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**School-based Mental Health Checkups Lead to High Rates  
of Follow-Up Care for Teens**

**Screening Identifies Suicidal Students Not Receiving Care**

NEW YORK - A study led by suicide researcher Madelyn Gould, Ph.D., M.P.H., of the Columbia University Department of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the New York State Psychiatric Institute found that school-based mental health assessments have significant success in identifying adolescents at-risk for suicidal behavior and facilitating high rates of follow-up treatment.

Seventy percent of adolescents with risk factors for suicide identified in a school mental health screening effort followed through on referral recommendations within one year. The results are published in the December issue of the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*. This is first study to report significant mental health service use by a large group of teenagers after school-based screening.

"This study shows that mental health screening is effective in finding teens at risk of suicide and in enhancing the likelihood that they will get help," said Gould.

The study followed 1,729 high school students age 13 to 19 who received a mental health checkup using evidence-based screening questionnaires in six New York State high schools; five schools were public and one was private. More than 13 percent of these teens were found to be "at-risk" because they reported serious thoughts of suicide, past suicidal behavior and/or depression. Families with teens identified as at-risk were given a specific referral list of mental health providers in the area. If the risk of suicide was high, immediate referrals were made.

Seven out of 10 teens who were recommended for additional care attended an appointment with a health professional within one year. Two-thirds of those found by the screenings to be at-risk had not previously accessed mental health services.

"Many parents and school personnel were surprised to find out these teens were suicidal or depressed," said Gould. "Adolescents tend to keep these feelings to themselves, making mental health problems difficult to detect in daily life without screening."

Laurie Flynn, executive director of the TeenScreen National Center for Mental Health Checkups at Columbia University, said, "This study tells us adults, as parents and educators, that we are key players in improving our young peoples' access to care for mental illness. Dr. Gould's study affirms that mental health checkups are effective and that at-risk teens identified through school-based screenings are able to get help. As with any medical condition, the earlier you can identify illness and begin treatment, the better the outcome."

According to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide is the third leading cause of fatality for this population. These deaths often are the result of untreated or unidentified mental illness. Yet, only one in five adolescents in the United States with a mental health disorder currently receives treatment.

Researchers found that access to mental health services by youth depended upon recognition of the problem and the actions of key adults. Parents and youths' perceptions about mental health problems were the biggest barrier to accessing services. Adolescents and parents who did not access services

cited feeling that symptoms were not serious enough to necessitate further analysis and care. Some also reported thinking that the problem would get better on its own, the problem could be solved by the teens themselves or with family, or that a real problem did not exist.

To increase the percentage of teens receiving timely health services for serious mental health problems, Gould suggested, "Screening and referral services should be better coordinated in order to facilitate timely access. Additionally, there is a great need for family and community-based education about mental illness and suicide risk to be offered along with increased access to screening since understanding is a the first step toward seeking help."

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