

School-based Agricultural Educators' Knowledge of Farm Stressors and Suicide Warning Signs

Research Brief

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Farm Stress Brief Series



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Introduction

Limited access to health resources and suicide-related training in rural areas, coupled with a stigma often associated with mental health, lead to an enhanced need to identify opportunities for creating sustainable practices to identify and support those in crisis. School-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers frequently reside in rural communities, and many are farmers themselves. Simultaneously, given the frequency and types of outreach as well as relationships SBAE teachers have in their communities, these individuals are well positioned to recognize struggles and respond. Additionally, they can help mitigate negative associations by creating a conversation in their communities.

A multi-state research team investigated southern region SBAE teacher knowledge of farm stressors and suicide warning signs. The research was supported by USDA-NIFA Farm and Ranch Stress Assistance Network - Award # 2020-70028-32730.

Background

A 2016 Centers for Disease Control report detailed rates of suicide in the agricultural community at twice that of the general population (Curtin et al., 2016). In a literature review about suicide among

U.S. farmers, Reed and Claunch (2020) identified the need for more robust science where suicide is the primary focus of the study. Previous research about suicide in agriculture has primarily focused on farm families; only one prior study (Comer & Layfield, 2020) involved agricultural education teachers. The study was limited in scope as it focused only on one state, South Carolina. The authors recommended revising the instrument and replicating throughout the southern region. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the awareness of farm stressors and suicide warning signs of school-based agricultural education teachers in the southern region of the United States as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture.

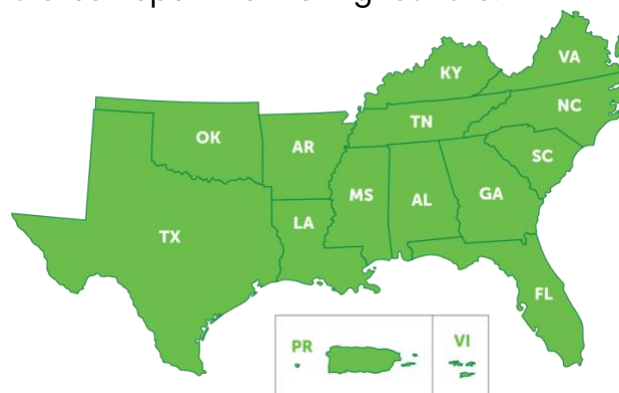


Figure 1. States and territories comprising the southern region as defined by the United States Department of Agriculture.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were: (1) describe Southern Region Agricultural Educators' knowledge of farm stressors (FS); and (2) assess Southern Region Agricultural Educators' knowledge of suicide warning signs (WS).

Theoretical Framework

The Interpersonal Theory of Suicidal Behavior (Van Orden et al., 2010) guided this study. Suicidal attempts are most likely when the simultaneous presence of thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and capability exists.

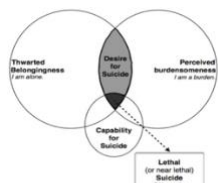


Figure 2. Interpersonal Theory of Suicidal Behavior (Van Orden et al., 2010).

Population

The population was SBAE teachers from 13 states and two territories in the southern region of the United States (see map on page 1). A researcher-designed survey was sent to participants (N = 793) by email, with three follow-up messages sent at one-week intervals. Demographic characteristics and awareness of farm stressors and suicide warning signs were collected.

Findings

On a 3-point Likert-type scale (1 = not; 2 score for knowledge of FS was 2.46 (SD = 2.01); the grand mean score for knowledge of WS was 2.51 (SD = 2.04).

Obj. 1: Top 5 farm stressors recognized by SBAE

Stressor	M	SD
High debt load	2.86	0.39
Immense debt load	2.85	0.39
Not enough money for day-to-day expenses	2.78	0.46
Not enough cash/capital for unexpected problems	2.75	0.46
Concern about the future of the farm	2.67	0.55

Obj. 2: Top 5 farm stressors recognized by SBAE

Stressor	M	SD
No reason for living; no sense of purpose in life	2.91	0.31
Feeling trapped—like there's no way out	2.83	0.39
Withdrawing from friends, family, or society	2.82	0.40
Hopelessness	2.68	0.48
Getting plans in order for their end of life	2.61	0.55

Conclusions/Discussion

Prevention efforts targeting thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness may be effective, while interventions that address these feelings should produce the best outcomes (Van Orden et al., 2010). Training agricultural educators on farm stressors and suicide could better equip them to recognize warning signs and intervene; however, Comer and Layfield (2020) discovered only 51% had participated in suicide-related professional development, while 73% were willing to attend. Therefore, we recommend suicide-related professional development be offered where agriculture teachers convene, such as FFA conventions and agricultural educator professional development conferences.

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