

How Can Communities Prevent Youth Suicide

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Introduction

A community, at one of its simplest definitions, could be described as the area in which a person lives and people that spend most of their time there. However, this definition, while not incorrect, has little indication of the great influence a community can have on the people that live within. The purpose of this literature review is to gain knowledge on how a community can use its influence in order to combat a serious issue that today's youth are facing, suicide. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Suicide is the third largest cause of death for 10-24 year olds" (2017). This issue is very widespread, affecting so many communities. If that is not startling enough, this means that more young people die from suicide every year than any other disease, including cancer. For minority youth, the risk for suicide goes up even higher, especially for Native American Youth. The CDC states that suicide is the leading cause of death for Native American Youth (2015).

Methods for this review was to first gather several Empirical Articles that studied various Youth targeted Suicide Prevention Programs, then these studies were compared to one another to find similarities in what made them effective. The limitations that I chose for this study is the age group of at risk individuals I was interested in. I decided to focus on youth for the propose of this study. I also limited which studies I chose based the year of publication. Communities were limited to that of geographical regions and the schools that are run by them and lastly, all articles are from the past 10 years (2007-).

Understanding how communities can create effective suicide prevention programs, in my opinion, is an essential step in trying to bring down the number of youth that commit suicide and the families left suffering. Growing up in my church community there were two suicides that took place, and while both individuals were over the age of 18, I still witnessed

the pain of their families and the devastation felt by our whole church. Those experiences are what propelled this study. Through this research it appears that communities can make a difference in preventing youth suicide through effective programs with commonalities such as looking at a person through their environment, cultural competence, educating on mental health, multi system approach, youth involvement, and participation opportunities.

Environment

The perspective in which a person's environment should be considered in coming up with an effective approach to suicide prevention was very important to the study on Frameworks, a youth community level prevention program, from the Journal of Community Psychology. The premise of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of Frameworks in a small community. "The Frameworks project seeks to build community competence for identifying youth at risk for suicide and connecting these youth to appropriate resources and services" (Baber 2009). They did this by getting over 100 adults volunteers from a variety of different occupations who had interaction with the youth of their community every day such as teachers, doctors, and bus drivers as well as over 100 9th grade students to enroll in the Frameworks training program. Participants were taught evidence-based steps in identifying and directing suicidal youth to appropriate resources. These protocols were designed to teach community members how to identify at risk youth and were based upon an ecological perspective. The program was designed to be one, which "emphasizes the importance of the environmental, contextual, and socioeconomical influences on the experiences and development of individuals" (Barber 2009). This perspective that Frameworks took in considering a whole person in the environment they are influenced by and how those factors are influencing their current mental health state. This allowed not only for the community to be more prepared to identify or encounter a suicidal

youth, but also for the community to place a higher value on mental health care. The conclusion of this study found that attitudes towards the importance of mental health care for youth rose from 84% to 96% (Barber 2009). This was a great step in the right direction in moving forward with the prevention initiative.

Culture

This idea of creating a program that does not just look at a person and simply judge behaviors, but looks at them through the eyes of their environment is very similar to looking at the culture of a person in order to understand why they might be behaving in a certain way and how to effectively create a program that touches on specific needs cultural needs as a way of understanding suicide on a larger scale. A study that demonstrated this very well happened in the community of Yup'ik in Alaska. This study focused on tailoring a suicide prevention program to match the exact needs of the community through their culture. They also developed an empowering program based on the community's cultural strengths "However, an enduring strength and asset of this community is its identification and pride in its cultural heritage and identity, which proved important motivation for the cultural focus described by the study (Allen 2009)." Through realizing these strengths they developed their program activities around cultural heritage and family connection. These were the results "The primary findings of this study suggest that community readiness and community protective factors increased in response to intervention" (Allen 2009). This means that through these activities this community realized how important their youth were to them and how they needed to increase protective factors such as parental supervision and limited access to alcohol and weapons in order to create a less harmful environment.

Mental Health Education

A study that is similar to this was done on the program Better Today's/ Better tomorrow's. This study was done in a rural American community. They found that in the culture of this community, mental health care was not something talked about or even really known about by its members. The implementers of Better today's/Better tomorrow's wanted to use mental health education as the main staple of their youth suicide prevention program because "Research suggests that mental illness and death by suicide in rural areas may be related to limited mental health literacy" (Story 2016). According to them this is due to many factors, but one of the most important is the difficulty it takes for someone from a very rural area to get to a mental health care professional. They did this by implementing an education program that would "Promote positive attitudes pertaining to mental health and promote health-seeking behaviors" (Story 2016). The culture of this town valued self reliance and there was much stigma towards mental health, so they really wanted to educate on the importance of seeking help and understanding common conditions such as depression. "Indeed, the authors found that participants reported improved mental health literacy" (Story 2016). What makes this program stand out is how they blended the importance of understanding the community's culture with the importance on emphasizing the importance of mental health when preventing suicide. No other program assessed in this review put such a high value on educating community members, which is what made it effective.

Another study realized the importance of training community members of rural areas to be more proficient in matters of mental health and suicide. A study done of Garrett Lee Smith prevention program found that "In particular, the emphasis on the gatekeeper role (educators, spiritual leader, physicians) may have been particularly effective in a context in which professional mental health support was less available, accessible, or socially acceptable"

(Walrath 2015). In areas where resources are scarce, for these programs it can be effective to train community members who are respected important information about youth and suicide. By doing this communities may have a better chance of filling in the gaps that a local mental health care provider would be able to give. I believe this to be a great example of how a community can really pull together in order to make a difference in suicide rates.

While environment was still taken is as a factor, this next study focused specifically on individuals behaviors and making sure that even at elementary school level, children's psychological wellbeing was being influenced in a positive way. Published in the Drug and Alcohol Depend, several researchers evaluated the effects of implementing the Good Behavior Game and Mastery Learning program on elementary students and the effects this had on suicide rates during adolescents and young adulthood. The Good behavior Game is a program set up in the classroom that helps teachers clearly set up classroom rules that encourage positive and supportive peer behavior. The class is divided up into teams and rewards were given to those who did not break the rules. They also implemented Mastery Learning "We therefore hypothesized that Mastery Learning would reduce suicidality because of the role that mastery plays in self-esteem, depression, and suicidal thought" (Wilcox 2008). This teaching method focused on developing children's strengths in school in order to build up self-esteem by helping them excel in school.

This study had huge results from some classrooms and not significant results from others which they attribute to the preciseness of the teachers implementing these programs, but as far a suicide ideation goes, this study found that "Those assigned to a Good Behavior Game intervention were half as likely to experience suicide ideation compared to those in controlled classrooms" (Wilcox 2008). The way that these programs discourage behaviors such as

aggression, drug/alcohol use, and disruptiveness and establish these students on a track of positive mental health appears to pay off in the end.

Multi-System Approach

Communities can use schools as a method of reaching children, but they are not limited to them. Community programs can include multiple systems within that community. The more levels involved the more people are trained in how to help prevent youth suicide. The more people who are properly educated, means theoretically that there is a higher chance of a suicidal youth being screened and directed to the proper resource before it is too late. Getting health care providers on board would be another included system. This multimodal approach was used by a group of researchers in Japan. “Local governments and local health authorities collaborated and implemented the intervention programs in accordance with the manual” (Ono 2013). Their idea was to not just get the public on board through their local community governments, but also get all local health care providers on the same page in order to hopefully catch as many suicidal youth as possible. These health care providers could then have a community wide unified way of intervening on behalf of suicidal community members. At the end of this study they found that in rural areas the outcomes on the intervention group lessened by 7% as compared to the control group (Ono 2013).

Youth Involvement

Both of the previous studies used different inner community layers such as schools and health care in order to prevent youth suicide, and while they were effective Hawaii’s Caring Communities Program takes this to a whole other level by not only incorporating different systems, but also incorporating actual youth from the community as leaders in the cause. They did this for several reasons, one was because they felt as though youth would feel more

comfortable talking to their peers about suicidal thoughts and more interestingly because “Youth have the insider perspective on youth culture and are attuned to the realities that their peers face” (Chung-Do 2015). In choosing a variety of youth from different backgrounds and involvements in the community, they were able to gain an insider perspective in order to build up their program in a way that would actual impact the at risk youth of that community. They were able to start a t-shirt campaign, do an interview on television, and set up a large community event. Through this 41 youth were screened for suicide, 24 were identified at risk, and 18 were willing to be connected to resources (Chung-Do 2015). While these opportunities for involvement were great, what they found was most important to participants were the relationships built. “After collective reflection, the staff realized that prioritizing relationship building was essential to meeting the goal of building youth leaders” (Chung-do 2015). Building the bonds of trust between the youth and trained adults was critical in order for the youth leaders to feel comfortable in confiding in the adults. This is very important because if a high school students has a good relationship with an adult they trust who is qualified to help in a suicidal situation, instead of trying to handle it on their own, they can feel safe in getting help.

Youth Opportunities

Giving the youth opportunity to get involved is something of great importance to another suicide prevention study done on Entrepreneurship Education as a way of combating youth feeling as though they are not valued or do not have the support of their community. “Entrepreneurship education has been shown to increase youth’s feeling of security, affiliation, autonomy, identity, and achievement, as well as improve confidence, knowledge and ability (Tingey 2016). This study focused on the effects of this approach on a community made up largely by Native Americans. The program was very strengths based and valued connectedness as they taught the

youth of their community how to turn their interests and strengths into a small “business” where they could not only find meaning in contributing to their community, but that their community could then contribute back to them by paying for the goods or offering encouragement. They wanted to promote a sense of “connectedness”. More studies still need to be done on this method, but in conclusions the researchers state, “Entrepreneurship education is a promising model of positive youth development to promote life skills and school connectedness and reduce high risk behaviors in A1 communities” (Tingey 2016).

Theories

Systems theory is a deep underlying principle that affects each and every human being. As social creatures, each person is part of many systems, which they interact with on a daily basis. This is what is called systems theory. According to the Social Work License Map, a website dedicated to providing information to Social workers studying for their license “Systems Theory is used to develop a holistic view of individuals within an environment and is best applied to situations where several systems inextricably connect and influence one another.” It is a way of looking a person as not a single unit, but as a person and everything around them that is influencing their behavior. The research gathered from all the programs above strongly suggests that having a suicide prevention program that includes not only an educational experience or involvement activities, but actually targets issues in the environment specific to that community and the systems within, will make that program more influential.

From researching all these programs, another important aspect a community needs to look at when creating a program to consider is the concept of cultural and how it is influencing the actions of the community members. The above programs discussed are examples of culturally competent programs. Instead of just using a general suicide prevention approach, these

communities made sure that the programs used were ones that community members could relate to. Not only that, but several of these programs used the strengths of their communities culture as a way of building them up, for instance the community of Yup'ik. According to the writers of *Understanding Human Behavior and the Social Environment* "Membership in any group provides a certain set of environmental circumstances. Sensitivity to group differences is critical in understanding an individual's behavior" (Zastrow 2015). Meaning that in order to understand behaviors like suicide, it is important to understand the group or culture that they belong to in order to understand why an individual may performing that behavior.

Limitations

There were many limitations to this study. The first of which was that none of the findings necessarily very concrete. While they are all great examples of effective programs that have helped communities in some capacity they were all hard to compare to one another to actually analyze which was the best. Another limitation is that besides Hawaii's Caring Communities Program, none of the studies had concrete numbers as to suicides prevented. All findings of success were based off of surveys taken by the participants after the end of the study. Since people are not always honest or can read questions wrong, these too could not exactly be accurate. Lastly more research needs and more studies need to be conducted of youth based suicide prevention. I had a difficult time finding enough youth based community programs to cover this topic to what it could be in the future.

Conclusion

Even with all that said, this kind of research is still very useful and informative, to not only Social Workers, but anyone who has interaction with youth on a regular bases and is involved in their community. For anyone wanting to create a community program that is targeted towards

suicide it is essential to first look at established programs, like the ones I have discussed in this paper. This way they can include elements such as looking at a person through their environment, cultural competence, educating on mental health, multi system approach, youth involvement, and participation opportunities. This way they can have a very research based and effective program. On a more personal level, it was reassuring to find that there are communities out there implementing these important programs. That maybe because of them some families will be saved that pain that I have seen others go through. I believe that communities can indeed at the macro level create a prevention plan that can touch individual lives. Through research community members can gather advice and strategies that prove effective and that would work for the culture of their communities. Communities can come together and unit for the cause of preventing as many young lives as possible from being lost to suicide.

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