

CU researchers call for national ethics guidelines when student health surveys uncover suicide-risk

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Public health agencies need ethical guidelines for deciding what to do when anonymous student health surveys discover a very high local rate of suicide-risk, according to CU researchers.

In a report published today in the highly influential *American Journal of Bioethics*, the researchers describe a student health survey team that discovered a Colorado [school](#) with extremely high rates of suicide risk, and a lack of ethical guidance on whether or how to intervene.

The case came from the Healthy Kids Colorado Survey, a voluntary statewide anonymous survey completed by students in participating schools across Colorado. In addition to reporting results for the entire state, the survey team compiles and returns results to each school.

"While compiling school results, the HKCS team noticed that one school's suicide-risk rate was off the charts. They were alarmed but weren't sure how to proceed, since the survey promises confidentiality of results," said lead author Arnold H. Levinson, Ph.D., MJ, professor of Community and Behavioral Health at the Colorado School of Public Health.

In the end, the surveyors called the principal at the school, who said he would use the information to ask the district for extra resources to address suicide risks. The decision to call the principal was endorsed by a multidisciplinary team of CU researchers and ethicists from the CU Center for Bioethics and Humanities who examined the case.

But the authors of the new report note that the decision was not informed by ethical guidance.

"We searched for guidance from research ethics, [medical ethics](#), public health ethics and education

ethics," Levinson said. "And we couldn't find any directly applicable guidelines."

"We urge national public health and education associations to produce guidance that clarifies the ethical and legal duties owed to randomly chosen schools and students that participate in anonymous surveys when surveillance activities identify high-risk clusters."

Adolescent suicide is at epidemic levels in Colorado and the nation, noted a research team member, M. Franci Crepeau-Hobson, Ph.D., associate professor and director of clinical training, University of Colorado School of Education and Human Development.

"Schools should be conducting suicide-prevention programs, and administrators are responsible for ensuring their students' [health](#) and safety," she said. "Screening for suicide is the best approach, but at a minimum, school personnel should be trained to see signs of risk and appropriate ways to respond."

Provided by CU Anschutz Medical Campus

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