

Supporting Adolescents with Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors in the Context of COVID-19

Adolescent suicide prevention is a public health priority, with the highest rates of suicide attempts nationally found in NC. **In 2018, 12% of adolescents in NC attempted suicide** (Knopov et al., 2019), **with an even greater number expected to attempt suicide in the context of COVID-19.** School closures and mandatory social distancing, coupled with stressful home environments (e.g., parental unemployment), place adolescents with suicidal urges at significantly greater risk for suicide (Reger et al., 2020).

Mental health care for adolescents with psychiatric disorders, commonly provided in schools (Costello, He, Sampson, Kessler, & Merikangas, 2014), has been dramatically disrupted by abrupt school closures. Just as teachers across the US have shifted to remote instruction, school mental health providers have had to learn to provide remote mental health services, with minimal guidance or preparation. Other school mental health providers, however, have been mandated by their district to *stop* providing these essential services to students. **Currently, schools across the state of NC lack guidance about how or if to deliver remote mental health supports to prevent suicide during COVID-19.**

Social distancing practices also leave few opportunities for adolescents to connect with peers or adults outside of their families, reducing their sense of “school connectedness” – a known protective factor against suicide (King et al., 2019; Marraccini & Brier, 2017). **Without access to these essential school supports and the mental health services provided in school settings, adolescents already dealing with suicidal urges are at even greater risk for dying by suicide.**

With the CDC’s warning of a potentially worse resurgence of the virus this coming winter (Sun, 2020), understanding how best to support adolescents at-risk for suicide in the context of remote delivery of school mental health services and the absence of social interactions is critical. **In response, this study will develop guidelines for improving school-based mental health services for high-risk adolescents during significant disruption to services from school closures due to COVID-19.** The proposed project leverages aspects of my currently funded research study (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention; PI: Marraccini), most importantly, a large, unique sample of NC adolescents previously hospitalized for suicidal behaviors and their parents, as well as school and hospital professionals representative of districts across NC. The proposed project will also enhance the aims of my original study, which employs a mixed-methods design to develop guidelines for adolescents returning to schools following psychiatric hospitalization that will be disseminated to all NC schools through the NC Department of Public Instruction. **Findings from the proposed project will identify urgently needed strategies for improving school-based mental health supports for adolescents with suicidal thoughts and behaviors to prevent suicide during resurgences of COVID-19 that force school closures.**

Team: Marisa E. Marraccini, Dana Griffin, Lauren Sartain

EHRA Salary	6,500
SHRA Salary	0
Graduate Student	21,714
Temps	0
Fringe Pool	8,471
Non-Personnel Expenses	18,315
Total	\$55,000

References

- Costello, E. J., He, J.-p., Sampson, N. A., Kessler, R. C., & Merikangas, K. R. (2014). Services for adolescents with psychiatric disorders: 12-month data from the National Comorbidity Survey–Adolescent. *Psychiatric services, 65*(3), 359-366.
- King, C. A., Grupp-Phelan, J., Brent, D., Dean, J. M., Webb, M., Bridge, J. A., . . . Mistry, R. D. (2019). Predicting 3-month risk for adolescent suicide attempts among pediatric emergency department patients. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*.
- Knopov, A., Sherman, R. J., Raifman, J. R., Larson, E., & Siegel, M. B. (2019). Household gun ownership and youth suicide rates at the state level, 2005–2015. *American journal of preventive medicine, 56*(3), 335-342.
- Marraccini, M. E., & Brier, Z. M. (2017). School connectedness and suicidal thoughts and behaviors: A systematic meta-analysis. *Sch Psychol Q, 32*(1), 5-21. doi:10.1037/spq0000192
- Reger, M. A., Stanley, I. H., & Joiner, T. E. (2020). Suicide Mortality and Coronavirus Disease 2019—A Perfect Storm? *JAMA Psychiatry*.
- Sun, L.H. (2020, April 21). CDC director warns second wave of coronavirus is likely to be even more devastating. *The Washington Post*.
<https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/2020/04/21/coronavirus-secondwave-cdcdirector/>