

Suicide Prevention

Among Youth Involved with the Justice System

Suicide is the leading cause of death among incarcerated youth. They have a suicide rate of 21.9 per 100,000 each year, nearly three times higher than the general population.* Studies also show that over 50% of incarcerated youth have suicidal ideation and one-third have a history of suicidal behavior.**

This high suicide risk may be due to a combination of individual, environmental and situational factors. If you work with incarcerated youth, you can help prevent suicide by learning the risk factors, warning signs and protective factors.

Risk Factors

A risk factor is something that increases the chance someone may think about or attempt suicide. The following are key risk factors:

- Foster care placement or involvement in the child welfare system.
- History of mental health issues or substance use.
- Involvement in special education.
- Legal or disciplinary problems, including prior offenses.
- Being placed in confinement.



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Warning Signs

Warning signs are indicators that someone may be in danger of attempting or dying by suicide and needs help urgently. The following are key warning signs:

- Being in a crisis, such as when a youth is transitioning from the community to a secure facility.
- Unusual or sudden change in personality, behavior or mood.
- Talking about wanting to die or kill oneself, or seeking a means to do so.
- Withdrawing from peers and family.
- Exhibiting hopelessness or a sense of being trapped.

Protective Factors

A protective factor is a characteristic or condition that decreases the chance a person might think about, attempt or die by suicide. The following protective factors may decrease suicide among incarcerated youth:

- Access to effective mental health and substance use services.
- Skills in problem-solving and conflict-resolution.
- Cultural or religious beliefs that discourage suicide.
- Sense of family and community connectedness and support.
- Positive school experiences.
- Time and distance between the youth and any means for taking their life.
- Collaboration between behavioral health and juvenile justice systems.

How to Keep Youth Involved in the Justice System Safe

- Demonstrate your belief that suicide can be prevented.
- Develop, implement, and evaluate your suicide prevention policies, programs and practices to include addressing risk and protective factors.
- Believe youth when they say or write that they want to kill themselves.
- Do not be afraid to ask if a youth is thinking about suicide – it will not put the thought in their head. Ask directly: “Are you thinking about killing yourself?” or “Are you thinking about suicide?”
- Listen, be non-judgmental and avoid acting shocked.
- Do not agree to keep suicidal thoughts or intent a secret.
- Stay with a youth in crisis – never leave them alone.

- Tell your supervisor or a mental health professional immediately if you suspect a youth may be thinking about suicide.

What Juvenile Justice Facilities Can Do to Prevent Youth Suicide

Develop suicide prevention policies, programs and practices that include:

- Routine suicide prevention training for all staff.
- Regular assessments and follow-ups for youth who have screened positive for suicide risk.
- Protocols for sharing suicide risk information with arresting and transporting officers, family members, facility staff, and between staff and youth.
- Safe physical and emotional environment.
- Varied levels of supervision, including:
 - » Close observation for youth with thoughts of suicide without method or intent.
 - » Constant observation for youth who are talking about suicide with method and intent or are displaying suicidal behaviors (closed-circuit television does not substitute for observation).
- In the case of a suicide attempt or death:
 - » Emergency response protocol.
 - » Notification system through chain of command.
 - » Critical incident debriefing for all staff and youth, and a death review.

Texas Administrative Code, Title 37, Part 11, Chapter 343, Subchapter B, Rule §343.340 outlines requirements for juvenile facility staff to follow regarding suicide prevention among youth involved in the justice system.

Sources:

* Gallagher, C.A., and Dobrin, A. (2006). Deaths in juvenile justice residential facilities. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 38, 662-668. pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/16730593/

** National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention: Youth in Contact with the Juvenile Justice System Task Force. (2013). Need to know: A fact sheet series on juvenile suicide – juvenile detention and secure care staff. Washington, DC. theactionalliance.org/sites/default/files/juvenile_detent_fact_sheet.pdf

