Fact Sheet Series on Juvenile Suicide

Juvenile Detention and Secure Care Staff

Need to Know: A Fact Sheet Series on Juvenile Suicide

Prepared by the Youth in Contact With the Juvenile Justice System Task Force of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention

September 2013
What You Need to Know about Juvenile Suicide

Youth suicide is a significant, yet preventable, public health problem.
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth ages 10–18.¹
- About one in thirteen high-school students attempted suicide in the past year.²
- Nearly 88,000 youth ages 10–18 were treated in emergency rooms for self-harm injuries in 2011.³,⁴
- Males are more likely to die by suicide and females are more likely to attempt suicide.⁴
- Certain populations (e.g., American Indian/Alaskan Native and sexual minority youth) have increased rates of suicide.⁵,⁶

Youth involved with the juvenile justice system have increased risk of suicide.
- Suicide is the leading cause of death for youth in confinement.⁷
- Youth in residential facilities have nearly three times the suicide rate of peers in the general population.⁸
- Risk factors for suicide are often more prevalent among youth in the juvenile justice system.⁹
- Studies report that over half of juveniles had current suicidal ideation¹⁰ and one-third had a history of suicidal behavior.¹¹

Factors that may increase the risk of suicide among all youth include:¹¹,¹²,¹³,¹⁴
- Mental illness and/or substance use disorder
- History of suicide attempts, self-harm behavior, and/or death by suicide in the family
- Social isolation, relationship problems, or separation from family
- Impulsive, aggressive, or reckless behavior
- History of bullying or being bullied
- Access to lethal means
- History of trauma or child maltreatment

Factors that may increase suicide risk among youth in the justice system include:¹⁵,¹⁶,¹⁷,¹⁸
- History of mental illness and/or substance use disorder
- Involvement in special education
- Legal/disciplinary problems
- Prior disciplinary action
- Prior offenses
- Referral to juvenile court
- Being placed on room confinement
Signs that immediate help for suicide risk is needed include:\textsuperscript{10,11,12,13}

- Perceived crisis (e.g., transition within the juvenile justice system)
- Unusual or sudden changes in personality, behavior, or mood
- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself
- Withdrawal from friends, family, or usual activities
- Expressions of hopelessness or feeling trapped
- Actively securing access to lethal means

Protective factors that may decrease suicide risk among youth in the justice system include:\textsuperscript{18,19,20}

- Easy access to effective mental health and substance abuse treatment services
- Problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills
- Cultural or religious beliefs that discourage suicide
- Connectedness and support from family and community
- A positive school experience
- Lack of access to lethal means
- Suicide-resistant housing
- Collaborative communication between juvenile justice and mental health systems

What You Can Do to Prevent Juvenile Suicide

- Demonstrate your belief that suicide can be prevented.\textsuperscript{15}
- Learn the protective factors, risk factors, and warning signs related to suicide.\textsuperscript{15}
- Implement and evaluate comprehensive suicide prevention policies, programs, and practices that address risk and protective factors on multiple levels.
- Take any written, spoken, or other communication of suicide seriously. If you think someone is at risk:
  - Do not be afraid to ask if someone is considering suicide. This will not cause suicide.
  - Be direct. Ask:
    - Are you thinking about killing yourself?
    - Are you considering taking your own life?
    - Do you ever feel like things would be better if you were dead?
  - Listen and do not judge anyone who you think might be thinking of suicide.
  - Avoid acting shocked if a youth says he or she is considering suicide.
  - Do not be sworn to secrecy or make promises that you won’t tell anyone.
  - Communicate any suspicion that a youth is thinking about suicide to a mental health professional or supervisor immediately.
  - Stay with the youth. Do not leave a suicidal youth alone while you go get help.
What Detention and Secure Care Facilities Can Do to Prevent Juvenile Suicide

- Develop, implement, and maintain a comprehensive written suicide prevention program that includes the following eight critical components:
  - Routine suicide prevention training for all staff
  - Standardized intake screening for suicide risk using a valid and reliable tool for all youth, with suicide risk assessment by a qualified mental health professional administered as necessary
  - Protocols that provide shared information about suicide risk
    - Among the arresting/transporting officer, family members, and facility staff
    - Between facility staff members
    - Between facility staff and youth
  - Varying levels of supervision
    - Close observation for youth with suicidal ideation or behavior
    - Constant observation for youth who are talking about or displaying suicidal behavior
    **Closed-circuit television does not substitute for observation.
  - Safe physical environment
  - Emergency response protocol in the case of suicides or suicide attempts
  - Notification system for suicides or suicide attempts through the chain of command
  - Critical incident stress debriefing protocol (for all staff and youth) and a death review

Access additional resources for more information.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
  - [http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide](http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/suicide)
- National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, Inc.
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline
  - [http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org; (800) 273-TALK (8255)](http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org; (800) 273-TALK (8255))
- Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention
  - [http://www.ojjdp.gov](http://www.ojjdp.gov)
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- Suicide Prevention Resource Center
  - [http://www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org)
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About This Fact Sheet

*Need to Know: A Fact Sheet Series on Juvenile Suicide* was developed by the Youth in Contact with the Juvenile Justice System Task Force ([http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org/task-force/juvenilejustice](http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org/task-force/juvenilejustice)) of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention ([http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org](http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org)) (Action Alliance). The task force’s Public Awareness and Education Workgroup developed this series to raise awareness among individuals who work with youth involved with the juvenile justice system, as well as provide practical information on what:

- **you need to know** about juvenile suicide
- **you can do** to prevent juvenile suicide
- **systems can do** to prevent juvenile suicide

This fact sheet is tailored to juvenile detention and secure care staff; companion pieces are tailored to juvenile probation staff and to juvenile court judges and staff.

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References


3 The term “self-harm” includes suicide attempts and non-suicidal self-injuries.


The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention is the public-private partnership advancing the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention (NSSP) (http://actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org/NSSP) by championing suicide prevention as a national priority, catalyzing efforts to implement high-priority objectives of the NSSP, and cultivating the resources needed to sustain progress. The Action Alliance envisions a nation free from the tragic experience of suicide. For electronic copies of this paper or for additional information about the Action Alliance and its task forces, please visit http://www.actionallianceforsuicideprevention.org.