

The state of research into youth helplines

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A study in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* reports that, while youth helplines appear to be utilized and potentially beneficial for a broad array of psychosocial problems, including suicidality, there remains a need for more evidence as to their ongoing effectiveness.

"Helplines are a seemingly ubiquitous service and have numerous benefits such as being free, anonymous, flexible in their ability to be delivered online, and offered 24 hours a day, seven days a week, said senior author Kairi Kõlves, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Principal Research Fellow at the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention, School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, Australia.

"All of which are highly relevant to young people experiencing difficulties or crises. However, their use and impact has not been systematically reviewed in young people and we wanted to determine what the extent of the literature was in terms of the types of studies conducted to date; what kinds of young people are using these services and for which types of problems; and what is known regarding helpline effectiveness."

A total of 52 articles were identified according to inclusion/exclusion criteria, based on a systematic review of the literature on youth helplines, with searches, extraction and synthesis occurring in late 2020. Articles varied widely in their design, from content analyses of helpline call logs/databases/transcripts, to cross-sectional surveys, or qualitative interviews and analyses of transcripts. Almost all studies were conducted in high-income countries such as the USA, Australia, Denmark, the United Kingdom, and Japan. However, the representation of global helplines across studies was small (11%) based upon those listed by the Child Helpline International network.

Several themes and key findings were found following a narrative synthesis, in addition to their implications and prominent gaps in the identified articles.

Of the findings, lead author Sharna Mathieu, Ph.D., a senior research assistant at the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention,

School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University, indicated that "It became clear that in addition to the overt barriers to help-seeking investigated in the studies themselves, such as service awareness, there may be additional systemic barriers to engage youths from lower socioeconomic, culturally, or sexually/gender diverse backgrounds.

"It was not obvious whether the helplines described in our identified articles had the capabilities, resources, or focus to ensure that national or broadly applied helpline services, such as in the USA or Australia, could be tailored to the needs of these [young people](#) and that would be perceived of as safe and viable by these individuals. We saw this as a prominent gap and important area of consideration for future research, service providers and policymakers."

Based upon the findings of this review, it appears that helplines are well suited to a variety of problems across a range of helpline modalities and may be beneficial. However, regarding their effectiveness, there was limited available literature. This is likely a consequence of the features of a helpline service that serve to constrain research designs and obtaining ethical clearance, such as anonymity, brief intervention, or time sensitive crisis response.

More information: Sharna L. Mathieu et al, Systematic Review: The State of Research Into Youth Helplines, *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2020.12.028](#)

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