

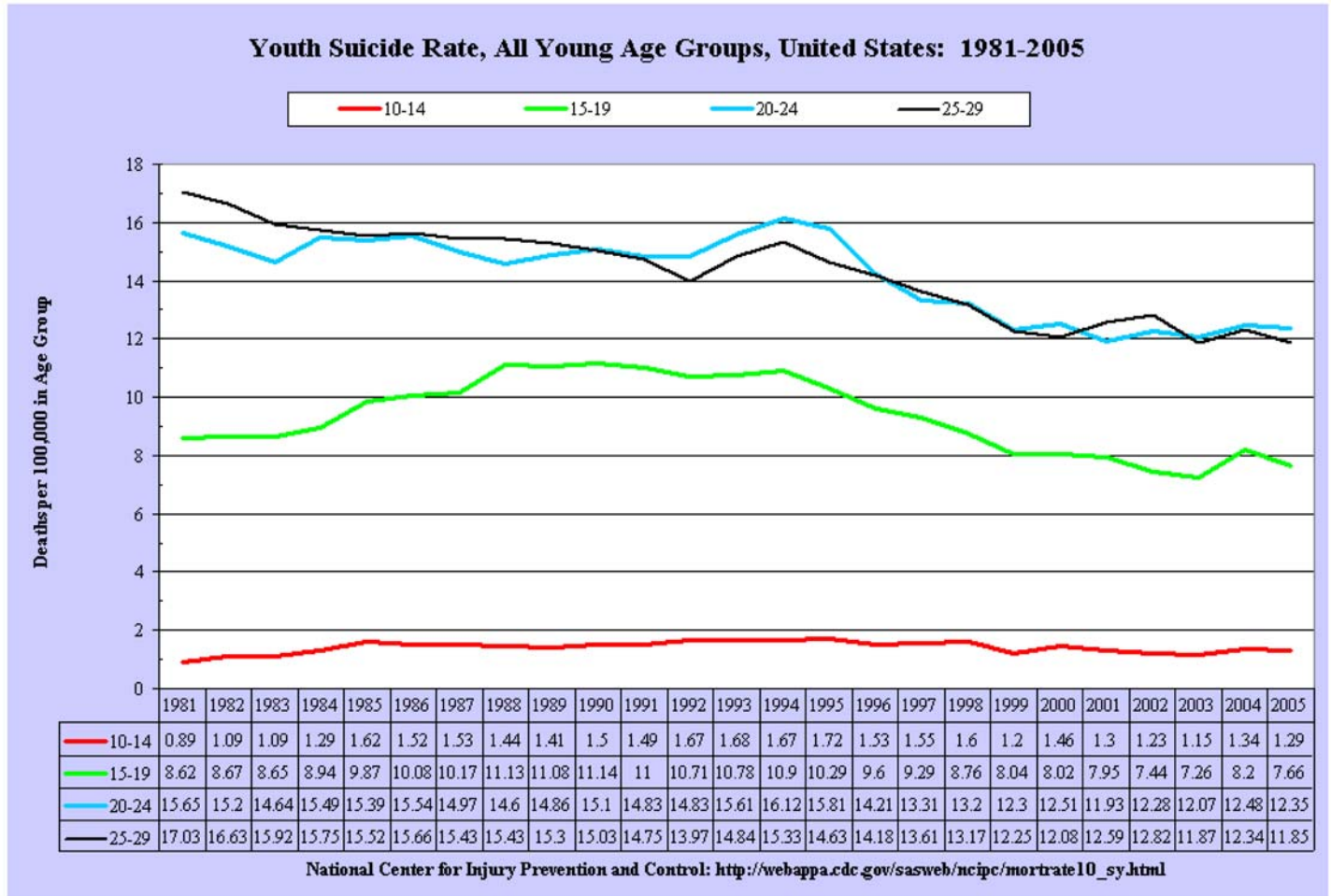
Source: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/mortrate10_sy.html

These data come from "cause of death" information that physicians have put on death certificates. Since some individuals committing suicide do not leave a suicide note and choose a means of death that could be accidental (over-medication, purposeful drug overdose, driving off a cliff), these data are likely to underestimate the actual number of suicides. The data are presented in rates that measure "deaths due to suicide per 100,000 people in a particular category." Remember, all the measures of [thinking about and attempting suicide](#) that we just examined were % measures, or per 100 people measures. Clearly, actual youth suicides are much less frequent than suicides plans or suicide attempts.

What do these numbers tell you?

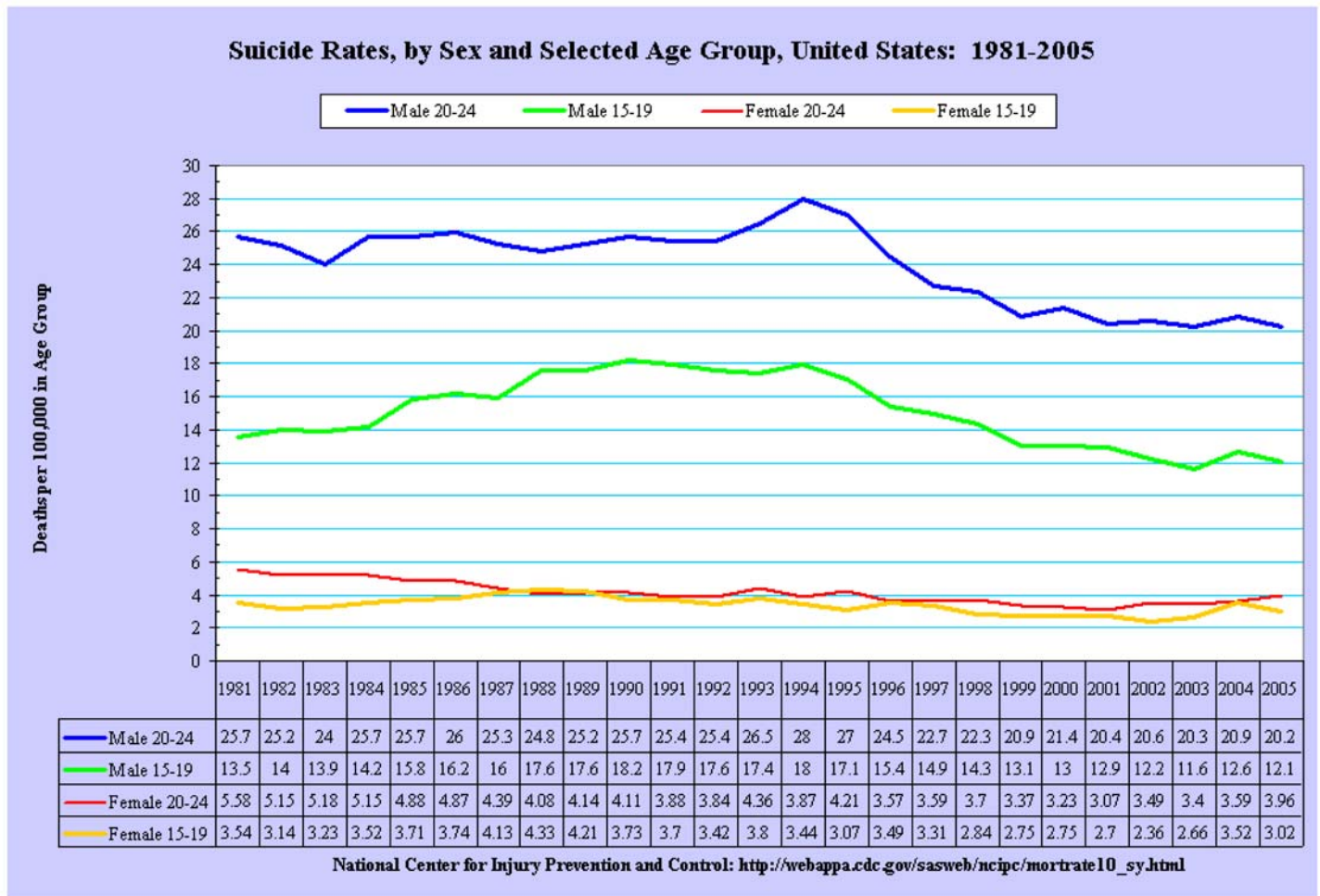
What has been happening over time?

An easy way to begin this analysis is to simply make a chart of the data and look for trends...



What trends do you see?

We can gain more insight into youth suicide by breaking down each age group into sub-populations that might have different rates of suicide. What if we look separately at males and females in several age group. Would one sex be more likely to take their own life?

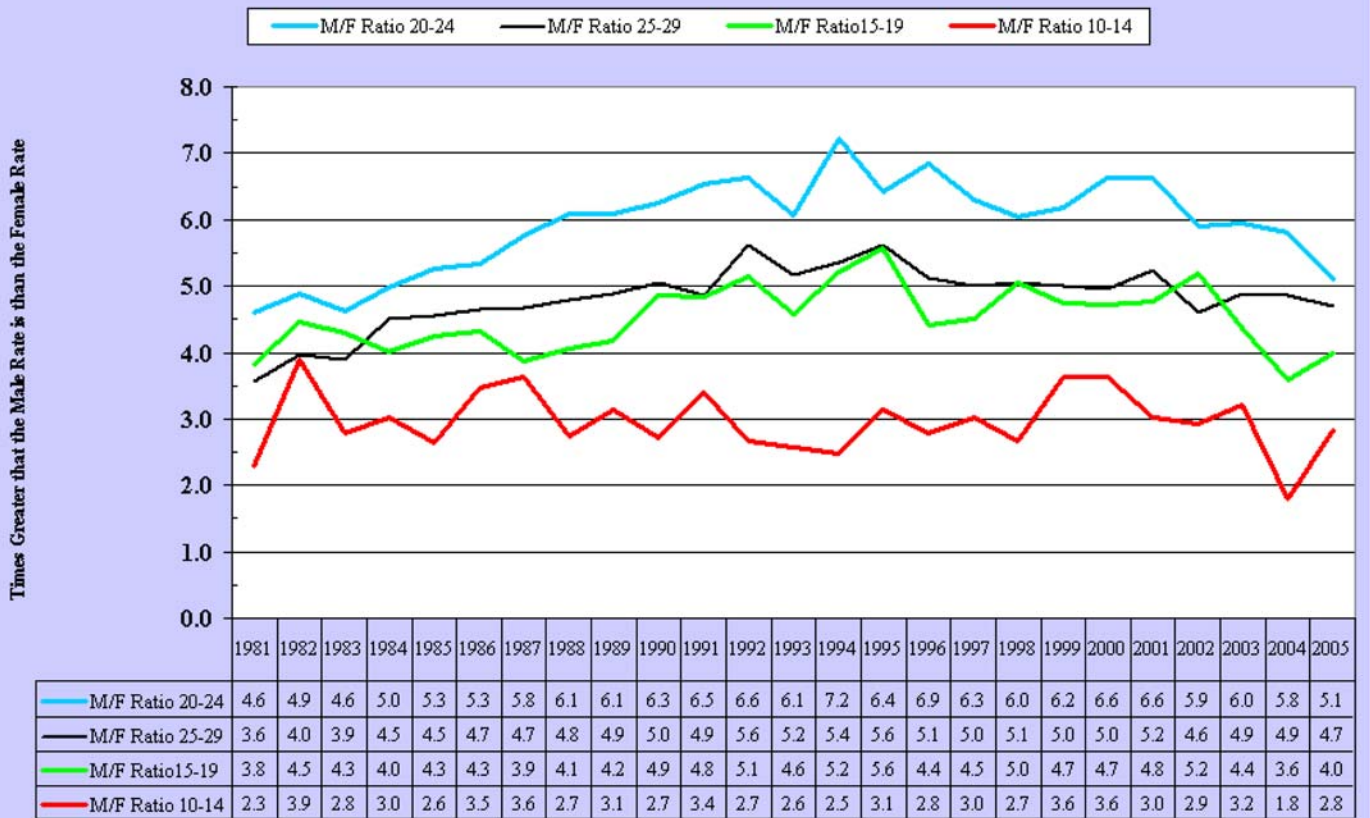


Is there an obvious consistent difference between male and female suicide rates?

Are these gender trends different from what you expected considering the data we just examined on [thinking about and attempting suicide](#)? Any ideas on why there is such a different gender pattern in suicide attempts and actual suicides?

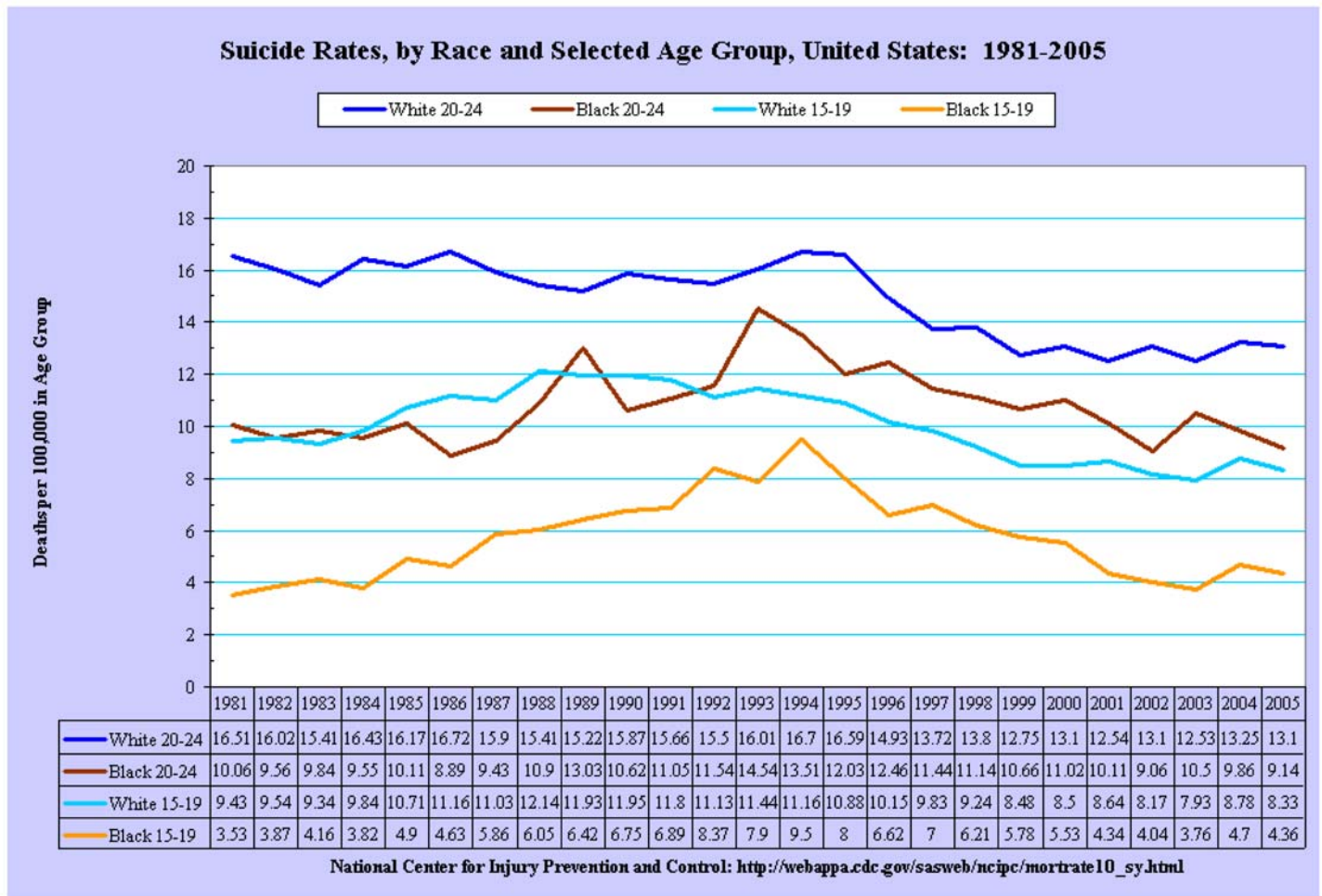
What about trends in suicide over time? Are there any differences in what has been happening to male and female rates of suicide over the period from 1981 to 2005? Look at this chart of the ratio of male to female suicide rates over time. Can you see any trends over time?

Ratio of Male to Female Suicide Rates, byAge, United States: 1981-2005



National Center for Injury Prevention and Control: http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/mortrate10_sy.html

We can add another dimension to our analysis. Do you think race makes a difference in youth suicide? Are white and black sixteen year olds equally likely to take their own lives? Examine this chart...

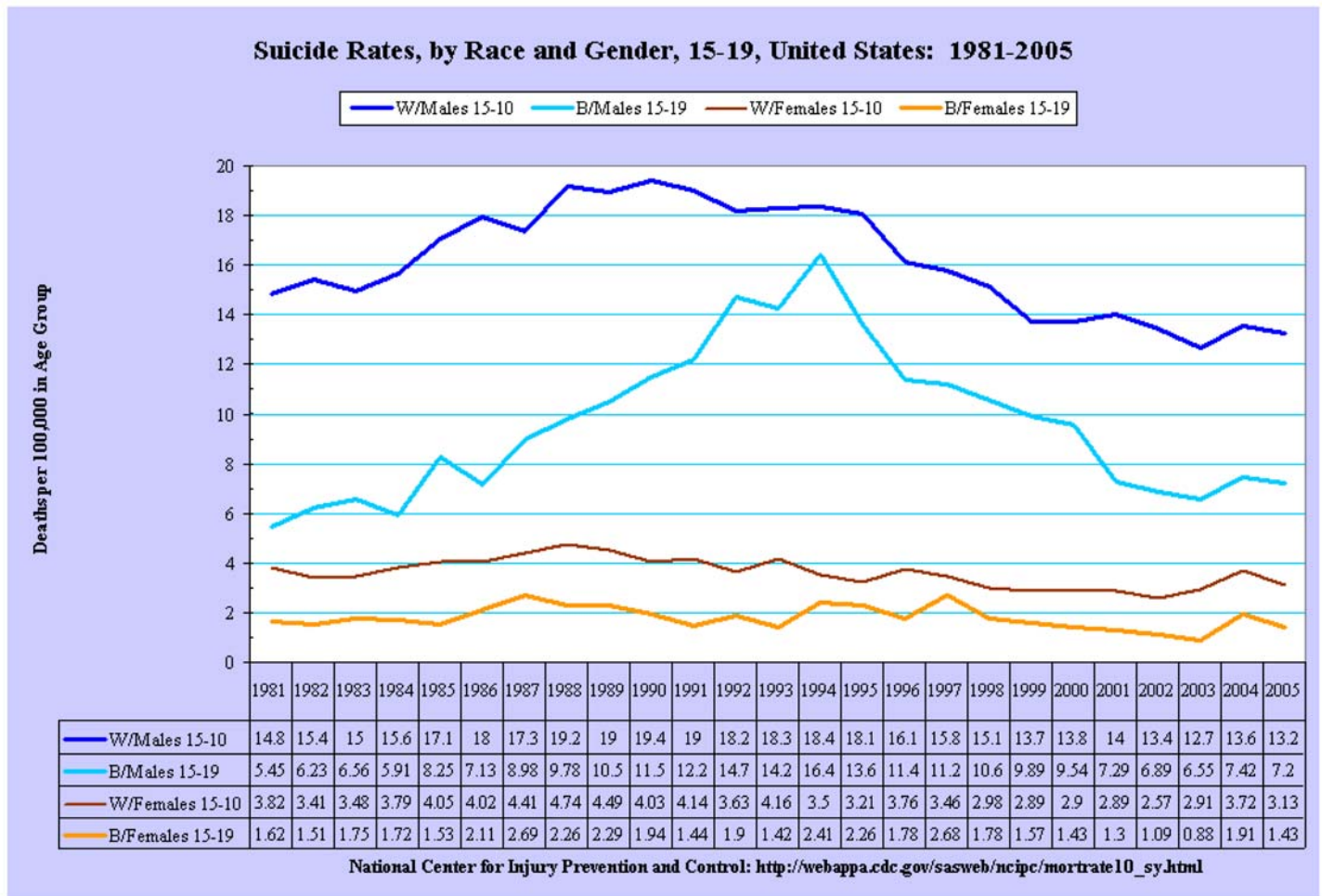


What are the clear pattern with respect to race and youth suicide?

Are these racial trends different from what you expected considering the data we examined on [attempting suicide](#)?

Are there any differences in time trends with respect to race and youth suicide? Are there any differences in what has been happening to white and black rates of suicide from 1981 to 2005?

We now know that there are significant gender and race differences in the likelihood of young people taking their own lives. How does gender and race interact? Examine this chart of suicide rates for 15-19 year olds.



Early in this period, during the early 1980s, which factor -- race or gender -- seems to hold more influence? What about during the early 1990s? Is "maleness" more important than race then? Any hypotheses as to why the relative influence of race and gender seems to change over time?

Conclusions

Good sociological thinking requires:

- focusing on patterns of behavior, not individual acts. What you want to explain is a *social fact* -- for example, why more males than female young Americans take their own life -- not an individual action -- why a particular male or female took their own life.

To do this you need to:

- find the best data that describes the actual patterns of behavior you are curious about.
- construct testable hypotheses that can explain the patterns of behavior you uncover.

