

Central Florida hospitals report spike in teen suicide attempts

Alex Johnson
8 September 2022

Hospitals in Central Florida are reporting a significant spike in teenage suicide attempts, with some figures showing a major uptick in the past 12 months. According to Marni Stahlman, president of the Mental Health Association of Central Florida (MHACF), nearly 9 percent of high school students made attempts against their lives.

In an interview with News 6 WKGM, Stahlman said the suicide rate in Central Florida among young people is at a 20-year all-time high. Hospitals confirmed the statistics found by the Health Association and indicated that 9 percent of children in grades 9 through 12 tried to commit suicide at least once in the last year.

The disturbing climb in suicidal ideation and depression among Floridian teenagers coincides with a general upswing of mental health issues in Central Florida. In July, the Heart of Florida United Way (HFUW) reported 988 calls to the center from Seminole, Orange and Osceola counties. The calls increased 32 percent in the first 30 days after the new national lifeline was unrolled, as compared to a year prior.

The new 988 three-digit number is a lifeline that was approved in 2020 that applies specifically to suicide and mental health crises, and is meant to be a more accessible option than dialing 911. The mental health crisis very much predates the unveiling of the new lifeline. In 2021, HFUW's 211 Crisis Line answered a staggering 11,000 suicide calls. This amounted to 30 suicide calls every single day from the three-county Central Florida area.

Central Florida's mental health crisis is emblematic of a nationwide crisis. According to Vibrant Emotional Health, the group that works with the federal government on 988, the Lifeline received over 96,000 calls, text and chats, compared to over 66,000 the week

before, a 45 percent increase in volume. It is an approximately 66 percent increase in volume compared to the same week in 2021.

The 988 crisis line was made effective six months after the United States Surgeon General issued a dire warning that young people are experiencing cataclysmic levels of "psychological distress" and accelerated levels of anxiety, depression and other mental health disorders. The public health crisis among youth, while no doubt existing before 2020, worsened dramatically due to the protracted isolation and social alienation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, along with the devastation it wrought on millions of families who suffered the death of a loved one and a decline in their living standards.

Last month, a Central Florida couple pointed to the crisis of youth depression after their 16-year-old daughter, Mckenna Brown, committed suicide before starting her senior year of high school. A star athlete who hoped to play women's hockey at the University of South Florida, she was one day away from starting her last year at East Lake High in Tarpon Springs before tragically taking her own life on August 7. "She made a couple mistakes. It led to some physical, sexual, emotional abuse," Mckenna's father Hunter told FOX 13 in Tampa Bay. "She was blackmailed. She was bullied. She was betrayed by her best friend."

Data from other agencies shed light on the growing prevalence of suicide attempts in Florida during the past two years. While the CDC reported a 31 percent increase in mental health-related ER visits from May 2021 to 2022, the Florida Poison Control Center showed a 51 percent increase over two years in calls. At least 165 teenagers across Northwest Florida were either sent to the ER or hospitalized for self-harm injuries.

According to a study from public health researchers at the University of South Florida this year, suicide is a leading cause of death among 10- to 14-year-olds in the state. After reviewing the cases of 5,017 victims, the study's investigators discovered 69 percent of violent deaths in Florida in 2019 were the result of suicide. The remainder were primarily attributed to homicide.

USF's College of Public Health is contracted by the Florida Department of Health to help collect and analyze specific data pertaining to deaths caused by suicide. This year's study found that most of the suicide victims from 2019 tended to be middle-aged or older white males. The team also saw increasing number of suicides among black males, especially younger black males between the ages of 10 and 24.

In 2019, there were 25 suicides among 10- to 14-year-olds in Florida, the age group's second leading cause of death behind unintentional injuries. For those aged 15 to 19, there were 102 suicides, and among those 20 to 24 years old the number was 190.

Catherine Rhea, the vice president for HFUW, hinted at some of the factors fueling the mental health crisis in Central Florida, including acute levels of social devastation. "What we're finding too is that many people are calling in crisis, but they're actually having a financial crisis after we talk with them," Rhea said. "And if we can get them that rental assistance or connection to a food bank or utility assistance, if we can help the financial crisis we can help, hopefully help, alleviate the mental health crisis."

In addition to causing over a million deaths, the pandemic upended the lives of countless millions of households. Social support directed toward rental assistance and mental health services from state and federal governments was either threadbare or abandoned, as the Democrats and Republicans prioritized rescuing Wall Street and the corporations while working people suffered from food insecurity and the threat of homelessness.

Several quarterly reports released by the HFUW include testimonials from psychologically distressed callers, with many citing financial hardship as the precursor to emotional and mental distress. A fall 2021 call from a Central Florida resident noted that he was on a fixed income and currently struggling to pay his bills due to his roommate leaving, after which he was solely responsible for rent payments. He had fallen

behind and had exhausted his personal options of asking friends and family for help. The report said this was his first time calling the HFUW's phone line.

Another quarterly report in late 2021 described a caller who was having a difficult time dealing with homelessness and mental well-being. A spring 2022 report said a caller had depleted her savings and that she was at risk of losing her home. The caller, feeling overwhelmed, did not know how she would resolve her issues and contemplated suicide as her only option.

Although these reports describe positive outcomes, the anecdotal experiences testify to a social order in a state of decay. Earlier this year, Orange County Mayor Jerry Demings said the county has at least a \$49.7 million gap in mental health and behavioral services. According to a report from HFUW, Florida ranked 49th out of the 50 states for access to mental health services. Thus far, Orange County has only been able to raise \$1 million from the HFUW toward mental health services, a sum completely inadequate to resolve the crisis.



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