

Prevalence of Suicide Risk-factors among Utah Emergency Medical Services Providers Survey

March 25, 2017

Dear Utah EMS provider,

Over the last several weeks, you have probably seen requests to participate in a survey regarding suicide risk factors among Utah EMS providers. The survey closed on March 4, 2017. Although the subject matter of this survey was sensitive and difficult to address, you came together as a group to provide excellent data which can be utilized to address the problem of suicide among EMS providers. Over 1,300 people participated in the survey. The purpose of the survey was to collect prevalence data (e.g. how many people have the problem at a given point in time) on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), alcohol abuse, and access to lethal means of suicide.

As a fellow EMS provider, I took on this project with a sincere desire to help my brothers and sisters in the EMS community battle this affliction. I plan to continue addressing this issue with stakeholders to improve the mental health of our EMS providers and to prevent any further loss of life due to suicide.

In an effort to keep all EMS providers informed, I am including the data from this survey in this letter. I will provide a short discussion of the results and future recommendations. Lastly, if you or anyone you know are struggling with mental health issue or have suicidal thoughts, please seek help. The University Neuropsychiatric Institute (UNI) has a crisis line which is available 24/7 at 801-587-3000. The National Suicide Prevention Hotline is similarly staffed around the clock at 1-800-273-8255. Additionally, a useful smart phone app called SafeUT can be downloaded in the iTunes or Google Play stores, or at www.healthcare.utah.edu/uni/clinical-services/safe-ut/.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

It has long been understood that EMS personnel *likely* suffer from PTSD as a result of daily exposure to human suffering and tragedy. However, the few studies that exist to determine how many EMS providers may have PTSD are usually done on local levels or individual departments. This survey encompassed EMS providers from all corners of Utah. The rate of PTSD among the general population is about 6% (Pietrzak, Goldstein, Southwick, & Grant, 2011). However, this survey showed that 55% of EMS personnel who responded had PTSD symptoms which justify further investigation, including 26% of respondents who had diagnosable PTSD. (See Appendix A for graphs).

Alcohol Abuse and Risky Alcohol Use

Alcohol abuse leads to impulsive behaviors. About 6% of the general population have alcohol dependency or risky alcohol use (Hedden, Kennet, Lipari, Medley, & Tice, 2015). According to this survey, 12.8% of respondents had alcohol dependence or risky use. Both the PTSD and alcohol abuse screening tools were validated instruments which accurately screen for these problems when answered honestly.

Access to Lethal Means

A poll of American households in 2015 found that 39% of homes had firearms (Gallup Inc, 2015). Data about access to high-risk medications was not found in the literature, the millions of prescriptions per year are written for these medications. It is safe to assume that a majority of homes in the United States will contain risky medications. Of the EMS providers surveyed, 76% stated they had firearms in the home and over 59% had access to high-risk medications.

Future Recommendations

One in ten EMS providers who responded to the survey had all three risk factors. This is alarming since the combination of these risk factors can place the individual at higher-risk for suicide. The high rates of these three risk factors help to justify increased funding and support for suicide prevention and treatment programs. This data can be used to approach lawmakers, administrators, and other stakeholders in addressing some of the risk factors associated with EMS provider suicide. In addition, peer support groups at local EMS agencies should also be created and implemented as a way to monitor for mental health concerns, provide a stress release forum, and monitor for suicidal ideations.

Once again, thank you so much for participating in this endeavor. The EMS community in Utah is a tight-knit group of caring professionals who look out for the public health and for each other. The concern you have for your fellow-providers was evident in the extraordinary response to this survey.

Sincerely,



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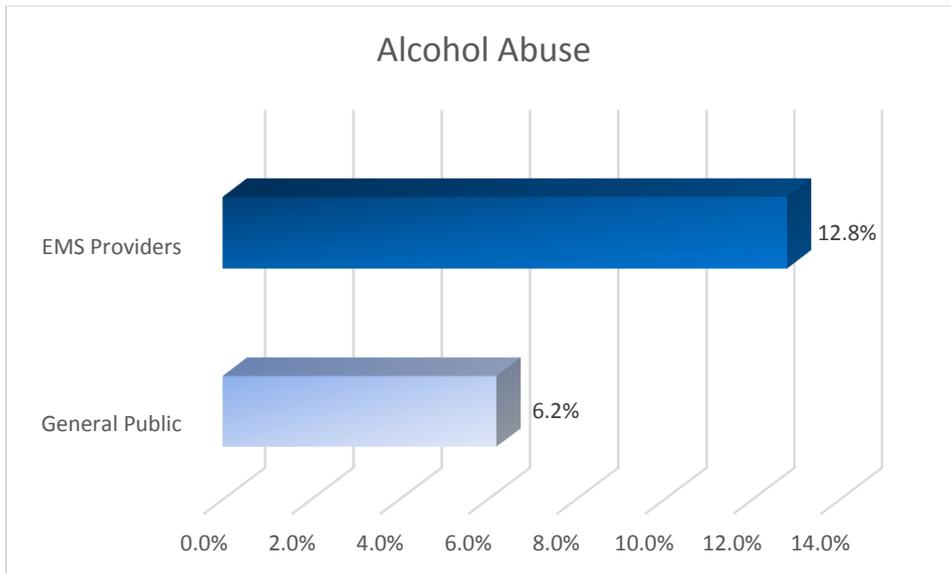
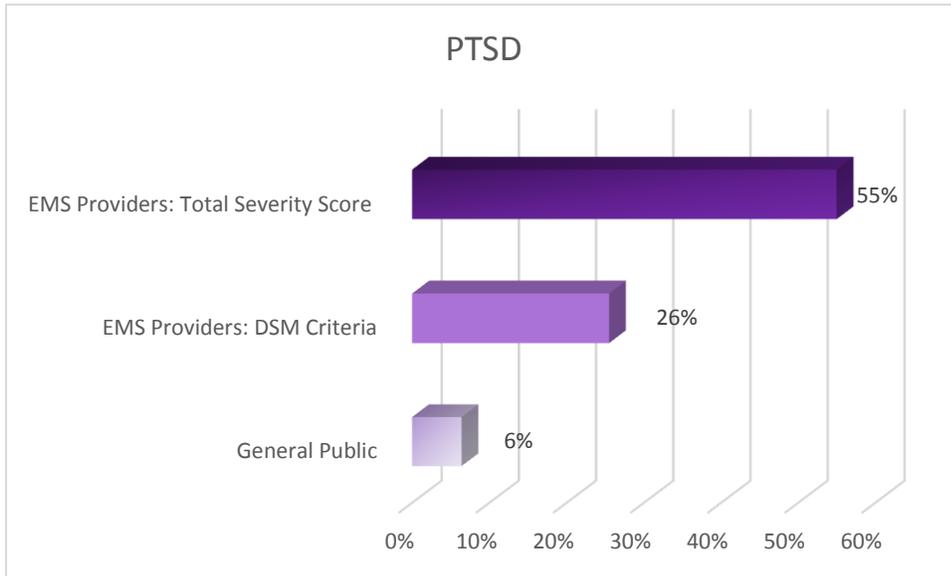
References

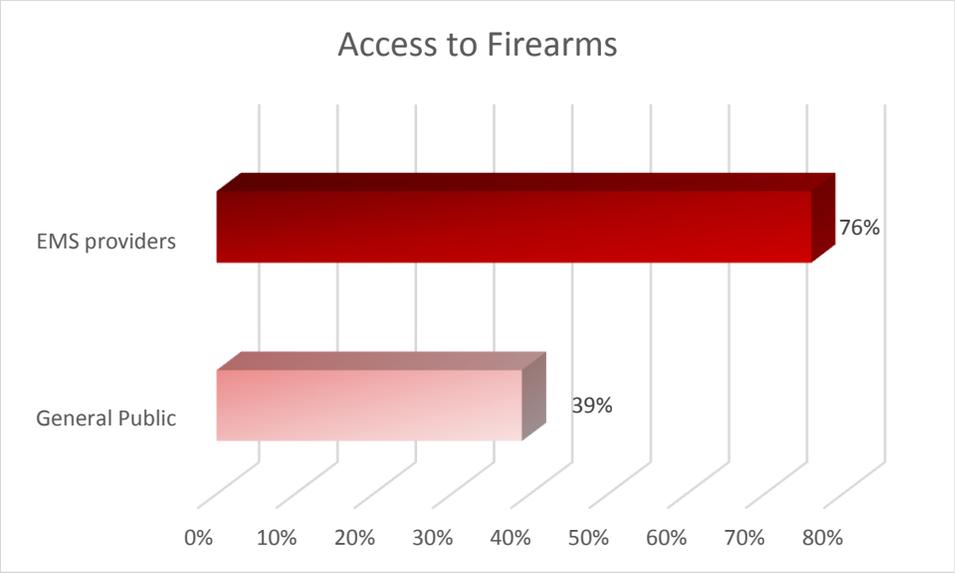
Gallup Inc. (2015). Guns. Retrieved March 10, 2017, from <http://www.gallup.com/poll/1645/Guns.aspx>

Hedden, S. L., Kennet, J., Lipari, R., Medley, G., & Tice, P. (2015). *Behavioral health trends in the United States: Results from the 2014 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*. Retrieved from <http://www.samhsa.gov/disorders>

Pietrzak, R. H., Goldstein, R. B., Southwick, S. M., & Grant, B. F. (2011). Prevalence and Axis I comorbidity of full and partial posttraumatic stress disorder in the United States: results from Wave 2 of the National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions. *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 25(3), 456–465. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.janxdis.2010.11.010>

Appendix A





Access to High-Risk Medications

