

Youth Suicide: Populations at Elevated Risk

It is important for school staff to be aware of student populations that are at elevated risk for suicidal behavior based on various factors:

Youth living with mental health and/or substance use disorders. While the large majority of people with mental disorders do not engage in suicidal behavior, people with mental disorders account for more than 90 percent of deaths by suicide. Depression and substance use disorders are commonly linked to youth suicide and many youth are not engaged in treatment, therefore school staff may play a pivotal role in recognizing and referring the student to treatment that may reduce risk.

Youth who have attempted suicide. A previous suicide attempt is a key risk factor for eventual suicide death. Many adolescents who have attempted suicide do not receive necessary follow up care.

Youth who engage in non-suicidal self-injury. Suicide risk among those who engage in self-injury is significantly higher than the general populations. Whether or not they report suicidal intent, people who engage in self-harm are at elevated risk for dying by suicide within 10 years.

Youth in out-of-home settings. Youth involved in the juvenile justice or child welfare systems often have many risk factors for suicide. Young people involved in the juvenile justice system die by suicide at a rate about four times greater than the rate among youth in the general population. Though comprehensive suicide data on youth in foster care does not exist, one researcher found that youth in foster care were more than twice as likely to have considered suicide and almost four times more likely to have attempted suicide than their peers not in foster care.

Youth experiencing homelessness. Homeless young people have higher rates of mood disorders, conduct disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide attempts. One study found that more than half of runaway and homeless youth have had some thoughts of suicide.

LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning) youth. The CDC finds that LGB youth are four times more likely, and questioning youth are three times more likely, to attempt suicide as their straight peers. The American Association of Suicidology reports that nearly half of young transgender people have seriously considered taking their lives and one quarter report having made a suicide attempt. Suicidal behavior among LGBTQ youth can be related to experiences of discrimination, family rejection, harassment, bullying, violence, and victimization. For youth already experiencing other risk factors such as mental illness, these experiences can place them at increased risk.

Youth impacted by suicide. Studies show that those who have experienced suicide loss, through the death of a friend or loved one, are at increased risk for suicide themselves. If there is a suicide in your school or community, it is important to follow postvention best practices to facilitate healthy grieving and reduce risk for other students.

Youth living with medical conditions and disabilities. A number of physical conditions are associated with an elevated risk for suicidal behavior. Some of these conditions include chronic pain, loss of mobility, disfigurement, cognitive styles that make problem-solving a challenge, and other chronic limitations. Adolescents with asthma are more likely to report suicidal ideation and behavior than those without asthma. Additionally, studies show that suicide rates are significantly higher among people with certain types of disabilities, such as those with multiple sclerosis or spinal cord injuries.

Help is always available.

The National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is available 24/7 and provides free, confidential support for people in distress, prevention and crisis resources at 1-800-273-8255. Crisis Text Line Text 'ACT' to 741741 for free, 24/7 crisis support in the U.S.

