



Title: Child suicide in Texas: an emergency we must talk about locally

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# Child suicide in Texas: an emergency we must talk about locally

**Stacy E. Wilson, J.D.** Opinion contributor

September is National Suicide Awareness Month – a time to highlight this national emergency that, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

- is the second leading cause of death for children ages 10-14; and
- is the third leading cause of death for young people ages 15-24.

The CDC has reported that 20% of U.S. high schoolers contemplated suicide during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the past two and a half years, children's hospitals in Texas have seen an increased number of children and adolescents with more serious mental health conditions in the emergency departments because these children and their families have nowhere else to go. The greater demand for care has left children's hospitals struggling to meet the needs of their patients due to a lack of mental health services and workforce to provide those services.

While some increase in mental health conditions is due to the impact of COVID-19, the truth is that children's hospitals have been seeing more kids with mental health issues for years before the pandemic. Between 2016 and 2020, children between the ages of 3-17 had a 29% increase in anxiety and a 27% increase in depression. In the U.S., from 2007 to 2018, there was a 60% increase in the number of children committing suicide.

At the Children's Hospital Association of Texas (CHAT) member hospitals, the numbers could not be more alarming:

- In Dallas, Children's Health reported a 270% increase over the past five years in the number of

children who arrived at the emergency department to receive mental health evaluations.

- Cook Children's Medical Center in Fort Worth has seen an increase in mental health consultations of almost 350% while simultaneously seeing suicide attempts among children and adolescents rise by over 200% from 2015 to 2021.

- Over the past three months, Texas Children's Hospital in Houston has treated around 1,100 children in mental health crisis in its three emergency centers. TCH has seen a 322% increase in the number of children whose conditions require inpatient admission between 2019 and 2022 and has received more than 32,000 referrals to outpatient mental health care from October 2021 to August 2022 – more than any other outpatient service.

- Driscoll Children's Hospital in Corpus Christi has seen a doubling of children and adolescents in their ED who have suicidal ideation or attempted suicide for the last three years.

CHAT continues to work with leaders to identify smart solutions to address this crisis. These solutions start with the immediate need for more pediatric psychiatric inpatient beds. According to data from a 2020 hospital survey, there are about 1200 beds in Texas for more than 7.5 million children. There are not enough pediatric beds to meet the needs of young Texans. Delay in receiving the right care due to the lack of critical infrastructure puts these children at risk.

Texas must invest in partial hospitalization programs and intensive outpatient programs that help kids stay out of crisis and reduce the overall need for pediatric psychiatric inpatient beds. Children could

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be discharged from a hospital bed to a more structured program like partial hospitalization, which offers counseling and school five days a week. Similarly, we could potentially avoid some inpatient hospital stays by having services that treat children who need more than just a counseling visit every couple of weeks but do not need to be admitted to a hospital.

It is vital that these programs be reimbursed appropriately to ensure that they remain available to every child, regardless of income. Reimbursement for mental health services must be at least on par with reimbursement for physical health services.

Finally, we must bolster the workforce pipeline for mental health professionals. Training individuals to fill these positions has become even more important, as over the last decade, Texas has gone from 69% of counties designated as total or partial Mental Health Professional Shortage Areas to over 99% today. Increasing funding to the Texas Loan Repayment Program for Mental Health Professionals would be a crucial step in addressing this issue.

Our kids need action. The upcoming 88th Texas legislative session gives our elected leaders the opportunity to increase mental health services for the children of Texas. The lives of so many young Texans depend on us getting this right, not tomorrow, but right now.

*Stacy E. Wilson, J.D. is the president of the Children's Hospital Association of Texas.*