

Data on Suicidal Behavior among College and University Students

Key Considerations in Using Existing Campus Data

Very little aggregated data on campus suicide deaths is available because there is no uniform surveillance system for these deaths, and campuses are not required to collect data on them. Individual campuses vary in the types of data they collect on their students and how they keep track of the data.

Some campuses do not track suicide-related behaviors. A survey by the Associated Press in 2017 found that of the 100 largest public universities in the U.S., only 46% currently track suicide deaths. Concerns about family privacy and the reputation and legal liability of the school are barriers to collecting and reporting suicide deaths among youth on campus. In addition, schools are inconsistent in tracking student suicides that occur off campus or during breaks. (Schools may not even be notified if a student suicide death occurs under these circumstances.¹)

Most campus suicide data are collected through surveys of students and counseling center directors, and include attempts, other suicidal behaviors, and ideation. The surveys usually focus on undergraduate students. When graduate students are surveyed, the sample size is usually much smaller than with just undergraduates.

Key Sources of Campus Suicide-Related Data

American College Health Association National College Health Assessment

<https://www.acha.org/ncha>

This is a survey that some campuses choose to administer. Each fall and spring, results from all campuses that use the survey are combined into a “reference group” report. The number of participating campuses varies from year to year. The schools either survey all of their students or use a random sampling technique.

Suicide-related questions include whether the student has ever seriously considered suicide, attempted suicide, intentionally self-injured, or seriously considered suicide when drinking alcohol. The survey also asks whether the student has received information about suicide prevention from the college or university and whether they would like to receive such information. In addition, the survey covers a wide range of other campus health topics, including other mental health issues; alcohol, tobacco, and other drug use; sexual health; personal safety and violence; and weight, nutrition, and exercise. Schools can choose to add questions specific to their campus.

Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey

<http://www.aucccd.org/director-surveys-public>

This survey of campus counseling center directors is conducted every year by the Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors. The results are published in annual reports. In 2017, over 600 counseling center directors responded. Separate data are included for counseling center clients and for the whole student body. The data include history of suicide attempts, current suicide deaths and attempts, and the mental health services and suicide prevention programs provided by the campus.

Center for Collegiate Mental Health

<http://ccmh.psu.edu/>

This center is a collaborative practice and research network that includes over 550 college counseling centers, key partners, and a number of academic departments at Penn State University. It conducts surveys of college and university students' mental health each year and publishes the results in annual reports. In addition to questions about lifetime suicide attempts and ideation, the surveys include other mental health issues, substance use, and family and academic distress.

Healthy Minds Study

<http://healthymindsnetwork.org/research/hms>

This survey is conducted by the University of Michigan and Survey Sciences Group, LLC and includes a random sample of students each year. In 2017–2018, 60 schools participated. Data are collected on the following:

- Depression, anxiety, substance use, suicide-related behaviors, and other mental health issues
- Unmet need for mental health treatment
- Barriers to care
- Attitudes about mental health

The data are included in selected publications available at the Healthy Minds website. The Healthy Minds Study also works with campuses that want to create a small set of their own questions for their survey.

¹ Binkley, C. (2018, January 2). Most big public colleges don't track suicides, AP finds. Associated Press. Retrieved from <https://apnews.com/45f78abcfcec43e49f4c0fbe06b66a8b>