

News

State policymakers look to curb youth suicides

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Suicide rates are rising for children and young adults, both nationally and statewide --- and Florida policymakers are trying to reverse the trend.

While suicide is increasing for nearly every age group, it's now the second-leading cause of death for Floridians aged 25 to 34, according to the state Department of Health Vital Statistics, and the third-leading cause of death among youths aged 10 to 24.

But experts say suicide is preventable with education and community action.

"Under-treated or untreated mental health is the major risk factor for suicide," clinical psychologist Heather Flynn told the Florida Children and Youth Cabinet meeting Wednesday. "Of those who die from suicide, more than 90 percent have a diagnosable mental disorder."

That disorder is usually depression or anxiety, said Flynn, a professor at the **Florida State University** College of Medicine who works with families that have lost members to suicide.

Experts say the key to curbing suicides is treating them as the public health threat they are --- and reducing the stigma for those who seek help.

"We need to catch individuals during their time of distress," University of Central Florida professor Kim Gryglewicz, who specializes in suicide prevention, wrote in an email. "And we can do this by working with hospitals and behavioral-health organizations to improve screening and assessment. ... We also need to help get people into treatment once they are identified as being at risk."

Florida's suicide rate is 13.8 per 1,000, higher than the national average of 12.9 per 1,000, according to the Department of Health and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

And while the rates for children and youths have risen, so have those for many other groups, including military veterans and members of minority groups.

But while the upward trend is clear, the data varies from study to study. Jay Reeve, president and CEO

of the Apalachee Center, a multi-county provider based in Tallahassee, said that's due to inconsistent reporting.

"It comes back to prejudice," he said. "Suicide is perceived as being a shameful thing. There are a lot of deaths that are probably suicides but are reported as accidents."

Earlier in his career, Reeve worked at a Rhode Island hospital where, he said, he found it "astounding and horrifying" to grasp the frequency with which "little kids tried to commit suicide."

So he consulted a more experienced colleague, who told him: "It's always described as an accident. But if you've got a kid who is consistently running out in front of cars, and you bring the kid into treatment and the kid says something like, 'Yeah, I was just trying to get away. I don't want to be here anymore' --- well, if that were a 16-year-old saying it, you would define it as suicidal act. But with a 6-year-old saying it, it's too troubling for everybody (to admit), but it's truly a suicidal act."

Getting the correct data is the first step, said Mike Hansen, president and chief executive officer of the Florida Council for Community Mental Health.

On Wednesday, the Children and Youth Cabinet tapped Tanya Wilkins, a nurse and new member of the panel, to chair its new Suicide Surveillance Task Force. The group, which will study the possibility of pooling data on suicide across state agencies to guide their prevention and intervention efforts, will include state leaders, researchers and suicide-prevention advocates.

"We really don't know why" suicide rates are rising, Hansen said. "And one of the reasons why we want to do these studies is to find out what's really going on with these rates, why these rates are increasing --- and as I said, it's true nationally, and it's true in Florida."

Hansen also pointed to Florida LINC, which stands for Linking Individuals Needing Care. A joint project of the [University of South Florida](#) and the University of Central Florida, with funding from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, it's aimed at identifying youth at risk for suicide and linking them to services.

But Hansen also warned that Florida --- which is ranked 49th of the 50 states for per capita spending on mental health --- needs to spend more of its own money.

"Federal grants are never going to cover it," he said.

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