

Younger Connecticut kids attempting suicide

By Lisa Backus
STAFF WRITER

The age of children dying by suicide or attempting suicide in Connecticut is getting younger as the number of resources to provide behavioral health treatment is shrinking, leading to increased "deaths of despair," the state Child Advocate says.

"This data is the most sobering reminder that our behavioral health system is collapsing from a lack of support, infrastructure, workforce and funding," Connecticut Child Advocate Sarah Eagan said. "This is while we have kids dying or attempting suicide younger and younger."

Between January 2016 and September 2022, 48 Connecticut children ages 10 to 17 died by suicide, in some cases by ramming their cars into structures, according to data presented during Wednesday's Child Fatality Review Panel headed by Eagan and Yale Pediatric Emergency Department physician Kirsten Bechtel.

Of those suicides, 15 of the children were ages 10 to 14 and the other 33 were teens ages 15 to 17, according to Assistant Child Advocate Brendan Burke, who culled the data from fatality reports completed by the state Office of the Chief Medical Examiner.

During the same period, 71 young adults ages 18 to 21 also died by suicide, which Eagan and Burke attributed to a lack of connection to schools and support systems.

"The 18- to 21-year-olds are sort of lost," Eagan said. "They may still be in school, but they may need agency support. We're going to have to figure out what is our public policy on this? The number of deaths is nothing short of staggering. Suicide is just behind accidental fatal overdoses and accidents."

But the number of deaths only tells part of the story, Ea-

gan said.

Epidemiologist Neena Jacob with the state Department of Public Health presented data during the same meeting that indicates hundreds more children as young as 10 years old and young adults in recent years have attempted suicide or expressed suicidal ideation —



Eagan

meaning they conveyed to someone that they are having repeated thoughts or feelings about suicide or self-harm.

New Haven had triple the number of suicide attempts — 221 — in the 18- to 21-year-old age group than any other large Connecticut city between 2021 and 2023, Jacobs' data showed. In the same period, Hartford had 87 suicide attempts and there were 83 in Bridgeport in that age group, DPH figures showed.

But there were also dozens of suicide attempts by children in the 10- to 14-year-old age group in various cities from 2021 to 2023. There were also at least some suicide attempts in the 5- to 9-year-old age range during that period, however, the DPH data did not reveal the exact number to protect their identities.

The DPH figures were compiled from insurance codes and triage notes at hospitals and urgent care facilities throughout the state, Jacobs said.

Those figures and other data sets, including the percentage of children who screened as positive for a suicide risk at Connecticut Children's Medical Center even though they were brought there for other health issues, indicate the problem is growing, Eagan said.

"There's a lot of despair in children that we don't have enough support for," she said.

In the 18 to 21 age group, 19-year-olds were the most likely to

have died by suicide between 2016 and 2022, Burke said. During that period, a total of 409 people in that age group died of unnatural causes, including accidents, homicides and suicides. Of those deaths, there were 177 — 43 percent — who had previous involvement with the state Department of Chil-

dren and Families, Burke said. Five dozen had been in DCF care and 36 percent had been involved in the state's criminal justice system, according to Burke's figures.

In the 15- to 17-year-old group, six of the teens died by suicide by driving a vehicle into a building or other object, the

data showed. Toxicology reports indicate there was an overlap between substance abuse, suicide and fatal car accidents, Eagan said.

"There is a despair of vulnerable children that we aren't addressing," she said. "The number of deaths to drug overdose and suicide are shocking."

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