

School Social Workers

A Necessity in the Fight
Against Youth Mental Health
By Sara Nowak, MSW



Executive Summary

In December of 2021, the United States Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, issued an advisory on the state of youth mental health. Over the past decade we have seen a steady increase in the number of adolescents reporting mental health issues. The pandemic has only made adolescent mental health issues worse. Though we do not know the long-term effects of the pandemic on youth, data already is showing that youth are reporting more mental health issues and there has been a rise in suicide attempts since the pandemic. Schools are one of the key places where students can access mental health services. Schools also are one of the only readily accessible points of mental health services and can reduce many of the barriers that keep students from mental health services. Social workers are uniquely qualified as culturally competent, barrier reducing, service accessing professionals who can help provide mental health services within the school setting.

There are currently over 67,000 schools in the United States that do not have a school social worker (1). The national ratio of school social workers to students is 1:2,106, compared to the professional recommendation of 1:250 (1, 2). Social workers, compared to other mental health providers within the school setting, can help students and families access services that can help alleviate stress and other factors that lead to mental health issues. There needs to be policy in place that requires and funds school social workers to be in every school. There also needs to be more research to the overall impact of social workers on the school setting.

Surgeon General Warning

In December 2021, the United States Surgeon General, Dr. Vivek Murthy, issued an advisory on the state of youth mental health. Protecting Youth Mental Health: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory highlighted the ongoing youth mental health crisis and the need for our nation to address this issue (3).



Introduction

01

An estimated 17% or 4.1 million youth aged 12-17 have experienced a Major Depressive Episode in 2020 (4). That figure has more than doubled since 2008 (4).

02

Adolescents' mental health issues have also been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Over 55 million students faced prolonged school closures in the United States (5).

03

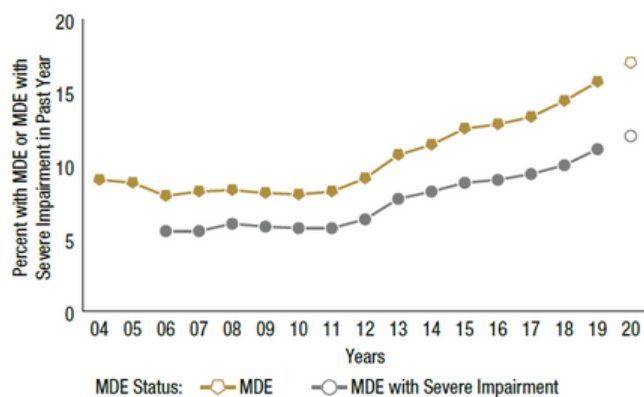
Schools are a key source for providing mental health services to adolescents with 58% of students who receive mental health services accessing them in the educational setting (6).

04

School social workers are educated to provide interventions that can assist students with their mental health. The problem is that while the National Association of Social Workers recommends a ratio of 1:250 social workers to students, the national average ratio is 1:2,106 (1,2).

Background

Figure 30. Major Depressive Episode (MDE) and MDE with Severe Impairment in the Past Year: Among Youths Aged 12 to 17; 2004-2020



Note: There is no connecting line between 2019 and 2020 to indicate caution should be used when comparing estimates between 2020 and prior years because of methodological changes for 2020. Due to these changes, significance testing between 2020 and prior years was not performed.

(4)

In early 2021, suspected suicide attempts were 51% higher for adolescent girls and 4% higher for adolescent boys than in 2019 (3).

Pre-Covid-19

“Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, mental health challenges were the leading cause of disability and poor life outcomes in young people, with up to 1 in 5 children ages 3 to 17 in the US with a reported mental, emotional, developmental, or behavioral disorder”(3). From 2009 to 2019, the proportion of high school students reporting persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness increased by 40% (3).

Post-Covid-19

The pandemic caused social, emotional, and economic stresses experienced all at once, and the effects are likely to persist once the crisis has been resolved (5). “Recent research covering 80,000 youth globally found that depressive and anxiety symptoms doubled during the pandemic, with 25% of youth experiencing depressive symptoms and 20% experiencing anxiety symptoms” (3).

Role of Schools

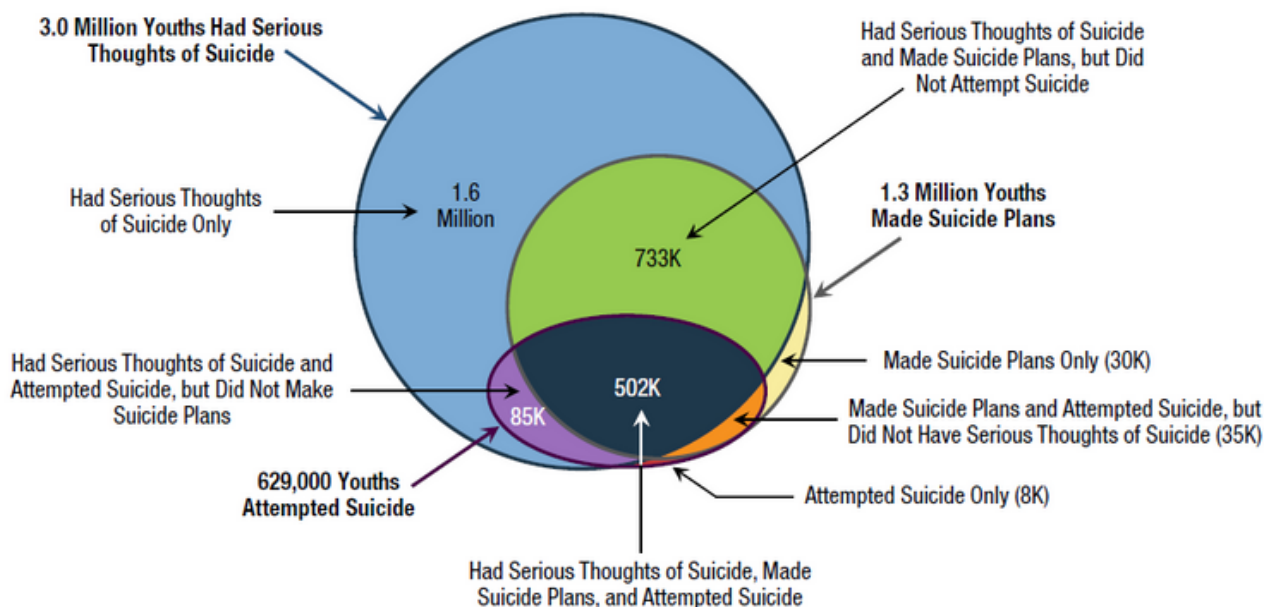
“Schools are one of the most important institutions that address children’s mental health needs, and in some areas, such as rural regions, schools are the only venue where children’s mental health services are offered”(5). Approximately 35% percent of all adolescents who receive treatment for an emotional or behavioral problem receive it in an educational setting only, and another 23% received treatment in both an educational and noneducational setting(6).

Role of School Social Worker

“School social workers seek to ensure equitable educational opportunities; ensure that students are mentally, physically, and emotionally present in the classroom; and promote respect and dignity for all students”(2). Along with mental health issues themselves, Social workers are uniquely equipped to assist with different contributing factors that can cause mental health issues and prevent children from learning.

Policy Recommendations

Figure 40. Youths Aged 12 to 17 with Serious Thoughts of Suicide, Suicide Plans, or Suicide Attempts in the Past Year; 2020



(4) 3.0 Million Youths Aged 12 to 17 Had Serious Thoughts of Suicide, Made Suicide Plans, or Attempted Suicide in the Past Year

There is currently no policy requiring schools to have social workers.

Mandate School Social Workers

That is why I am proposing a federal mandate that requires schools to hire social workers at the NASW recommended ratio of no more than 1:250 students (2).

Provide Federal Funding

I propose that the federal government redirect approximately \$6 billion to provide social workers in every school. That amounts to just \$82 per student.

Pass H.R. 7037

Recently a bill, H.R. 7037, was introduced that if passed, would provide grant funding for school social workers by amending the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965.

More Research

More research is needed about school social workers and their impact on the education of students. It is important for the future of the profession, as well as for their effectiveness within their schools.

Conclusion

Mental health issues amongst youth have been on the rise and have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. Schools are a place where students can receive access to mental health services and where many barriers are reduced. School social workers are uniquely qualified and needed to help students deal with mental health issues and other problems that can impact their learning. Policy needs to be in place that requires schools to have social workers at the recommended ratio of one social worker for every 250 students. Federal funding should be allocated to help relieve this burden off the individual school districts. More research is also needed to show the impact of school social workers on students education and mental health. We are in the midst of a youth mental health crisis, and school social workers are key figures who can help make a difference if given the chance to help students in need.



References

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