

research in brief

Adolescent Suicide

This article isn't a research report, but is a summary of research on a problem that's significant to anyone involved in youth development programs.

Suicide among youth is becoming more and more of a problem each year. Of the 25,000 American suicides each year, more than 6.6% are youth aged 15 to 19. It's now the second leading cause of death among teenagers and young adults. During the past quarter of a century, the number of suicides among this age group increased almost threefold—from 1,958 cases in 1951, to 2,319 in 1961, to 5,548 in 1971. Experts estimate that 70,000 to 80,000 young people will attempt suicide this year, and from 3,500 to 4,000 will succeed.

Actually, the number of suicide attempts will never be known because many go unreported and many of the actual suicides may be reported as accidents or death by natural causes.

Males are three times more likely than females to commit suicide. The rate among American Indians is five times the national average. Suicides are also high among blacks. Poverty, unemployment, hostile environment, school, and job reversals may be factors contributing toward the higher rate among American Indians and blacks.

Theory and research in suicide show isolation, high personal ambition, keen rivalry, and discrepancy between opportunity and results as factors. Studies of adolescents who have attempted suicide point to school adjustment as a variable, with poor grades, truancy, and discipline problems being evident. Other studies indicate that the five-year period before the suicide attempt is marked by personal, medical, social, and family difficulties.

Suicides usually don't occur without warning. Some behavior changes that may indicate a possibility of suicide include:

- A marked change in quality of school work.
- Social behavior changes, including excessive use of alcohol or other drugs.
- Changes in daily behavior and living patterns in such areas as extreme fatigue, boredom, decreased appetite, preoccupation, and inability to concentrate.
- Obvious signs of mental illness, such as delusions and hallucinations.
- Giving away prized possessions.
- Absences from school.

Editor's Note

With the rapid increase in the suicide rate, should we begin a staff development program to prepare professionals, paraprofessionals, and volunteers to recognize potential suicides and refer them to helping agencies?

“Adolescent Suicide: A Problem for Teachers?” Donald F. Smith.
Phi Delta Kappan, LVII (April, 1976), 539-42.

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