



Comparing Components and Efficacy of School-Based Suicide Prevention Programs

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Abstract

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suicide is responsible for 47,500 deaths per year (2019). Suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents between the ages of 12-18 (CDC, 2019). Annually in the United States, there are approximately two and a half times as many suicides as there are homicides (CDC, 2019). School based suicide prevention programs are a response to this national problem. Due to significant rates of suicide with adolescents, there are a variety of suicide prevention programs currently being utilized in High Schools across the United States and their effectiveness is varied. This research utilized a systematic review to investigate the efficacy of school-based suicide prevention programming. The PRISMA 2020 guidelines were followed, and multiple databases were methodically explored to identify studies which evaluate suicide prevention interventions delivered on high-school campuses. Criteria for inclusion in this systematic review included studies that explored the impact of peer support and gatekeeper trainings as suicide prevention initiatives. Research findings suggest the use of mutual aid has positive outcomes on adolescents experiencing suicidal ideation. Gatekeeper trainings were also found to be impactful for suicide vulnerable adolescents.

Keywords: suicide prevention programs, adolescence, school-based programs

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Purpose of Study

This systematic review explores diversified school-based suicide prevention programs and the impacts they serve on adolescents and young adults. The goals of this investigation are to better understand:

1. What components of current suicide prevention programs in schools are effective in promoting help-seeking behaviors among students.
2. The role mutual aid and gate-keeper trainings play in student suicide prevention.

Literature Review

Review of prior literature identified three significant research studies considered relevant to the current investigation.

Calear, McCallum, Christensen, Mackinnon, Nicolopoulos, Brewer, & Batterham (2021) employed a qualitative research design to explore whether adolescent participants improve on help-seeking intentions and behavior after engaging with a peer leadership program known as Sources of Strength. The program uses a social connectedness approach, enabling student peer leaders to promote help-seeking behaviors and positive communication with trusted adults. Data was collected through pre/post intervention surveys distributed to student participants. Results of this study indicate how the program increased conversations about mental health and suicide when initiated by the peer leaders.

Tsong, Young, Killer, Takemoto, & Compliment (2019) utilized a quantitative research design to explore the effectiveness of Question, Persuade, and Refer (QPR) suicide prevention workshops on college campuses and universities that implement a peer-to-peer approach. The study method allowed graduate and undergraduate college students that were enrolled in counseling-related fields to serve as peer educators. Results indicated changes in participants' knowledge and attitude toward suicide, directly after the workshop in three areas: (a) normality of people who take their lives, (b) suicidal warning signs/behaviors, and (c) talking about suicide does not indicate an individual is suicidal.

Hart, Cropper, Morgan, Kelly, & Jorm (2020) used a cluster-randomized crossover trial to measure the effectiveness of teen Mental Health First Aid as an intervention in enhancing peer support among adolescents at risk for suicide. The researchers also utilized a pre/post intervention surveys to collect qualitative data on program efficacy. Study findings suggested that adolescents felt confident after the Mental health First Aid training, in regard to recognizing students who may be at risk. This study highlights gatekeeper training as an effective intervention when combined with a peer-to-peer model.

Methods & Preliminary Findings

Studies selected for inclusion of this review were identified through three Georgian Court University databases (*Academic Search Premier, PsycInfo, and ProQuest*) and Google Scholar, using keywords such as "suicide prevention, education, mutual aid, gatekeeper training and program evaluation." Criteria for selection consisted of studies that addressed peer support or gatekeeper trainings as suicide prevention initiatives. There were a total of fifteen (n=15) selected studies in the literature review. Researchers then used narrative synthesis to determine whether the programs involving either mutual aid or gatekeeper training demonstrated effectiveness in increasing help-seeking behaviors among students.

Preliminary findings indicated effectiveness of a peer-to-peer program model in increasing student help-seeking behaviors. Studies found that the use of mutual aid has suggested positive outcomes on young adults with suicidal ideation. Specifically, programs that implemented peer-led groups were successful in encouraging adolescents to openly discuss their problems with peers. Student participants in studies reported that they felt better understood by their peers with similar experiences. In addition, findings indicated that involving mutual aid played a significant role in strengthening social and emotional connectedness amongst adolescents and young adults, particularly in educational settings.

Findings also suggested the efficacy of gatekeeper trainings. Study findings highlight an increase in health-seeking behaviors when students or faculty are trained in suicide prevention. Gatekeeper trainings can educate individuals on a) normality of people who take their lives, (b) suicidal warning signs/behaviors, and (c) talking about suicide does not indicate an individual is suicidal. Research suggests that young adults are more susceptible to seek help from individuals that are educated and able to openly discuss suicide.

Discussion- What Schools Can Do

In accordance with preliminary findings, both peer-to-peer models and gatekeeper trainings are effective in promoting help-seeking behaviors in students. While mutual aid has been shown to help students feel more understood, the gatekeeper model provides knowledge to further preventative strategies. Schools should seek implementation of more suicide prevention programs that incorporate both models. Students can train students on suicide prevention, in contrast to adults training students. Therefore, the effective components of programs such as QPR and Sources of Strength can work together to enhance prevention.

School implementation of suicide prevention programs should also consider social work theories, such as social learning theory and systems theory. Through understanding social learning theory, schools can model peer support programs to align with their adolescent development stage. According to Erikson, the stage of adolescence is known as Identity vs. Role Confusion," whereas individuals rely heavily on their peers for validation. Thus, implementing a program that recognizes social learning theory allows peers to help peers talk about their struggles, may as well help individuals learn that it is ok to seek help. Having school administration apply systems theory to this approach also engages the uses of a gatekeeper initiative, where schools recognize the importance of educating students on the not only support systems they have at school, but also at home and in the community.

Future Works

- The mental health of student peer leaders in response to participation in gatekeeper trainings.
- The role school faculty plays in contributing to student suicide prevention

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