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ADOLESCENT SUICIDE AND FATAL DRUG OVERDOSE

Katherine E. Ross

INTRODUCTION

Suicide and fatal drug overdose are two events that affect millions of people across the world, and are quite prominent within the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines suicide as “death caused by self-directed injurious behavior with an intent to die as a result of the behavior” (2018, September 6). The CDC defines an overdose as “injury to the body (poisoning) that happens when a drug is taken in excessive amounts. An overdose can be fatal or nonfatal” (2017, August 28.) These definitions are important because there can be confusion when talking about these topics. As such, keeping

meanings consistent will aid in keeping all information regarding these topics uniform and accurate.

In 2016, the World Health Organization (WHO) stated that suicide was the 18th leading cause of death in the world, totaling 1.4% of deaths (World Health Organization, n.d.). The WHO also stated that drug overdose related deaths contribute to between approximately one-third to one-half of drug related deaths. Of these cases, the majority are related to opioid death (World Health Organization, 2018, August). Figure 1 shows the crude suicide and fatal drug overdose rates for adolescents between 2000-2016 compiled by the CDC.

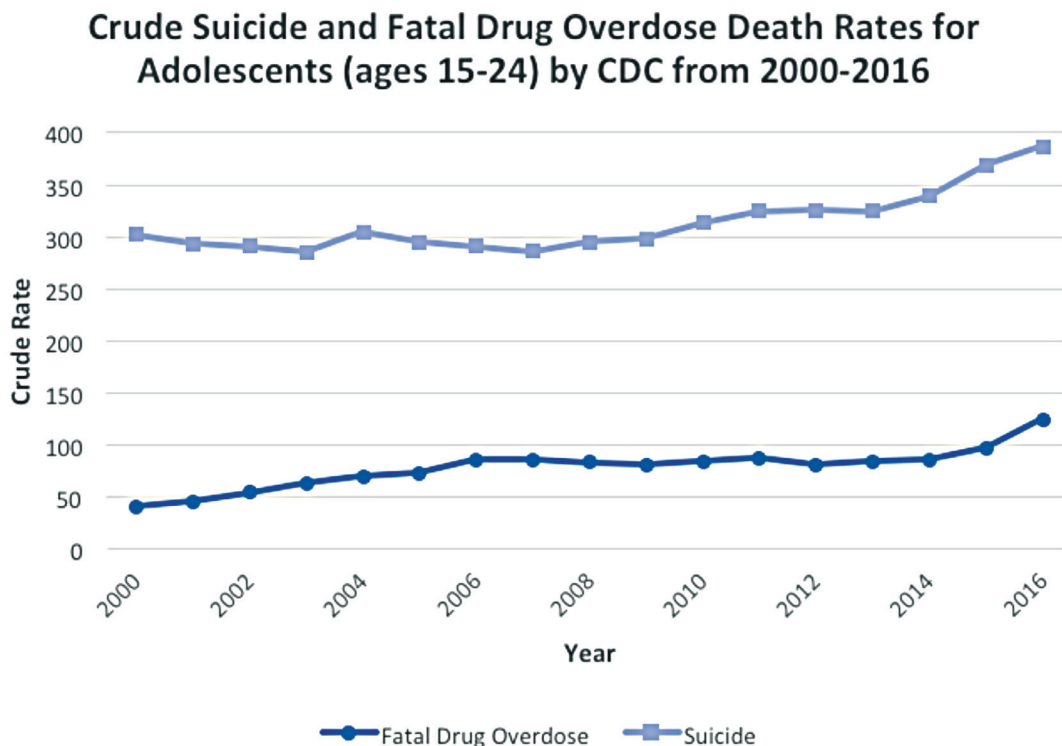


Figure 1. Crude Suicide and Fatal Drug Overdose Death Rates for Adolescents (ages 15-24) from 2000-2016 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.)

This research focuses specifically on the suicides and fatal drug overdoses of adolescents (ages 15-24) within the United States. This specific age group includes a significant amount of students in high school or college. During this period in life, adolescents are dealing with a number of stressors including classes, puberty, figuring out their lives, and trying to fit in with everyone else their age. For these reasons, this age group is exposed to stress and aggression which can lead to increased mental health issues, a dependency on drugs, or a struggle with bullying among peers. Over the last 10 years, deaths resulting from these events have been steadily increasing within this age group.

METHODS

This research project consisted of two electronically distributed surveys run through Qualtrics. The first survey was “Adolescent Suicide & Fatal Drug Overdose – Ages 18 – 24” and received 78 responses. The survey was spread using snowball sampling, so the exact number of potential participants, or their demographics, cannot be determined. This survey collected information on the participants’ (ages 18 – 24) personal relationship with mental health, substance abuse/addiction, bullying and suicide. This included what their high schools and/or colleges offered with respect to these topics. In addition, this survey covered what participants wished their high schools and/or colleges offered specific to these topics, as well as how they would want to receive this information. The results from the first survey determined what material would go into the Capstone Project, fightingforward.org.

The second survey, “Fighting Forward Website Review”, received 16 completed responses. This website and survey was also distributed through snowball sampling, so the exact number of potential participants, or their demographics,

cannot be determined. Survey questions were specifically about the website and the participant’s thoughts on it. This was broken down by each portion of the website and allowed for thoughts on improvement and what they thought the effectiveness of the website would be. This survey was open to anyone who had been to the website as the Qualtrics survey could only be accessed through the “Feedback” tab on the website.

RESULTS

From the survey, “Adolescent Suicide & Fatal Drug Overdose – Ages 18 – 24”, each survey respondent was asked to answer questions regarding their relationships with mental health, substance abuse/addiction, bullying, and suicide with a “Yes” or “No” response. This was used to help gauge the existing scope of the issue among this age group. For all but one statement, the majority of survey participants indicated that they either had a personal connection to the subject, or knew someone who did. With each question, each participant had the opportunity to add detail to their response.

"...this age group is exposed to strength and aggression which can lead to increased mental health issues, a dependency on drugs, or a struggle with bullying among peers."

The next portion of this survey focused on each of these topics in relation to their prominence within a high school or college environment. For each topic, participants were asked to answer questions on a 1 to 5 scale with 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 5 being “Strongly Agree”. For high schools, the majority of responses indicated that high schools did not have available resources to deal with mental health, substance abuse/addiction, bullying, or suicide. For colleges, the responses varied a bit. The majority of participants felt that their college had readily available resources for dealing with mental health and suicide, but not for substance abuse/addiction. Similar to the last section, each participant had the opportunity to add details about their responses.

The final portion of the survey focused on how participants wanted to find information on these topics and any topics they would like to learn more about, and they were allowed to choose more than one option. These results can be seen in Figures 2 and 3. Results show that the majority

of participants would like to find information through a website or their school. The topics participants were most interested in learning about were mental health and illness, coping strategies, and tips for communication.

Q75 - How would you prefer to find information on topics such as these? Please choose all that apply:

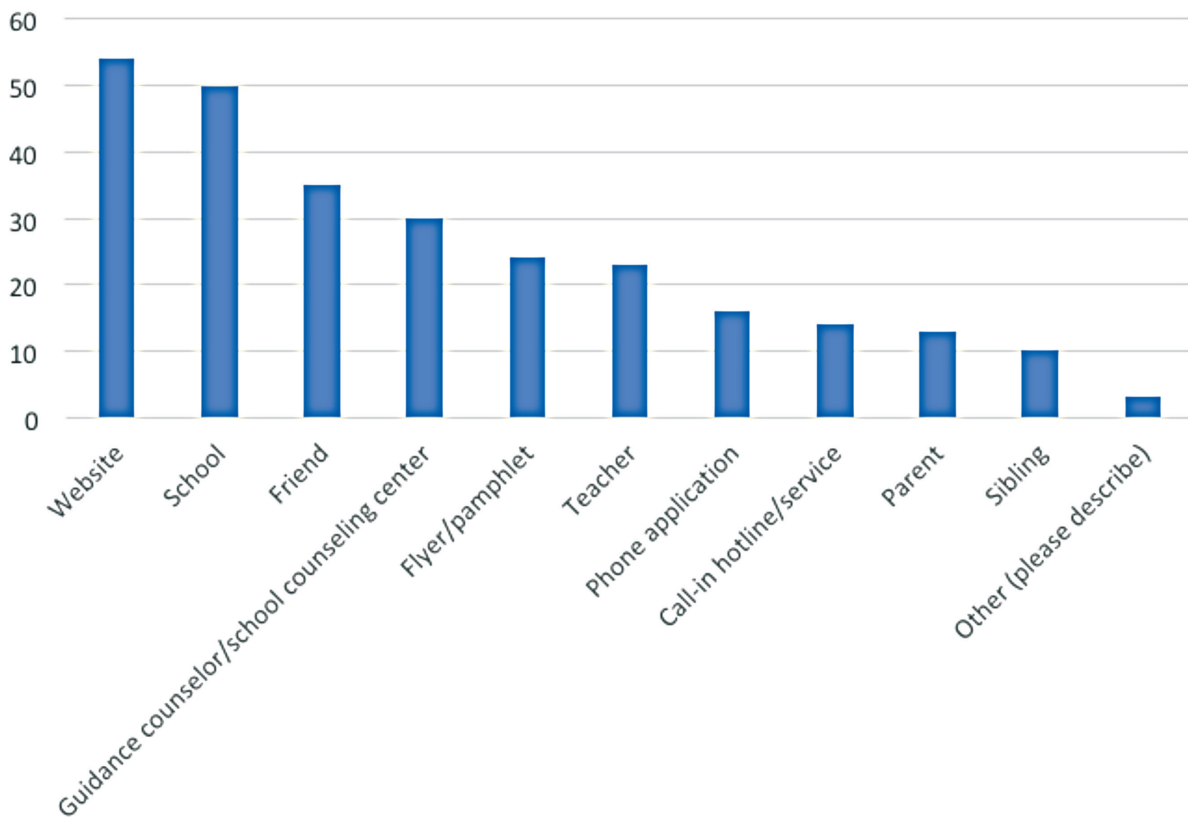


Figure 2. Methods of Information Distribution (Survey Tool: Adolescent Suicide & Fatal Drug Overdose Ages - 18 – 24, 2019)

Q73 - Are there any topics you would like to learn more about? Please choose all that apply:

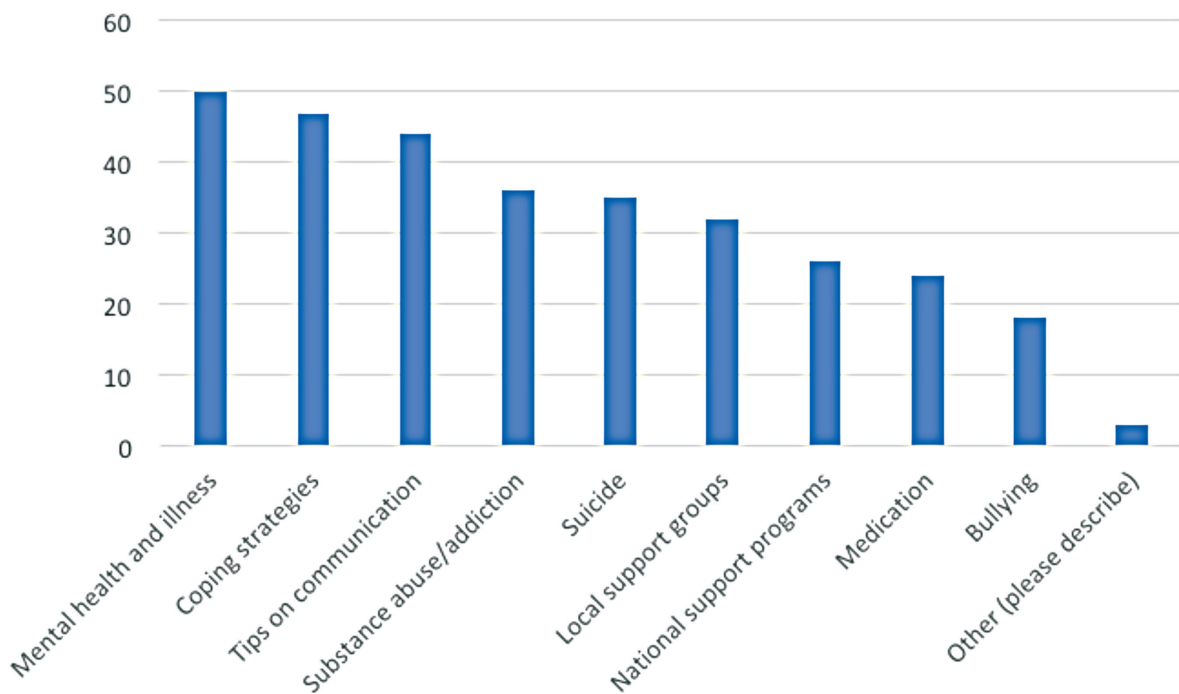


Figure 3. Learning Topics (Survey Tool: Adolescent Suicide & Fatal Drug Overdose Ages - 18 – 24, 2019)

DISCUSSION

Fighting Forward (fightingforward.org) launched on December 31, 2019. The target threshold for this project was that 75% of respondents found the website helpful, would use it again in the future, and would recommend it to a friend, family member, or peer they thought could benefit from it. When asked to rate statements regarding these areas where 1 was “Strongly Disagree” and 5 was

“Strongly Agree”, the results were positive and can be seen in Figure 4. In all categories except “I will use this website again in the future”, the target threshold was met through rating the statement a 4 or 5, with two categories reaching 100% of participants: “I found this website useful.” and “I wish my high school and/or college provided a resource such as this to students.”

For the following statements, please rate them on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being Strongly Disagree and 5 being Strongly Agree. Please choose N/A if the statement does not apply.					
Statement	1	2	3	4	5
I found this website useful.	0%	0%	0%	31%	69%
I will use this website again in the future.	6%	6%	31%	19%	38%
I will share this website with someone I know (friend, family member, student, etc.).	0%	6%	6%	38%	50%
I wish my high school and/or college provided a resource such as this to students.	0%	0%	0%	25%	75%

Figure 4. Website User Satisfaction (Fighting Forward Website Review, 2020)

Results for the survey for the pilot implementation have led to improvements for the website so that it can meet the needs and recommendations that may have been overlooked in its initial creation. This will hopefully make the website more applicable to more users and organizations such as high schools and colleges in the future.

For the promotion of social justice, this website puts information in the hands of adolescents written for them to understand. Right now, there is not another resource like this online. Because of this, Fighting Forward can allow adolescents struggling with personal issues surrounding mental health, substance abuse/addiction, and bullying to learn more about these topics and strategies for how to improve their situations before they reach the point where suicide or fatal drug overdose could occur. This website not only acknowledges that these issues can be prevalent in the lives of adolescents, but uses the information to try to end the stigma that currently keep adolescents from sharing what is going on in their lives.

In the future, this research gives future Ozanam Scholars the opportunity to continue this work and improve the impact resource or find ways to better get this information to its target community: adolescents, high schools, and colleges. Going forward, feedback will still be collected and saved so this website can continue to improve. In addition, fightingforward.org allows struggling adolescents the opportunity to receive

information they may need to handle issues they might be facing. Simultaneously, the conversation surrounding adolescent suicide and fatal drug overdose will hopefully gain attention and end some of the stigma surrounding seeking help, allowing these death rates to decrease with time.

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Other individuals crucial to the success of my research and website are every individual that took and shared my surveys which allowed me to tailor my website to my target audience, and Dr. Tow Yee Yau, Director of the St. John's University

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine Ross is a St. John's University Class of 2020 graduate obtaining her Bachelor of Science in Risk Management and Insurance with a concentration in Quantitative Risk Management and Insurance, and minors in Business Analytics and Social Justice Theory from the Maurice R. Greenberg School of Risk Management, Insurance and Actuarial Science. She is also a member of the Ozanam Scholars Program through which this research and Capstone Project, fightingforward.org, were completed.