

Help Seeking Behaviors and Warning Signs of Suicidality and Mental Health Crises in Missouri College Students

Partners in Prevention (PIP) is Missouri's higher education substance misuse consortium dedicated to creating healthy and safe college campuses. The coalition is comprised of 26 public and private colleges and universities in the state. This brief includes data for the 23 4-year institutions in the coalition; 2-year campuses participate in a separate version of the survey, and their data is not included in this statewide aggregate. The campuses in the coalition work to prevent high-risk behaviors by implementing evidence-based strategies including education, social norming campaigns, policy review and enforcement, and more. To measure progress and obtain data needed for the implementation of programs, PIP created the Missouri Assessment of College Health Behaviors (MACHB) Survey. The MACHB is an annual, online survey that has been implemented each spring since 2007. This brief will focus on warning signs, suicidality, and help-seeking among Missouri college students from the data collected in the 2024 MACHB survey.

Background

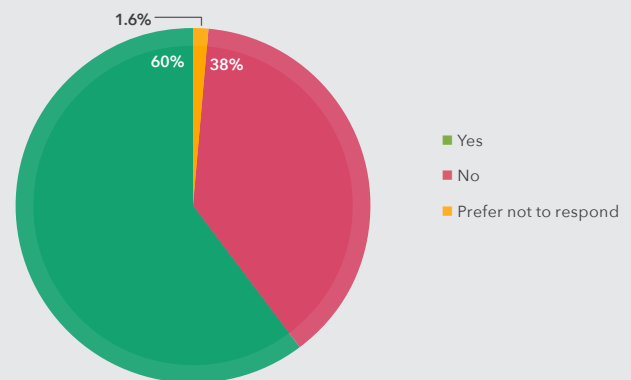
Suicidality is defined by the American Psychological Association as "the risk of suicide, usually indicated by suicidal ideation or intent, especially as evident in the presence of a well-elaborated suicidal plan." Given the stigma associated with suicide, language is of particular importance and therefore the terms used throughout this report include, "died by suicide," "suicidal ideation," and "suicide attempts." The term "commit suicide" is not used because it implies that the individual did something criminal. The terms "failed suicide" and "successful suicide" are also avoided to diminish the idea that suicide is a goal. Rather, the terms "fatal" and "non-fatal" will be used. The use of proper language can ensure discussions of suicide are destigmatizing, safe, and comfortable.

Overall Instances of Suicidality in Missouri College Students

The MACHB surveyed Missouri college students about past suicidal ideation and attempts. Forty-five percent

(45%) of students surveyed reported having had suicidal thoughts at some point in their lifetime, although this percentage decreases to twenty-two percent (22%) of students reporting that they have experienced suicidal ideation in the past 12 months. Less than two percent (1.5%) of Missouri college students have attempted suicide in the past 12 months. Of those students who reported having experienced suicidality in the past 12 months, only thirty-eight percent (38%) sought assistance as illustrated in Chart 1.

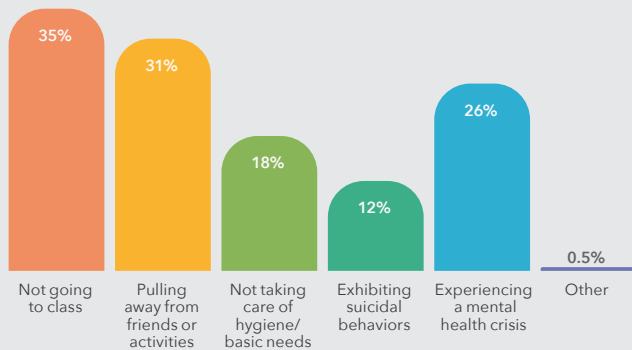
Chart 1: Have You Sought Assistance for Your Suicidal Attempt/Thoughts in the Past 12 Months?



Prevalence of the Warning Signs of a Mental Health Concern

There are certain behaviors that can be concerning and possibly signal that an individual may be going through a mental health crisis. It is important to keep track of these seemingly harmless behaviors because they can be warning signs of a larger concern, including suicidality. In 2024, nearly half (48.7%) of the surveyed college students reported witnessing at least one of the following worrisome behaviors: not going to class, pulling away from friends or activities, not taking care of hygiene/basic needs, exhibiting suicidal behaviors (e.g., talking about death, giving away belongings, withdrawing, isolating, etc.), experiencing a mental health crisis, or other. Chart 2 displays a visual representation of the frequency that these behaviors have been witnessed by Missouri college students*.

Chart 2: Mental Health Concern Warning Signs

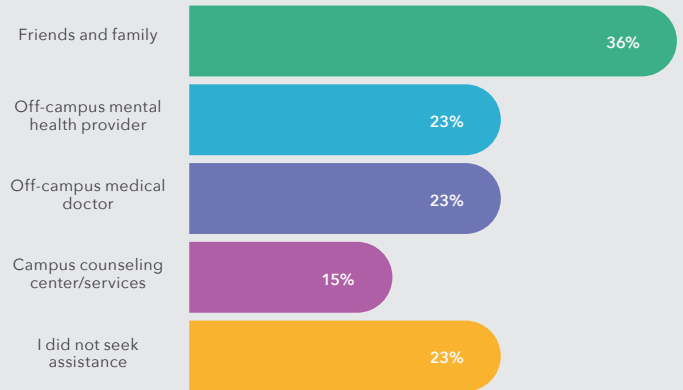


Help Seeking Resources used by College Students

The MACHB asked students who have experienced symptoms of a mental health concern in the past 12 months where they got support during this time frame. These results are seen in Chart 3 and the majority of students reported seeking help from friends and family (36%), followed by an off-campus medical doctor (23%), and an off-campus mental health provider (23%)*. Although many did seek assistance, it should be noted that twenty-three percent (23%) of students reported they did not seek any assistance at all. Identifying which resources are most likely to be

utilized by students allows for the reinforcement of specific initiatives that will impact the most individuals.

Chart 3: Most Commonly Used Help-Seeking Resources



The reported lack of help-seeking can arise from societal stigma (24%) and expensive treatment costs (26%), but the majority of students who did not seek any help simply do not think they need any assistance (50%)*.

Help-Seeking Resources used by College Students for Suicidality

Students who reported experiencing suicidal ideation or attempts utilized similar help-seeking resources as students who have other mental health conditions. The top three resources that students went to were family and friends (56%), an off-campus mental health center (47%), and campus counseling center/services (31%)*.

Summary

Collecting data about mental health and suicidality is one way the PIP strives to promote well-being and healthy habits. Understanding the warning signs of a mental health crisis will help health and well-being professionals encourage students to utilize help-seeking methods. Proactive measures, such as connecting students to resources, can aid in the mitigation of serious mental health crises and suicide attempts. Individuals can promote help-seeking by completing Engage training which provides education on bystander intervention, mental well-being, and

suicide. The Engage program heightens one's awareness of the warning signs discussed above and empowers them to intervene. There may be barriers and disconnects between help-seeking resources and the student population, but normalizing asking for and giving help will hopefully reduce the amount of Missouri college students that consider suicide.

Resources

Ask. Listen. Refer.

Ask. Listen. Refer. (ALR) is a free online suicide prevention training program for colleges and universities. During the 20-minute ALR training program, participants learn about signs and symptoms of suicidal behavior, common myths about suicide, how to ask if someone is considering suicide, and how to make trauma-informed resource referrals. Participants are given a pre- and post-test to evaluate knowledge, attitudes, and willingness to intervene. Find the training at asklistenrefer.org.

Engage

Engage is a multi-level violence prevention program, created by Missouri Partners in Prevention with support from the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services Office on Women's Health in collaboration with the Missouri Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence. Engage frames bystander behavior within the context of community connection and sense of belonging and covers 4 primary topics, 1) alcohol and other substance use, 2) bias and discrimination, 3) interpersonal violence, and 4) mental well-being and suicide. [Click here for more information about Engage!](#)

The National Suicide Prevention & Crisis Lifeline

The National Suicide Prevention & Crisis Lifeline has transitioned to 988, a 3-digit call and text number. The lifeline is available 24/7 and is also accessible online via chat. People can use 988 if they are having thoughts of suicide, mental health or substance use crises, or any other kind of emotional distress. People can also dial 988 if they are worried about a loved one who may need crisis support. [Learn more about 988 here!](#)

The Crisis Text Line

The Crisis Text Line (text MOSAFE to 741-741) is also a 24/7 digital resource for anyone experiencing issues such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders, thoughts of suicide, and more. [Learn more about the Crisis Text Line here!](#)

Missouri Suicide Prevention Resources

The Missouri Suicide Prevention Network

The Missouri Suicide Prevention Network (MSPN) is MSPN is an independent, non-partisan, voluntary group of individuals, organizations, and agencies (public and private) who lead statewide suicide prevention efforts. This group crafts the [Missouri Suicide Prevention Plan](#), which has recently been updated for the 2024-2028 timeframe. The plan includes 3 primary goals, 1) raise public awareness about suicide risk and prevention, 2) support community-led efforts to promote suicide prevention, intervention, and postvention care, and 3) help diverse groups and organizations create suicide prevention programs, systems, and policies. Every Missourian plays a role in preventing suicide and the Missouri Suicide Prevention Plan is for those who want to learn about our state's efforts for preventing suicide at the community level. [Learn more about MSPN here!](#)

The Suicide Prevention & 988 Guide for Schools

The Suicide Prevention & 988 Guide for Schools which was developed by MSPN to help school personnel utilize suicide prevention, intervention, and crisis response services along with postvention resources to better address and meet the needs of schools across the state. While primarily geared towards elementary through high schools, there is a higher education consideration section and can be helpful for parents, coalitions, and more. [View the guide here!](#)

Contact Partners in Prevention at (573) 884-7551.

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