

JUST SIX
QUESTIONS

RESEARCH
SUMMARY



Training Youth Services Staff to Identify, Assess and Intervene When Working with Youth at Risk of Suicide

Key Details

KEY WORDS

Suicide, Suicide Intervention,
Youth In Care, Youth Mental Health

POPULATION GROUPS

Youth In and Leaving Care
Youth Workers

STEPPING UP THEME

Health and Wellness

RESEARCH ORIGIN

USA

SOURCE

Academic

“Research suggests that youth in the child welfare system are at an elevated risk of suicide ideation and behaviour due to the numerous physical and psychological challenges they face” (p. 308).

1. What is the research about?

Evidence suggests that youth in care (child welfare) are at increased risk of suicide ideation and behaviour. The physical and psychological adversities they are exposed to can have a negative lasting impact on their mental health, increasing risk of suicide. This study estimates that 27% of youth involved in the child care system are at imminent risk of suicide, compared to 16% of youth in the general population.

This was a longitudinal study (carried out over a period of time) looking at the impact of suicide intervention training on the ability of youth workers who have received “gatekeeper” training to identify, assess and intervene when working with youth in care at risk of suicide. (*Gatekeeper* refers to a heterogeneous group of professionals and non-professionals likely to come into contact with individuals at risk.) The study measured whether training developed skill-based competencies, leading to changes in knowledge, attitudes, self-efficacy and intervention or prevention behaviours.

2. Where did the research take place?

This small study took place in Florida, USA. It was restricted to youth workers at one youth service agency, who had direct contact with youth; 42 youth workers participated in the study.

3. Who is this research about?

The study target population was youth services staff working with youth in care at risk of suicide ideation and behaviours. The study explored how training for service providers affected youth workers’ competence in supporting youth at risk of suicide. The research was based on a small study, restricted to a small sample. Given these limitations, the study is not widely generalizable or transferable. However, the study provides informative insights for service providers working with youth in similar settings.

4. How was the research done?

Youth workers selected for inclusion in the study participated in three training sessions, which used a range of learning techniques (didactic methods, group activities and case-based scenario simulations). Content covered over the course of the training included:

- Addressing myths about suicide, identifying warning signs and risk or protective factors
- Learning and practicing skills for identifying and assessing suicide risk
- Identifying protocols and resources guiding interventions for youth at risk

Youth workers took pre- and post-training surveys to measure learning. Additionally, they were invited to complete two post-training surveys at 3 months and 6 months post-training, for which they received \$25 gift cards per survey. Data gathered was analyzed using a statistical program to identify statistically significant differences and assess how the training impacted their work.

5. What are the key findings?

The goal of the study was to assess the impact of suicide intervention training for service providers working with youth in care. The training aimed to increase knowledge, improve attitudes and increase self-efficacy in youth workers — the expectation being that with these improved skills youth workers would be better equipped to identify and intervene in high suicide risk situations.

The study assessed the following measures:

- Knowledge about suicide and suicide intervention
- Attitudes toward suicide intervention
- Self-efficacy
- Suicide intervention behaviours

Overall, the results showed improvements in practice. There were notable improvements in some measures and moderate changes in others. At the core, study results showed increased use of both assessment and intervention behaviours in the sample participants. Youth workers who participated in the training were more likely to ask the youth they worked with about suicidal thoughts when youth showed warning signs.

The study findings suggest that youth workers with a good base knowledge know which warning signs to look for and are better equipped to connect youth to services they need.

6. Why does it matter for youth work?

Youth in care are at increased risk of suicide due to the many physical and psychological challenges they face. Youth workers as “gatekeepers” are highly likely to come into contact with youth at risk. Training provides youth workers with the skills they need to identify youth at risk and make referrals to mental health services as needed.



Osteen, P. J., Lacasse, J. R., Woods, M. N., Greene, R., Frey, J. J., & Forsman, R. L. (2018). Training youth services staff to identify, assess and intervene when working with youth at high risk for suicide. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 86(C), 308-315. DOI:10.1016/j.childyouth.2018.02.008