5 Recommendations for Youth Suicide Prevention

Key Findings from the Utah Youth Suicide Research Project

For families & communities

Department *of* Health & Human Services

About the Utah Youth Suicide Research Project

Youth suicide is a serious and ongoing health crisis in Utah. Rates in our state remain troublingly higher than the national average. Every loss is a young person whose life ended far too soon, leaving families and communities changed forever.

The Utah Youth Suicide Research Project (UYSRP) was started to understand why young people die by suicide and to find ways to prevent these tragedies. Instead of only looking at numbers, this study performed in-depth interviews for 108 youth who died between 2016 and 2019. Researchers listened closely to those who knew them best, including parents, siblings, and friends. By combining these personal stories with data, this study shows the challenges that put youth at risk. It also suggests clear actions everyone can take to help.

At a Glance - 5 Youth Suicide Prevention Recommendations for Families and Communities:

- Recognize and address childhood maltreatment
- Strengthen families facing complex behavioral health challenges
- Help every young person feel they belong
- Promote healthy romantic and peer relationships
- Watch for signs of change

Who are the youth in UYSRP?

Between 2016 and 2019, 203 young people died by suicide in Utah. 78% of families who could be contacted chose to take part in this project. The Office of the Medical Examiner completed in-depth interviews of family members and friends for 108 of these youth using a well-known method called a psychological autopsy. These interviews provide a great deal of information and different views on the challenges these young people faced in their lives.

More about these recommendations and the full report

The recommendations for UYSRP were made by the Suicide Child Fatality Review Committee (SCFRC). The Suicide Child Fatality Review Committee is a group of experts who make recommendations to DHHS and the State of Utah. This executive summary is a shorter version of the full Youth Suicide Research Report.

Nearly 80% of youth who died by suicide experienced some form of child maltreatment.

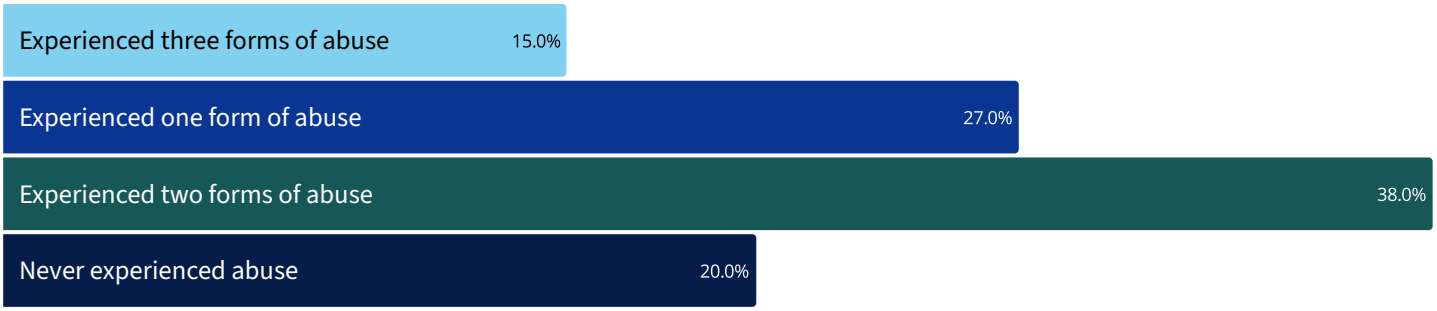
One of the most important findings of the study was that many young people faced concerning levels of maltreatment before their death. Much of this was in the form of abuse:

- 45.4% experienced physical abuse
- 22.2% experienced sexual abuse
  - Rates of sexual abuse were very different by gender. 63.6% of females were reported to have experienced sexual abuse compared to 11.6% of males.
- 74.1% experienced emotional abuse (such as being constantly criticized, shamed, or neglected)

In total, nearly 80% of youth who died by suicide experienced at least one form of maltreatment, and some experienced more than one type.

Two-thirds of these youth experienced other types of trauma besides abuse. Examples include seeing violence, surviving a natural disaster, or dealing with the serious illness or death of someone close to them.

These painful experiences often happened years earlier but continued to affect youth throughout their lives.



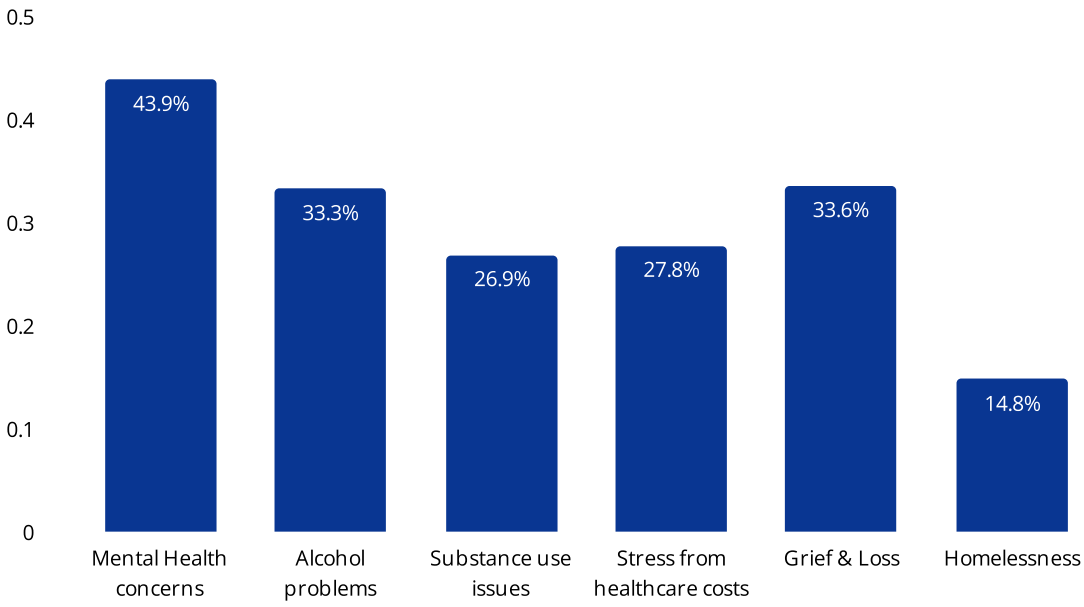
Recommendation from the suicide child fatality review committee:

Recognize and address childhood maltreatment.

Many youth who died by suicide lived in homes where parents or other family members were facing complex challenges with mental health or substance use, or were grieving the loss of someone close.

Many youth in this study lived in households dealing with high levels of distress:

- 43.9% lived with someone who had a diagnosed mental health condition
- 33.3% lived in homes with problematic alcohol use
- 26.9% lived in homes where drugs or medications were misused
- 27.8% of families said healthcare costs were stressful, even when they had insurance
- About one-third (33.6%) experienced the death of someone close to them
- Nearly 15% (14.8%) were homeless at some point



When health, housing, and money problems happen at the same time, it creates a major challenge. These are key areas where communities can step in to help families stay stable and prevent suicide.

Recommendation from the suicide child fatality review committee:

Strengthen families facing complex behavioral health challenges.

Despite having social connections, only 39% of youth felt they belonged in their community

One key finding that surprised UYSRP researchers was that many youth were socially connected — but still felt they didn't belong.

- 91.7% had someone they could count on in a crisis
- 64.8% were happy with their friendships
- 96.3% had people they enjoyed spending time with

Despite this, only 39% felt they belonged in their community.

> ### Ways to foster belonging:
>
> Give youth a real purpose: Create ways for young people to contribute to their schools or groups. This helps them feel that their presence is necessary, not just noticed.
>
> Reduce the shame around mental health: Talk openly about mental health so youth don't feel they have to hide their struggles to be accepted by others.
>
> Build community ties: Connect youth with local mentors or neighbors. This helps those who feel like outsiders find a secure place in their own community.

Feeling unseen, unlikeable, isolated, or like an outsider — even though many youth had friends they spent time with regularly — was a common theme described by families and peers.

Recommendation from the suicide child fatality review committee:

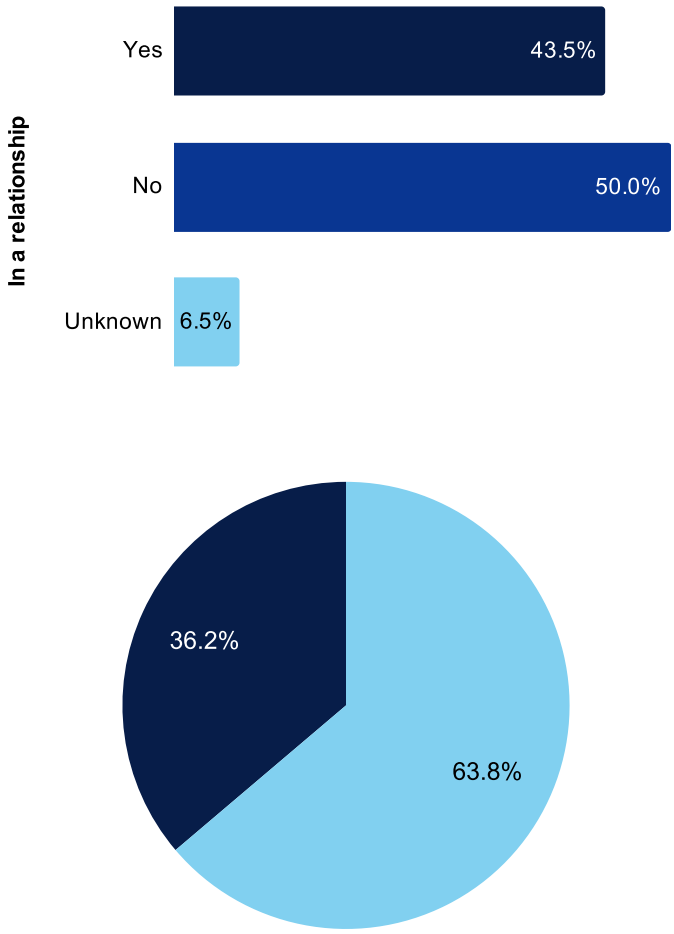
Help every young person feel they belong.

Break ups with romantic partners — or the threat of breaking up — was a common theme among youth who died by suicide.

Building healthy relationships is a big part of growing up, but this research shows that breakups or being mistreated by peers can be highly distressing. Nearly half of the youth were in a romantic relationship leading up to their death, and about two-thirds of those relationships were ending or had just ended. For many young people, a bad argument or a breakup can feel like a disaster and lead to quick, life-altering decisions. Adults can help by taking extra care during these times. They should treat a breakup or peer fight as a serious crisis rather than "just a phase" and offer extra support when a relationship ends.

To help kids stay safe, communities should focus on teaching social skills and how to bounce back from hard times. Families and schools can help by teaching kids how to handle peer pressure and arguments, how to set healthy boundaries, and how to treat others with respect. It is also important to teach youth how to see when a friend is struggling — like when they stop hanging out or seem more angry than usual so they know how to help their friend find support from a trusted adult.

Building social skills includes giving youth the tools they need to stay safe and supported during the ups and downs of growing up.



Nearly two-thirds of youth who were in a relationship around the time they died were on the verge of breaking up or had just broken up.

Recommendation from the suicide child fatality review committee:

Promote healthy romantic and peer relationships.

Most youth who died by suicide exhibited a warning sign at some point before their death.

- 60.2% of UYSRP youth were experiencing frequent mood changes
- 46.3% were becoming more lonely
- 49.1% stated that they felt like they were a burden on those around them
- 47.2% were feeling hopeless
- 45.4% were feeling trapped, like there were circumstances in their lives they could not escape from or deal with.

Many of these youth were experiencing these feelings along with changes in sleep patterns or appetite. Many of them were also experiencing some type of major life change, like a move, breakup, or thinking about college or career.

Our study found that no young person showed every warning sign we asked about, or even most of them. Patterns of change were far more important for risk than any specific warning sign. Whether it's a shift in sleep, more irritability, or a loss of hope, any noticeable change in a young person's normal routine or reactions is a signal that they may need extra support.

Our data showed that friends were often the first to notice small changes in how a youth was talking or acting. This tells us that we must teach young people how to spot these signs and involve a trusted adult.

Adults can help by paying attention and talking openly about the stresses youth are facing. By offering extra support during big life changes, families and communities can make sure no young person feels they have to face their problems alone.

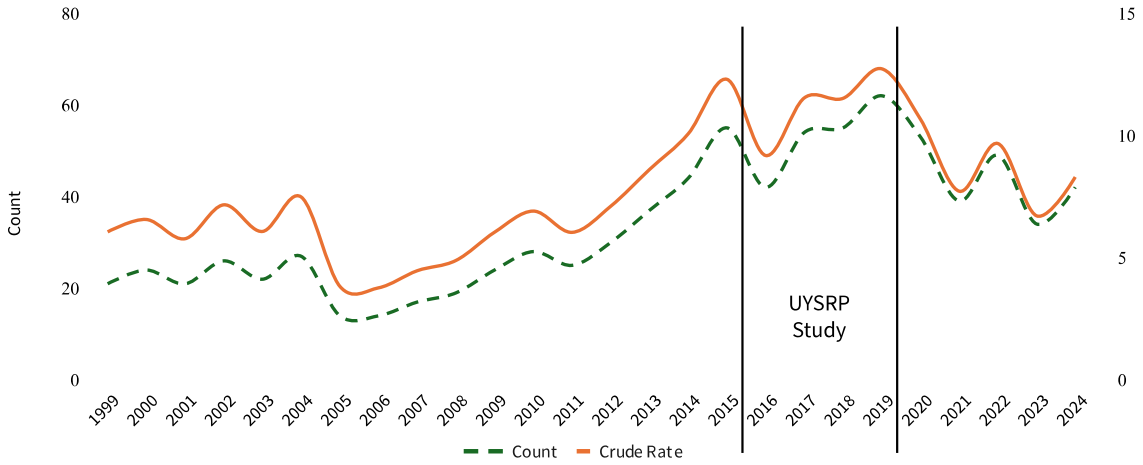
For more information about suicide warning signs and how to start a caring conversation, check out the LiveOn suicide prevention playbook

Recommendation from the suicide child fatality review committee:

Watch for signs of change.

Youth suicide in Utah: The big picture

The number of youth suicides in Utah rose sharply starting in 2008 and grew even faster between 2011 and 2015. From 2015 to 2019, the numbers leveled off, but they remained concerningly high. During this time, about 40 young people died by suicide each year. Between 2016 and 2019, Utah's youth suicide rate was 46.5% higher than the national average.



More about the Utah Youth Suicide Research Project

Overall, the youth in this study were very similar to all the young people who died by suicide in Utah during this time. The data shows several key patterns:

- 75% were male
- Nearly 80% were between the ages of 16-18
- Youth who lived in rural and urban areas were fairly represented
- More than 90% lived with their parents or guardians
- Most lived in middle-income households with caregivers who had jobs and health insurance

Understanding how these youth died helps experts create better ways to prevent suicide. For those who died between 2016 and 2019:

- 48.3% used a firearm
- 39.4% died by asphyxiation (loss of air)
- 7.4% died by poisoning
- 4.9% died by some other method