

QuickLits: COLLEGE STUDENT SUICIDE- A Brief Review

It is difficult to determine how many college students die each year by suicide. “Student” status can be hard to define and is not typically recorded by a coroner or medical examiner following a death. We do know that suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students (Kochanek, 2002) and that more teenagers and young adults die by suicide than from all medical illnesses combined (Silverman, 2008).

Estimated rates for student suicide come from surveys of campus counseling, health center or administrative staff at 4-year institutions. They range from 6.5 to 7.5 suicide deaths per 100,000 students (Schwartz, 2006,2011; Silverman, 1997). According to Silverman (2008) we lose about 1,350 college students to suicide each year; roughly 3 young people per day.

We also learn about suicide risk by surveying students. The 2009 Healthy Minds study (Eisenberg) surveyed 8,590 students across 15 campuses. Results indicate that 7% of students reported having “Seriously thought about suicide” in the past year. Two percent report having had a plan for suicide and 1% reported having made a suicide attempt in the past year (findings which are comparable to those reported in the 2010 report of the American College Health Association’s National College Health Assessment).

Bad news, good news

The bad news? If we translate those percentages to actual individuals on a small (1,000 student) and large (10,000 student) campus, the results are quite concerning.

Percentage of students in this past year who have:		1,000 students?	1,000 students?
Seriously thought of suicide	7%	70	700
Made a plan for suicide	2%	20	200
Attempted suicide	1%	10	100

Figure 1: Estimated numbers of students at risk for suicide on two different size campuses.

Clearly, preventing suicide, suicidal thinking and suicidal behavior are a priority to those who work to create safe campus communities. **The good news** for a college community? Statistics also tell us that 18-24 year olds who are in college are at HALF the risk of suicide compared to their non-student counterparts. That is, **being part of a campus community is believed to have a protective effect.** While we don’t have the full explanation for these findings, experts suggest that key factors may be reduced access to firearms, the greater availability of mental health care and richer connections to a supportive network. The continued study of suicide risk within campus communities may well teach us some strategies for preventing suicide among 18-24 year olds in non-campus settings.

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