

## School program curbs teen suicide attempts: study

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By Amy Norton

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - A high school program that teaches teens about the link between suicide and [depression](#) cut suicide attempts by 40 percent at five U.S. schools, according to a study out Wednesday.

Among 2,100 students in the study, those who took part in the program were less likely than their peers to report a suicide attempt three months later.

When surveyed, 3.6 percent of these students admitted to attempting suicide in the past three months. That compares with 5.4 percent of their peers, according to findings published in the March 4th issue of the American Journal of Public Health.

Students at the schools, in Hartford, Connecticut, and Columbus, Georgia, were racially diverse and came from low- to middle-income families.

Researchers say such success has not been found in similar studies of other school-based suicide-prevention programs. In general, results from past research have been "disappointing," said the study's lead author, Dr. Robert Aseltine of the University of Connecticut Health Center in Farmington.

He told Reuters Health it appears that the greater understanding that students gained of mental illness, and its connection with suicide, explain the success.

The program, called Signs of Suicide, or SOS, is run by the non-profit organization Screening for Mental Health, and has been used in more than 1,000 U.S. schools. Students see a video featuring dramatizations of depressive and suicidal behavior, as well as interviews with real people whose lives have been affected by suicide.

They also fill out a short survey that allows them to screen themselves for depression,

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and are told how to seek help if they need it.

The materials focus on teaching kids that suicide is directly related to treatable mental illnesses, usually depression, according to Aseltine. The goal is to get them to recognize and respond to depression and suicidal behavior in themselves and in their friends.

Aseltine said the program tells them "it's OK to go to an adult," and that it's not a "betrayal of trust" to tell someone when they think a friend is suicidal.

He and his colleagues evaluated the SOS program in three high schools in Hartford and two in Columbus. The Hartford schools had large low-income and Hispanic populations, while the Columbus schools had mainly white and black students from working- and middle-class families.

The fact that the program appeared to reduce suicide attempts among such "high-risk" teens in urban schools is important, the researchers note in their report.

Aseltine said they plan to look at whether the lower risk of attempted suicide is lasting, or whether "booster" programs might be needed.

According to the government statistics, the rate of suicide among Americans ages 15 to 24 has tripled since 1950, and suicide now stands as the third leading cause of death in that age group.

SOURCE: American Journal of Public Health, March 4, 2004.