

Study paints picture of collegiate mental health

April 20 2009, By GENARO C. ARMAS , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- Ever since campus counseling centers were established in the 1940s, college officials have known that the prevalence and severity of students' mental health problems were rising. They just didn't know by how much.

A pilot study released Monday by the Center for the Study of Collegiate Mental Health, at Penn State University, hopes to fill that void. Organizers call it a first-of-its kind effort by college counseling centers designed to get an up-to-date picture of mental health trends affecting higher education.

Most schools collect data of counseling center clients on their own. Until now, though, there have been no national data to help study perceived trends, organizers said.

"Mental health affects every aspect of a college student's functioning," said Ben Locke, executive director of the center. "The earlier you intervene in mental health issues, the more likely you are to be successful in treating it."

The numbers will further help colleges and universities equip themselves to support students, Locke said.

The Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors does a separate annual survey of its members. That survey estimated that about 1 in 10 college students seek treatment from campus counseling

centers.

But the Penn State study is the first to get data from the counseling center clients themselves, Locke said.

"This is actual data from the counseling centers: the clients who are coming in, what they're saying," said Robert Rando, the director of counseling and wellness services at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. "It's accurate in that way, and no one has done that."

There is concern about the increased severity of mental health problems counseling centers are seeing among student clients, in part because of the increased use of medications such as Prozac by high school students, Rando said.

The collaboration began four years ago, but data collection began only in fall 2008.

The effort had been in the works before the high-profile campus shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007 and Northern Illinois University last year.

The killing of 33 people, including the gunman, at Virginia Tech and five people at Northern Illinois put a spotlight on campus counseling services and risk reduction, said Dennis Heitzmann, director of counseling and psychological services at Penn State.

"What this effort will do will keep our work in the forefront, identify the importance of our function before the administration, parents and students themselves," Heitzmann said.

More than 130 schools nationwide are registered with the center. Of them, 66 participated in the initial study, with responses from more than

28,000 students who received [mental health](#) services in fall 2008.

Each counseling center asked clients to answer standardized questions, with the data pooled nationally. All data were anonymous.

Among the study's findings:

- One percent of students who answered a question about binge drinking reported going on a binge 10 or more times in the previous two weeks. Nearly half of those respondents said they had seriously considered suicide in the past.
- The vast majority (93 percent) of students who responded to a question about campus violence had little to no fear of losing control and acting violently.
- The 7 percent considered to have strong fears were most likely to be male and said they had previously harmed another person. They also tended to have experienced a cluster of other symptoms, such as a fear of having a panic attack or suicidal thoughts.

The results "don't translate into a guaranteed assessment or reliable profile at any point, but they offer a starting point in assessing risk in counseling center clients," Locke said.

The center has received \$45,000 in funding over the past five years, Locke said. The Jed Foundation, a nonprofit that describes itself as trying to reduce suicides and emotional distress among college [students](#), is listed as a past contributor.

The center also requires members to pay a \$150 annual fee. In addition, researchers have received about \$100,000 in in-kind funding from Titanium Software.

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