Transforming Conversations About Suicide

A Study Conducted by the Youth Council for Suicide Prevention

Robin Lindquist-Grantz, PhD, LISW-S
Renae Koch
Margot Brunette
Amanda Drew

31st Annual Research & Policy Conference on Child, Adolescent & Young Adult Behavioral Health | Tampa, Florida | 2018
Adolescent Suicide Overview

- 2nd leading cause of death for youth ages 10-24 (CDC, 2016)
- Recent years show a steady rise in suicidality since lowest rates in mid-2000s (CDC, 2016)
- Estimated 100-200 attempts for every 1 death by suicide (Drapeau & McIntosh, 2015)

- Address full range of suicidal factors
- Expand focus on protective factors
- Comprehensive, collaborative strategies involving schools, healthcare, and mental health
- Increased communication around topic of suicide
- Further develop coping, problem-solving, and help-seeking skills
- Innovative methods that empower youth and represent their lived experience
Youth Council for Suicide Prevention (YCSP)

- **Academic partners:** Cincinnati Children’s Hospital Medical Center—Division of Emergency Medicine & University of Cincinnati

- **Youth partners:** 26 youth from 11 different schools during 2015-2016 cohort year

- **Volunteer as co-researchers and advisors** on suicide screening and intervention in the pediatric emergency department

- **2015-2016 cohort:** designed and conducted a qualitative interview project targeting peers
Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

- Engages youth “insider expertise” (Ozer, 2016, p. 266) in the examination of issues that affect them so they can take leadership in finding solutions for those issues (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009).

- “…explicitly pedagogical with implications for education and youth development” (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 6).

- “…contribute to creating health programs and services that can better meet the needs of young people while simultaneously expanding their knowledge and skills, therefore increasing their capacity to engage in more healthful decision making” (Suleiman, Soleimanpour, & London, 2006, p. 126).

Improve Rigor, Relevance & Reach
Social-ecological theory  
(Bronfenbrenner, 1979)

+ 

Positive youth development  
(Lerner, 2004; Silbereisen & Lerner, 2007)
Study Purpose:
To explore the ways in which the topic of suicide is perceived and addressed among youth in order to identify methods of communication that encourage conversations about suicide.

Research Questions:
1. How do youth view suicide?
2. What are youth perceptions of why people address suicide the way that they do?
3. What are the key components of powerful and effective conversations about suicide?
Study Method

- Semi-structured interviews conducted by youth researchers
- Participants recruited from youth researcher schools and social networks
- Approximately 20-30 minutes

- Participatory group analysis during three 2-hour meetings
  - 1st cycle: small groups; 3-4 people w/ 4-5 paper transcripts; independent coding (Vaughn & Lohmueller, 2014)
  - 2nd cycle: small groups sorted independent codes into thematic categories; large group collapsed small group categories into overall themes (Kane & Trochim, 2007)

Study Participants (n = 17)
- 65% Female; 35% Male
- 82% White/Caucasian
- 6% Hispanic
- 8 high schools (5 public, 3 private)
Study Findings

Theme 1: Youth need help understanding suicide

- Complicated and sensitive topic
- Important topic vs. emotionally complex
- Desire to discuss it more openly & frequently

“I mean, obviously it doesn’t make you feel happy to talk about it, so you kind of avoid it when you can.”

“Unless you’ve had an experience with it, I don’t think it’s something that people think about very much or understand very much.”

“If it were in some sort of context like it is now [through the interview], or it came up in conversation, I would talk about it. But it’s not exactly a conversation starter for me.”
Study Findings

Theme 2: The perceived reactions of others guides youth behavior

- Reported they are likely to turn to people who seem open to discussing the topic in general
- Especially sensitive to parent reactions
- Friends viewed more positively, but ill-equipped to deal with the issue

“Sometimes I’m scared to open up to my mom because I feel like she’s going to cry. Because she does that a lot, she breaks her back for me. And I’m like, ‘I don’t wanna put you through that’.”

“…I would be afraid that they wouldn’t trust me then or they’d want to kind of protect me so much to the point that it became overbearing.”

“I think it’s very important that we have some type of plan in place and you can tell people that ‘hey, this is what you do’…we need to let people know what to do, because I really don’t know what’s the right thing to do. Eventually you probably have to involve some type of medical or counseling personnel, but at what stage do you involve that in?”
Study Findings

Theme 3: Youth need help taking suicide seriously

- Awkward topic to discuss
- Desire to discuss it more openly & frequently
- Lack of experience with the topic—need more personal stories

“I’m not sure. Maybe they don’t have any experience with it so they don’t understand the full impact of suicide on their family and friends.”

“Where do I belong? When I hear suicide, I picture all the kids saying, where do I belong? Where am I supposed to be in this world? How do I fit in this clique that clique? How can my teachers judge my religion or try to put me in their religion even if I’m not? How can I fit in?”
Study Findings

Theme 4: Youth prefer small groups

- May make youth more comfortable discussing the topic
- May contribute to greater depth of conversations
- May develop greater trust among peers, and between youth and adults

“It is addressed as, you know, kinda in a formal setting. Outside of the classroom I wouldn’t say it’s talked about a lot. We haven’t really had any seminars or anything like that about it, but there is some talk about it. As far as suicide prevention, I would say that there is definitely an effort but probably not good enough.”

“I think you would also have to talk about it in a smaller group because there is [sic] a lot of people that aren’t comfortable talking in a large group that would be comfortable talking in a small group.”
**Study Findings**

**Theme 5: Supportive schools are essential**

- Primary setting for youth
- Current efforts viewed as infrequent and lack help-seeking content
- Perception that school personnel do not care nor are willing to listen to them

“I’m not really sure if [suicide has been addressed] at all this year. But, you know, I’m a freshman so I don’t really know. They always do these weird talks where they try to explain it, but I don’t really think they do it that well.”

“I think the admin [sic] is just afraid of addressing conversations that aren’t comfortable for people. Just because we go to a big school, the controversy that surrounds those topics, they’re worried about the school being associated with bad things...they just don’t want to glorify suicide.”

“If they were more open to us, then we would be more open to them.”
Study Findings

Theme 6: Social media as a prevention tool

- Suicide already being discussed, but youth struggle to navigate online conversations
- Potential as far-reaching platform due to importance in youth culture
- Potential to reduce stigma and expand help-seeking behaviors

“...it’s like a ‘post’ war, basically. And they always be like, the suicide game at the bottom...it’s really serious to young kids because, you know, there’s been a lot of deaths lately [in the local school district]. People like it and comment at the bottom, but it’s like they’re not taking it seriously. They put laugh emojis.”
## Implications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Local Implications</th>
<th>Implications for Suicide Prevention Field</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **YCSP Vision Statement:** The lack of education about suicide at school leads to people not understanding suicide and feeling like there is a lack of social support. To prevent suicide, we need to address concerns about how others react, target social media, and make use of small groups. | ➢ Expand communication—openness and frequency (general & specific concern)  
 ➢ Expand conversations in school settings  
 ➢ Help youth apply knowledge with peers and adults over time as they experience new situations and emotions  
 ➢ Emphasize social connectedness  
 ➢ Incorporate small group settings  
 ➢ Potential theoretical frameworks: Relational Theory & Experiential Learning Theory |
| ➢ New website [https://cincyycsp.weebly.com/](https://cincyycsp.weebly.com/)  
 ➢ Expand social media presence  
 ➢ New video with updated personal stories  
 ➢ School presentation & future creating workshop  
 ➢ Community awareness event & fundraiser  
 ➢ New partnership with 1N5 | |

|  New website https://cincyycsp.weebly.com/  
  Expand social media presence  
  New video with updated personal stories  
  School presentation & future creating workshop  
  Community awareness event & fundraiser  
  New partnership with 1N5 | |


Robin Lindquist-Grantz, PhD, LISW-S
University of Cincinnati
Institute for Policy Research
lindqurn@uc.edu