

Data Help Describe Suicide Problem in Utah

How can data be used to more accurately portray the burden of suicide in Utah?

Challenge

The topic of suicide is rarely highlighted in newspapers, yet Utah has one of the highest rates of suicide in the nation. The lack of attention to suicide in the media may create a public perception that suicides are not a public health problem in Utah. In 2007, Utah ranked ninth in the United States in age-adjusted suicide rates and 42nd in homicides, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). The Utah Violent Death Reporting System (UTVDRS) collects detailed information from death certificates, medical examiner records, police reports, crime lab records, and supplemental homicide reports on violent deaths in Utah. A study that compared data from newspaper articles and UTVDRS found Utah newspapers were more likely to report deaths from homicide than deaths from suicide. Suicides accounted for 83 percent of violent deaths in the UTVDRS yet 79 percent of newspaper articles focused on homicides. Furthermore, for reports on suicides, factors such as a recent crisis or intimate partner problem were well documented but mental health problems were rarely mentioned.

Solution

The study suggested public health professionals need to better engage media and provide newspaper reporters with timely information on the prevention of and intervention for suicides in their community. The goal is to focus more attention on local data, prevention strategies, help, and resources for suicides rather than sensationalizing suicides. The recent study created an opportunity for the Violence and Injury Prevention Program (VIPP) at the Utah Department of Health to seek media help in promoting suicide awareness. As a result, the VIPP is developing a Suicide Awareness Toolkit for media. The toolkit will include fact sheets such as: suicide among older adults, teens and adolescents; domestic violence-related suicides; suicide among veterans; and the role of mental health factors and how they relate to suicidal behavior. These fact sheets will highlight the scope of the problem in Utah and the United States; describe risk and protective factors for suicidal behavior; strategies that can be used to prevent suicide, and available resources. In addition, the toolkit will include the recommendations for appropriate reporting of suicides that CDC published in 2001. The toolkit aims to help media cover

Highlights

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in Utah. The topic of suicide is seldom covered in Utah newspapers, suggesting a missed opportunity for public health professionals to gain media advocacy for prevention. The goal is not to increase media reporting of individual suicides, but to increase opportunities to provide local data and prevention strategies while calling attention to available help and resources.

the topic of suicide without sensationalizing cases to reduce the chance that others will copy an incident.



Results

The development of a Suicide Awareness Toolkit will provide the media with tools to more adequately address suicide in Utah. As a secondary benefit, it will help VIPP staff respond quickly to media requests for information about suicide. For example, several newspaper articles have been written over the past year about suicides occurring among veterans and civilian employees on one of Utah's military bases. Upon review of these articles, VIPP was concerned that the data used did not accurately reflect whether these suicides were occurring at a higher rate than the rate of suicide among other residents in Utah. With the fact sheets and data included in the toolkit, VIPP staff were able to quickly provide information from the UTVDRS, guidance on suicide reporting, and contacts and referrals for crisis help to the reporters. The toolkit is expected to be completed by spring 2011 and will be available online at <http://health.utah.gov/vipp>. The toolkit also will be electronically distributed to all Utah media agencies by the Utah Department of Health Public Information Office.

"We can use UTVDRS data for media advocacy to help prevent suicide in Utah. We have an opportunity to partner with the media to create articles that include a public health viewpoint and provide the public with timely information on awareness and prevention of suicide in their community."

- Trisha Keller, MPH, RN - VIPP Program Manager

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