

Epi-Aid 2015-003: Undetermined risk factors for suicide among youth, ages 10-24-Fairfax County, VA 2014

Questions and Answers

(updated 6/26/15)

1. What is an Epi-Aid?

An Epi-Aid is an investigation of an urgent public health problem in a community or state. The causes or factors that increase the risk for these problems are unknown, and the investigation is to identify these factors. An Epi-Aid can occur when the U.S. Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) receives a request for assistance from a state or local public health department to better understand what may be causing a public health problem and what may be some prevention steps that could be taken.

2. Why was this Epi-Aid requested?

The request for this Epi-Aid was in response to a series of suicides in 2014 among youth in Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) which occurred in close proximity and time. Although the community has dedicated extensive resources to suicide prevention activities over the years, it was important to identify any epidemiological factors that may be contributing to the suicide risk or unmet needs that could be addressed through additional preventive actions. Therefore, Fairfax County Health Department (FCHD) and the Virginia Department of Health (VDH) requested CDC's assistance in investigating youth suicide and making recommendations for a public health response to prevent additional suicides among Fairfax County youth.

3. Has Fairfax County requested an Epi-Aid before?

No.

4. What was the focus of the Epi-Aid and when did it occur?

In November 12-21, 2014, staff from CDC and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) assisted FCHD and VDH in the investigation of undetermined risk factors for suicide among youth, ages 10-24. Objectives for this Epi-Aid included examining trends in fatal and non-fatal suicidal behaviors among youth and identifying risk and protective factors associated with these behaviors. The Epi-Aid team has provided the final report to FCHD and FCPS. The final report is available here:

<http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/hd/hdpdf/va-epi-aid-final-report.pdf>.

5. What did the Epi-Aid involve?

To understand what factors may be contributing to youth suicides in Fairfax County, the Epi-Aid team looked at several information sources, such as the Virginia Violent Death Reporting System, emergency management services data, and school surveys. They also talked with

school staff and representatives from organizations that serve youth, the schools, and families. The knowledge they gained will inform prevention activities, including how to strengthen prevention approaches that are already in place.

6. What were the overall findings?

The youth who died by suicide or attempted suicide in Fairfax County had multiple risk factors for suicide. Some of those factors included, but were not limited to, mental health issues (e.g., depression), substance abuse, and interpersonal problems. The findings also suggest that access to mental health resources, the pressures associated with academic achievement, and the influence of mass media and social media may also play a role.

In summary, youth suicide is a public health problem with multiple risk factors that will require a community-wide, multi-level response.

7. What prevention activities are already in place?

FCPS, Fairfax County and community partners have been working on various activities to reduce the risk of youth suicide and to connect youth to the support services they may need. The final report will continue to help us improve these activities.

Some of the ongoing activities include:

- Using online interactive training for school staff and community members in how to recognize signs of mental health concerns and connect youth with appropriate resources
- Implementation of crisis text line, with trained support available 24/7
- Establishment of the Promoting Mental Health Team, a committee of the Partnership for a Healthier Fairfax with representation from County agencies, FCPS, and community-based providers and stakeholders, to develop and coordinate local implementation of the Northern Virginia Suicide Prevention Plan.
- Development of a public health campaign aimed at breaking the silence and stigma surrounding suicide and encouraging individuals to seek help.

8. What are the plans for using this report and its recommendations?

Based on the findings in this Epi-Aid and on ongoing research into best practices related to suicide prevention and intervention, the partners will work to:

- Integrate recommendations into the Northern Virginia Suicide Prevention Plan
- Develop, implement and evaluate evidence-based and evidence-informed interventions to strengthen the system of care for people at risk of suicide
- Ensure a coordinated and strategic approach to ongoing suicide prevention efforts and the implementation of the recommendations

As part of this work, the Epi-Aid report as well as school-specific data will be shared with administration, clinical teams, parents and student leaders to address areas of concern identified in the report.

9. What data was used in this Epi-Aid report?

This report used school-specific and school region data from the following sources:

- Virginia Violent Death Reporting System (VVDRS)
- Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner (OCME)
- Virginia Electronic Surveillance System for the Early Notification of Community-Based Epidemics (ESSENCE)
- Fairfax County Fire and Rescue’s Emergency Medical Services (EMS)
- Fairfax County Youth Survey
- Virginia Secondary School Climate Survey
- News Coverage – Reporting on Suicide
- Focus groups with parents of children in FCPS
- Interviews with school staff

10. How can I interpret the data in the odds ratio (OR) tables in the report?

Data from the Fairfax County Youth Survey were used to calculate odds ratios between risk and protective factors known to be related to suicide behaviors and ideation. Odds ratios are measures of association between a risk or protective factor and an outcome of interest. As the Fairfax County Youth Survey is cross-sectional, the odds ratios represent the relationship of self-reported risk and protective factors to the self-report of having seriously considered suicide.

- OR=1 Risk or protective factor is of equal prevalence among those who reported having seriously considered suicide and those who did not.
- OR>1 Factor is of higher prevalence among those who reported having seriously considered suicide compared to those who did not (risk factor).
- OR<1 Factor is of lower prevalence among those who reported having seriously considered suicide compared to those who did not (protective factor).

For example, see the chart below for how to interpret some of the data presented in the chart on page 34 of the report. *Please note these data/associations do not indicate causality, but do show statistical relationship between the two variables.*

Independent Variable/Exposure	Dependent Variable	OR	Explanation
Parent Help Available	Suicide Attempt	0.66*	Youths who report suicide attempt are 0.66 times less likely to have a parent available for help than those who did not report suicide attempt; and that results is statistically significant (protective factor).
Adult in Neighborhood to Talk With	Suicide Attempt	0.90	There is no statistically significant association between having an adult in the neighborhood one can turn to and suicide attempts (no asterisk).
Victim of Cyberbullying	Suicide Attempt	1.72*	Youths who report suicide attempts are 1.72 times more likely to be a victim of cyber bullying than those who did not report suicide attempt; and that results is statistically significant (risk factor).

*-The asterisk denotes a relationship is a statistically significant association.

11. Why did this Epi-Aid not focus on any particular high school? Will school specific data be shared?

In the early planning stages, some community members were concerned about youth suicides at one high school and its unique risk factors, including the potential role of social media (e.g., youth using social media to share information about a suicide at one high school being a risk for suicide at another high school). Preliminary data analyses showed that youth suicides were occurring at multiple high schools, and in October 2014 there were three youth suicides

at three separate high schools. Based on this information and community goals to prevent all youth suicides, the Epi-Aid partners selected a county-wide approach to identify risk and protective factors for the county as well as unique to any particular school.

A community and multi-school approach to the Epi-Aid in Fairfax County has many advantages that can inform suicide prevention community-wide as well as at any particular school. It allows for a comparison of risk and protective factors across schools so that schools can more reliably understand their strengths and challenges in context. It also better informs community-wide prevention approaches.

A youth death by suicide in the community at any school impacts youth across FCPS. Coverage by traditional media and discussions throughout social media quickly spread across schools, leaving all youth in the community potentially affected. Therefore, understanding youth suicide across the community strengthens any broad or individualized prevention approaches. Partners involved with this Epi-Aid want every youth in the community to be healthy and safe, and the examination of multiple schools better positions us to support all young people.

12. Why did this Epi-Aid use different methods compared to Epi-Aids that have been completed in the past on youth suicide (i.e., Maine and Delaware)?

Methods of Epi-Aids vary based on the objectives and type of communities involved. The methods for the Epi-Aid to Fairfax County were based on the objectives identified collaboratively by FCHD, FCPS, and the CDC/SAMHSA Epi-Aid Team.

13. What about confidentiality concerns?

Consistent with ethical medical and public health practices, efforts were made with this Epi-Aid to protect the identity of individuals. For ethical treatment of deceased youth, as well as for parents and school administrators, no data is presented in a way that would lead to the identification of an individual.

14. Who was on the Epi-Aid team?

The team consisted of:

- Erica Spies, PhD, MS [Lead], CDC, Division of Violence Prevention
- Asha Ivey-Stephenson, PhD, MA, CDC, Division of Violence Prevention
- Kristin VanderEnde, PhD, MSN, RN, CDC, Division of Violence Prevention
- Sean Lynch, PhD, LCSW, SAMHSA
- David Dean Jr., PhD, MS, SAMHSA
- Brigette Gleason, MD, MPH, Virginia Department of Health

15. Is the final report available?

Yes. The final report is available here: <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/hd/hdpdf/va-epi-aid-final-report.pdf>.

16. What can I do to impact this issue?

- Learn to recognize the signs of mental health problems and suicide risk, and how to connect individuals to help. Take an online suicide prevention training.
 - <http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/csb/at-risk/>
- Ensure that people know where to go for help when they need it. Share the CrisisLink hotline and textline numbers.
 - Text to 703-940-0888
 - Call 703-527-4077

17. Who do I contact with questions or comments?

You can email questions or comments to fairfaxcountyhealthdepartment@fairfaxcounty.gov.