

Key Points

What is it?

Data is important for understanding the scope or magnitude of suicide. It can show how many suicide deaths and attempts are occurring and the distribution of suicidal behaviors among the population (e.g., in various age groups and racial or ethnic groups). Data can also point to the factors that play a role in suicidal behavior.

Why is it important?

Without data, it is difficult to know exactly what groups are at particular risk in a community and what risk and protective factors a program or strategy should focus on to reduce suicides. Data can make a difference to decision makers, such as state suicide prevention coordinators or policymakers, because it can be used to determine how to most effectively direct—or redirect—resources to the communities and populations that need them most.

What are the challenges to implementation?

- National data is often available, but it doesn't provide a picture of what may be occurring in a specific state or community.
- Many communities have access to data on deaths; however, such data is only a small part of what is needed to understand the burden suicidal behavior has on a community. For example, many others may attempt or think about suicide.
- Suicide attempts are usually much more numerous than deaths, yet that data can be more difficult to access and understand.
- The data that exists in a community may be inconsistent or incomplete.
- Certain organizations and agencies may be unwilling to share their data due to specific concerns, such as privacy.

How can we overcome those challenges?

- Gather data on suicides, suicide attempts, and thoughts of suicide (suicidal ideation) to more fully understand the issue:
 - » Sources of data on suicide deaths: Vital statistics department, coroner or medical examiner, law enforcement, or your state's National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS)
 - » Sources of data on hospitalizations and emergency department visits due to suicide attempts: Local hospitals, state hospital associations, Healthcare Cost and Utilization Project (HCUP)
 - » Sources of data on attempts and suicidal ideation from self-reports on surveys: National Survey of Drug Use and Health (NSDUH), Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), or state school surveys
- Partner with other organizations and agencies, including the state health department, who have access to data. By establishing relationships or formal agreements, they may be more willing to share their data or to help you find the data you need.
- Learn from other communities or systems who are finding new ways to gather and crosswalk data to better understand their suicide problems.

"Data is one of the foundations when we talk about the public health approach to addressing any particular condition or problem, such as suicidal behavior."

Dr. Alex Crosby, Medical Epidemiologist,
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Prevention