



## **YOUTH SUICIDE IN THE UNITED STATES A Fact Sheet for Schools**

Suicide is a major public health issue that affects people of all ages, backgrounds, and racial and ethnic groups throughout the country. When a student commits suicide, it is not only a tragedy for his or her family, but it can also significantly affect other students and disrupt school learning environments. While the causes of youth suicide are complex and determined by multiple factors, the goals of suicide prevention are simple: reduce factors that increase the risk of suicide and increase factors that promote resilience and encourage an effective community response to the risk. Schools play an important role in reaching these goals.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Safe and Healthy Students (OSHS) provides resources to promote safe and supportive learning environments for all students. This fact sheet gives an overview of youth suicide and links to useful resources for educators on suicide prevention.

### **How prevalent is suicide among America's youths and students?**

In 2010, suicide became the second leading cause of death for those 10 – 24 years old, surpassing homicide.<sup>1</sup> Only motor vehicle accidents claim more lives each year for this age group than suicide does.<sup>2</sup> In the 2013 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 17 percent of high school students reported seriously considering suicide during the 12 months before taking the survey. About 8 percent of high school students attempted suicide during the same period.<sup>3</sup>

### **What are the risk factors for suicide?**

A combination of factors contributes to the risk of suicide. Note that while these factors are associated with suicide they might not be direct causes. Among them are

- a family history of suicide;
- a family history of child maltreatment;
- previous suicide attempt(s);
- a history of mental disorders, particularly clinical depression;
- a history of alcohol and substance abuse;
- isolation, or a feeling of being cut off from other people;
- bullying, as a victim, perpetrator, or both; and

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<sup>1</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Suicide Trends Among Persons Aged 10–24 Years — United States, 1994–2012. Retrieved on April 27, 2015 from <http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/pdf/wk/mm6408.pdf>

<sup>2</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Injury Prevention and Control, Motor Vehicle Safety. Retrieved on April 27, 2015 from [http://www.cdc.gov/MotorVehicleSafety/Teen\\_Drivers/teendrivers\\_factsheet.html](http://www.cdc.gov/MotorVehicleSafety/Teen_Drivers/teendrivers_factsheet.html)

<sup>3</sup>Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Trends in the Prevalence of Suicide-Related Prevention," *National Youth Risk Behavior Survey: 1991-2013*. Retrieved on April 27, 2015 from [http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/pdf/trends/us\\_suicide\\_trend\\_yrbs.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/yrbs/pdf/trends/us_suicide_trend_yrbs.pdf)

- discrimination, harassment, and/or violence as it relates to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) sexual orientation.

### **Warning Signs for Suicide**

The risk of suicide is greater if the behavior is new or has increased, and if it seems related to a painful event, loss, or change. The signs listed below may indicate risk.

- talking about wanting to die or to kill oneself
- looking for a way to kill oneself, such as searching online or obtaining a gun
- talking about feeling hopeless or having no reason to live
- talking about feeling trapped or in unbearable pain
- talking about being a burden to others
- increasing the use of alcohol or drugs
- acting anxious or agitated; behaving recklessly
- sleeping too little or too much
- withdrawing or feeling isolated
- showing rage or talking about seeking revenge
- displaying extreme mood swings

### **What can schools do to prevent youth suicide?**

Suicide prevention experts recommend using a multifaceted approach in which specific components are implemented in a particular sequence. These components are (1) protocols for helping students at risk of suicide; (2) protocols for responding to a suicide death; (3) staff education and training; (4) parent education; (5) student education; and (6) screening. The resource listed below, *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools*, is a comprehensive guide to help schools put this multi-faceted approach in place. If a student exhibits warning signs for suicide, school-based professionals should provide immediate support for the student and should not leave him or her alone until a mental health professional is located to help. School staff can call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at **1-800-273-TALK (8255)** for guidance. Local education agencies may also have existing protocols (such as mandated reporting procedures) that should be followed carefully.

### **Where can I find resources on suicide prevention?**

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services leads federal efforts to advance the behavioral health of the nation. Below are some resources on suicide prevention available from SAMHSA and other sources.

- *National Suicide Prevention Lifeline*: [www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org), 1-800-273-TALK(8255). A toll-free hotline staffed with trained, skilled counselors 24 hours a day that provides support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress.
- *Suicide Safe: A New Suicide Prevention App*: <http://store.samhsa.gov/apps/suicidesafe/>. SAMHSA's new suicide prevention app for mobile devices and optimized for tablets, which helps providers integrate suicide prevention strategies into their practices and addresses suicide risk among their patients. The free app is based on SAMHSA's Suicide Assessment Five-Step Evaluation which, among other supports, provides health care providers with

sample language and tips for talking with patients who need suicide intervention. The app also can locate treatment options, filtered by type and distance, so the patients receive timely referrals.

- *Suicide Prevention Resource Center*: [www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org). Provides technical assistance, training, and materials to increase the knowledge of and expertise in suicide prevention.
- *Preventing Suicide: A Toolkit for High Schools*: <http://store.samhsa.gov/product/Preventing-Suicide-A-Toolkit-for-High-Schools/SMA12-4669>. A guide for high schools, school districts, and their partners to design and implement strategies to prevent suicide and promote student behavioral health.
- *After a Suicide: A Toolkit for Schools*: [www.sprc.org/webform/after-suicide-toolkit-schools](http://www.sprc.org/webform/after-suicide-toolkit-schools). Information for schools in the aftermath of a suicide or other death in the school community.
- *FindYouthInfo Youth Suicide Prevention page*: <http://findyouthinfo.gov/youth-topics/youth-suicide-prevention>. A youth topic page that provides an overview of suicide prevention strategies and related federal resources.
- *Readiness and Emergency Management for Schools (REMS) Technical Assistance Center*: <http://rems.ed.gov>. Resources to build schools' capacity to develop high-quality emergency operations plans, including how to respond to a student suicide.

*NOTE: This fact sheet was produced by the Office of Safe and Healthy Students (OSHS) staff and contains resources, including Web sites, created by outside organizations. The resources are provided for the user's convenience, and inclusion does not constitute an endorsement by the U.S. Department of Education of any views, products, or services offered or expressed therein. A copy of the fact sheet can be found at:*

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/oshs/oshsfactsheets.html>