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Suicide Indicators
in
Ontario County Students
Results from the
Evalumetrics Youth Survey
2023

Evalumetrics Research Brief EYS23-009

Summary –

Results from the 2023 Evalumetrics Youth Survey (EYS) in Ontario County found:

More than one in 15 (6.5%) Ontario County middle school and 6.6% of high school students reported making a plan to commit suicide, i.e., ideation, in the 12 months prior to the survey.

Nearly one in 20 (4.5%) middle school and 4.4% of high school students reported one or more suicide attempts in the past 12 months.

Students who scored at risk for Social Emotional Distress (SED) were six times more likely to report suicide ideation. More than one in 10 (14.1%) middle school students and 7.3% of high school students scored at the risk level for SED.

Students who reported two or more adverse childhood experiences (ACE) were 6.0 times more likely to report suicide ideation. Nearly one in three (31.8%) middle school and 35.8% of high school students reported two or more ACEs.

One in three (34.3%) high school and 33.0% of middle school students reported feeling sad or depressed most of the time.

Nearly one in three (31.5%) middle school and 30.9% of high school students reported that their lives lack meaning or purpose.

Background –

The Evalumetrics Youth Survey (EYS) has been conducted in schools throughout the Finger Lakes Region every odd-numbered year since 1999 and, most recently, in Ontario County in 2023. The EYS is based on the Risk and Protective Factor Model developed at the University of Washington by J. David Hawkins, Richard Catalano, and Janet Miller¹. The EYS asks students about several critical health risk behaviors such as: substance use, violence, depression, and suicide ideation. The EYS also includes questions about underlying or root cause factors such as students' attitudes toward and connection to school, family, and community, as well as trauma and social-emotional distress.

Method -

The EYS was conducted online on a web-based platform that was accessed by students clicking on a URL address provided by the school. Surveys were completed in school with adult supervision. Basic demographic information was collected including grade, age, gender, and race. No individual identifying information was collected. Parents were notified of the surveys prior to implementation and were instructed on how to “opt out” if, for any reason, they preferred

¹ Hawkins, J.D., Catalano, R.F., and Miller, J.Y., Risk and protective factors for alcohol and other drug problems in adolescence and early adulthood: implications for substance abuse prevention. *Psychol Bull.* 1992 Jul;112(1):64-105.

not to have their child participate. Unless parents opted out, students were asked to complete the survey (i.e., passive consent). At the start of the survey, students were informed that participation was voluntary, and they could elect not to take the survey or to skip any questions that they did not want to answer. This information is repeated on the first survey page.

This report provides results from the 2023 EYS related to suicide ideation and its root causes.

Results –

Risk Behaviors

There are several behaviors that represent risks to the wellbeing of young people. These include depression, suicide ideation, and self-injury such as cutting or burning. The EYS includes several items based on the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Youth Risk Behavior Survey*.

Depression

Teenage depression is a serious problem that impacts every aspect of teens’ lives. Left untreated, teen depression can lead to problems at home and school, drug abuse, and an overwhelming sense of sadness, despair, or anger. Students were asked if they “feel depressed most of the time, even if you feel happy sometimes.” Students were also asked if their life has meaning or purpose.

(B01) Felt Sad or Depressed Most days in Past Year	GRADE 6	GRADE 8	Middle School	GRADE 10	GRADE 12	High School
Felt Sad	31.0%	35.9%	33.0%	35.7%	31.0%	34.3%
No	69.0%	64.1%	67.0%	64.3%	69.0%	65.7%
N=	358	241	599	641	277	918

(B06) Life Has Direction and Purpose and Meaning	GRADE 6	GRADE 8	Middle School	GRADE 10	GRADE 12	High School
Life Lacks Purpose	27.6%	33.1%	31.5%	32.6%	27.8%	30.9%
No Lack of Purpose	72.4%	66.9%	68.5%	67.4%	72.2%	69.1%
N=	246	610	856	512	277	789

Suicide Thoughts and Ideation

The greatest concern about depression and other negative feelings is the possibility that a student might contemplate, plan, or attempt suicide. Items from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Youth Risk Behavior Survey* were included in the EYS to address these concerns.

(B02) Thought About Suicide in Past Year	GRADE 6	GRADE 8	Middle School	GRADE 10	GRADE 12	High School
Made Plan	11.2%	16.6%	13.4%	17.0%	12.3%	15.6%
No Plan	88.8%	83.4%	86.6%	83.0%	87.7%	84.4%
N=	358	241	599	641	277	918

(B03) Made Plan for Suicide (Ideation) in Past Year	GRADE 6	GRADE 8	Middle School	GRADE 10	GRADE 12	High School
Made Plan	5.9%	7.3%	6.5%	7.6%	4.3%	6.6%
No Plan	94.1%	92.7%	93.5%	92.4%	95.7%	93.4%
N=	358	241	599	641	277	918

(B04) Attempted Suicide 1 or More Times in Past year	GRADE 6	GRADE 8	Middle School	GRADE 10	GRADE 12	High School
Attempted 1 or More	3.6%	5.8%	4.5%	5.3%	2.2%	4.4%
Did Not Attempt	96.4%	94.2%	95.5%	94.7%	97.8%	95.6%
N=	358	241	599	641	277	918

Self-Injury

Some teens have a difficult time balancing their conflicting feelings and some turn to harmful activities like drinking, using drugs, or self-injury. Intentional self-injurious behavior, through cutting or burning, is used as a mechanism for coping with emotional distress. Those who self-injure often are experiencing overwhelming feelings, like extreme anxiety or tension, and in the moment self-injury may seem to provide a feeling of escape or relief. These injuries are not suicide attempts and often are interpreted as expressions of anger or psychological pain.

(B05) Injured self (cutting or burning) When Upset	GRADE 6	GRADE 8	Middle School	GRADE 10	GRADE 12	High School
Injured Self	11.7%	15.5%	14.3%	16.5%	15.5%	16.2%
No	88.3%	84.5%	85.7%	83.5%	84.5%	83.8%
N=	358	741	1099	641	277	918

Underlying Factors/Root Causes -

Strategic prevention planning requires analysis of the prevalence of problem behaviors, such as suicide ideation, as well analysis of the root causes of these problems. The Evalumetrics Youth Survey (EYS) includes data with which to conduct analyses of risk and protective factors and other factors as root causes. Root cause analyses show the relationship of each factor to specific health risk behaviors. First, students who scored below the risk level (“No Risk”) for each factor are compared to the students who scored at or above the risk level (“Risk”). The relationship between the factor and reported problem is expressed as a ratio. The ratio is calculated by dividing the proportion of at-risk students who reported a specific problem behavior, e.g., suicide ideation, by the proportion of no risk students who reported that behavior.

The table below shows the relative risk for suicide ideation for students at or below the risk level on each factor. The table shows that the strongest predictor of suicide ideation is Social Emotional Distress (SED) as measured by the SED scale in the EYS. Students above the risk level on SED were 8.3 times more likely to report suicide ideation. More than one in 10 (14.1%) Ontario County middle school students and 7.3% of high school students scored at the risk level for SED.

Students with two or more adverse childhood experiences (ACE) were 6.0 times more likely to report suicide ideation. Nearly one in three (31.8%) Ontario County middle school students and more than one in three (35.8%) high school students reported two or more ACEs.

Strongest Predictors (Root Causes)	Ratio	Prevalence in Ontario County	
		Middle School	High School
Social Emotional Distress	8.3x	14.1%	7.3%
ACE 2+	6.0x	31.8%	35.8%
Friends Use Drugs	3.3x	1.1%	4.0%
Interaction w/Antisocial Friends	3.2x	3.2%	5.9%
Poor Dental Health	3.1x	30.5%	36.3%
Lack Attachment to School	2.9x	9.7%	9.9%

Discussion –

Results from the 2023 Evalumetrics Youth Survey (EYS) indicate that more than one in 15 (6.5%) Ontario County middle school and 6.6% of high school students reported making a plan to commit suicide, i.e., ideation, in the 12 months prior to the survey. Nearly one in 20 (4.5%) middle school and 4.4% of high school students reported one or more suicide attempts in the past 12 months.

Root cause analyses indicate that students who scored at risk for Social Emotional Distress (SED) were six times more likely to report suicide ideation. More than one in 10 (14.1%) middle school students and 7.3% of high school students in Ontario County scored at the risk level for SED.

Students who reported two or more adverse childhood experiences (ACE) were 6.0 times more likely to report suicide ideation. Nearly one in three (31.8%) middle school and 35.8% of high school students reported two or more ACEs.

Strategic planning can utilize these results in identifying factors to be addressed by prevention and intervention strategies.