

ISSUE BRIEF - POSTVENTION IS PREVENTION



THE PROBLEM

How a community or organization responds after a death by suicide is a direct form of the prevention of future suicides. By recognizing the issues our young people are facing and following best practices on how to react, we can ensure our young people have the opportunity to thrive.

Being a young person is difficult. Young people face greater social, emotional, and achievement pressures, which increases the risk for substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and suicide. Suicide is the leading cause of death for youth ages 10 to 17 in Colorado and they seem to be at higher risk to the adverse effects of exposure to the suicide of a peer, which can lead to a phenomenon sometimes referred to as suicide clusters or contagion. Studies of suicide clusters indicate that between one to five percent of teen suicides may be related to other similar deaths. As responses are formalized through policies and procedures, data shows that certain populations need special considerations. In Colorado, as well as nationally, there are significant mental health disparities among LGBTQ+ youth and youth of color, who are more likely to face discrimination and victimization compared to any other group in the United States.

The Healthy Kids Colorado Survey (HKCS) is the state's widely administered survey on the health and well-being of middle and high school students. In 2019, high school students* surveyed in El Paso County reported poor mental health outcomes at higher rates than their peers across the state. In each category, LGBTQ+ youth and youth of color were more likely to experience these outcomes than their heterosexual or white peers:

- More than 40% reported feeling sad or hopeless and stopped doing usual activities almost every day for 2+ consecutive weeks (compared to 34.7% of peers in Colorado)
- More than 20% had seriously considered attempting suicide in the previous year (compared to 17.6% of peers in Colorado)
- Sixteen percent made a plan about how they would attempt suicide (compared to 13.4% of peers in Colorado)
- More than 9% had attempted suicide (compared to 7.6% of peers in Colorado)

In El Paso County, deaths by suicide among young people ages 11-17 more than doubled from 2015-2016 and increased again from nine in 2019 to 15 in 2001 (1). In May of 2021, Children's Hospital of Colorado declared a "state of emergency" for youth mental health, stating that "we are seeing our pediatric emergency departments and our inpatient units overrun with kids attempting suicide and suffering from other forms of major mental health illness.(2)

*HKCS does not publicly share middle school data at the regional (county) level.

BACKGROUND

The suicide of a family member, friend, or other emotionally close person can have a powerful and devastating impact on the people who are left behind. In fact, it is estimated that as many as 115 people are directly impacted by just one death by suicide. Outside of a young person's home life, the school they attend is likely to be their next closest community. School district policies that ensure that every school (K-12) has an organized response in the aftermath of a suicide is a best practice in preventing additional suicide attempts, completions and clusters. Referred to as postvention, this includes the resources, infrastructure, services, and systems necessary to effectively respond to any incidence of suicide. By providing everyone who is exposed to a suicide access to effective services and support immediately, and for as long as needed, their risk of suicide is decreased, mental health is strengthened, and they are better equipped to cope with grief.

CALL TO ACTION

For school districts:

It is imperative that schools develop processes and procedures that support students after a suicide occurs (whether it's the death of a fellow student, staff or faculty member), as well as support an individual student returning to school after a suicide attempt.

We encourage every school district to:

- Work with local suicide prevention experts to develop policies for every school (K-12) in the district based on best practices.
- Ensure policies are inclusive for some of the most at-risk populations by including strategies from the Colorado's Suicide Prevention Commission's recommendations for creating supportive, inclusive, and safe communities for both LGBTQ+ and youth of color.(3,4)

For parents:

We encourage parents to:

- Contact your child's school and request information regarding these types of policies.
- If no policies exist, we encourage you to speak to your school board. Ask them to work with local suicide prevention experts to develop policies for every school (K-12) in the district based on best practices and ensure policies are inclusive for some of the most at-risk populations by including strategies from the Colorado's Suicide Prevention Commission's recommendations for creating supportive, inclusive, and safe communities for both LGBTQ+ and youth of color. (3,4)

1. Data from El Paso County Office of the Coroner
2. <http://ow.ly/hBR250FzbgG> - Children's Hospital
3. <http://ow.ly/Ca2350Fzbj> - Recommendation to Support LGBTQ+ Youth
4. <http://ow.ly/Wqd450Fzblk> - Recommendation to Support Support Black, Indigenous, and Youth of Color

Collaboration in Action has always fueled CHP's mission to improve the health and well-being of our community. We are guided by our values of collaboration, innovation, boldness, respect and responsibility, and are driven to help residents access health services, address the social determinants of health, and become a trusted resource for health policy information in the Pikes Peak region.

