

Research in Brief:

Evaluating the Effectiveness of School-Based Suicide Prevention Programs

Suicide ranks as one of the leading causes of death internationally among youth aged 15-19. Suicide and attempted suicide rates have increased substantially in the last 15 years.

While some countries attempt to prevent suicide by reducing youth's access to lethal means, the most common method of suicide prevention in North America is school-based: prevention programs are integrated into the regular classroom curriculum.

Generally, school-based suicide prevention curricula incorporate instructional videos, presentations, and transparencies 3-5 days per week. Common goals of such curricula are:

- Raising awareness
- Recognizing signs and symptoms in both oneself and others
- Providing students with school and community resources

Are school-based suicide prevention programs effective?

A recent systematic review sought to evaluate a range of school-based suicide prevention curricula. The review examined the efficacy and limitations of several existing suicide prevention programs.

With the use of suicide prevention curriculum, students' and staffs' knowledge of and attitudes toward suicide showed some improvement. While only two of the 16 programs evaluated in the review were found to reduce suicide attempts, other programs decreased incidence of suicidal thoughts, improved general life skills, and changed gatekeeper behaviours (identifying and responding appropriately to at-risk individuals).

What is a systematic review?

The purpose of a systematic review is to sum up the best available research on a specific question. This is done by bringing together the results of a number of studies. Studies included in a review are screened for quality, so that the findings of a large number of studies can be combined.

Why does this matter?

- ⇒ Suicide ranks as one of the leading causes of death among today's youth.
- ⇒ Given how much time youth spend in school, school-based suicide prevention initiatives may be the most effective way to reach them.
- ⇒ School-based suicide prevention curricula can improve students' knowledge, attitudes, and help-seeking behaviour.
- ⇒ In view of the number and scope of available programs, a combination of these may be more beneficial than a single program.
- ⇒ Researchers recommend that future studies restrict their focus to the effect of prevention programs on suicide-related outcomes specifically.

The Knowledge Network for Student Well-Being is a project of the **Knowledge Network for Applied Educational Research** (www.knaer-recrae.ca)

Communities of practice in the KNSWB include: **Ontario Healthy Schools Coalition, PREVNet, School Mental Health ASSIST, and the Social Planning Network of Ontario**

Other Research in Briefs can be found at
<http://oere.oise.utoronto.ca/>

KNAER-RECREAE is funded by the government of Ontario. The views expressed in this brief are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Ontario government.

Evaluating the Effectiveness of School-Based Suicide Prevention Programs

What did the researchers do?

The researchers identified relevant studies through literature searches using a combination of MEDLINE® and Scopus.

The following criteria were used to qualify a study for this review:

Evaluation of a suicide prevention program in a school context measuring outcomes including improvement in:

- Attitudes
- Knowledge
- Help-seeking
- Suicidal behaviour (thoughts and attempts)
- General skills

A total of 16 programs across 60 relevant studies met the criteria for this review. The researchers first identified five general categories of suicide prevention curricula, and then discussed specific examples from the list of 16 programs that fall into those categories. Programs included:

- SOS (Awareness/Education category)
- TeenScreen (Screening category)
- QPR (Gatekeeper Training category)
- Sources of Strength (Peer Leadership Training category)
- AILSD; CARE/CAST; Reconnecting Youth; Good Behavior Game (Skills Training category)

What did they learn?

Overall, the review revealed that all five categories of suicide prevention curricula were associated with positive changes in attitudes toward and knowledge about suicide. However, the researchers were careful to point out that improvements in attitudes/knowledge do not necessarily translate to positive

changes in behaviour. Accordingly, the researchers highlight a need for future research to examine suicide-related outcomes (suicide rates, attempts or ideation) specifically as more direct measures of efficacy.

Additionally, the finding that Signs of Suicide (SOS) and the Good Behavior Game (GBG) were the only two of 16 programs to reduce suicide attempts suggests that a combination of curricula (in this case, programs from both the Awareness/Education and Skills Training categories) may be more effective than a single approach in preventing suicidal behaviour. Those programs found to have no impact on suicide attempts require further evaluation with respect to suicide-related outcomes.

The researchers stressed that the letter grades assigned to the range of prevention programs in their review do not necessarily indicate that a program is ineffective per se – the grade may instead reflect a lack of conclusive evidence or flaws in the design of the original study; further analysis of the lower-grade programs is therefore recommended.



This brief summary was prepared from: Katz, C., Bolton, S.-L., Katz, L. Y., Isaak, C., Tilston-Jones, T., Sareen, J. and Swampy Cree Suicide Prevention Team (2013), A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF SCHOOL-BASED SUICIDE PREVENTION PROGRAMS. *Depression and Anxiety*, 30(10): 1030–1045.

Please see the original document for full details. In the case of any disagreement between this summary and the original document, the original document should be seen as authoritative.