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Falling Through the Cracks: A Profile of Adolescents Less Likely to Receive Services after Peer Death

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FALLING THROUGH THE CRACKS:
A PROFILE OF ADOLESCENTS LESS LIKELY
TO RECEIVE SERVICES AFTER PEER DEATH

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Psychology

Cody Raine Duckworth
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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
The School of Graduate Studies and Research
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Title: Falling Through the Cracks: A Profile of Adolescents Less Likely to Receive Services After Peer Death

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Research has shown that almost two-thirds of adolescents will have experienced the death of a peer during their high school years (Swihart, Silliman, &McNeil, 1992), yet little research has been conducted on how this potentially traumatic event, in the lives of these youths, was handled within the school system or community. The present study explored whether there was 1) a demographic profile that would predict which adolescents would not receive services, either at school or in the community, after the death of a peer, and if there was 2) a demographic profile that would predict which peers would find their services satisfactory versus unsatisfactory. Related to this second profile, satisfaction ratings for specific services as well as reasons for receiving and not receiving services were examined. This was done using a survey containing questions about demographic variables, services offered by schools and communities, satisfaction with services, and reasons for accepting or not accepting services.

620 respondents completed the survey measure. All of these respondents were first year students at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), at least 18 years of age, experienced at least one peer death during high school, and graduated within no more than one year before study participation. Of these 620 respondents, 53 utilized school support services and 79 utilized community support services.

A total of nine demographic variables were evaluated as possible predictors in this study including gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and high school setting as block one; amount

of grief experienced and closeness to the deceased peer as block two; and participation in social groups/organizations, type of peer death, and the presence of drugs or alcohol in the peer's death as block three. In the examination of the prediction of receiving services, the dependent variable was dichotomous (yes or no). Thus, hierarchical binary logistic regression was used as the main analysis with frequency analyses used to further explore significant effects. In the examination of the satisfaction with services, the dependent variable was ordinal (very helpful, somewhat helpful, neither helpful or hurtful, somewhat hurtful, very hurtful). Thus, hierarchical ordinal logistic regression was used as the main analysis with frequency analyses used to further explore significant effects. Of the nine demographics explored, two were found to be significant predictors of whether someone would or would not receive services following peer death. Coming from a minority ethnicity and experiencing lower levels of grief were significant predictors for a decreased likelihood of receiving support services. No significant relationships were found to exist between demographic variables and level of satisfaction with school or community support services. Although the participants reported that 82.8% of schools and 41.8% of communities offered support services, utilization rates were consistently low (8.5% in schools, 12.7% in community). Of the 53 participants who received school services and 79 who received community services, they tended to rate them in a generally positive or neutral manner, with community support services being rated more positively than school support services. Parents, peers, and other family members were the most positively rated supports for adolescents. A peer's utilization of support services and "I don't know" were the two most commonly endorsed reasons that adolescents selected for why they chose to accept support services. The most frequently endorsed response (278 for school, 298 for community) for not accepting services was the belief that the individual did not need help. Closely following this, 142 responses indicated

that stigma was an issue in school settings and 52 responses indicated that stigma was an issue in community settings. Furthermore, 74 responses in the school setting and 25 responses in the community setting indicated that the individuals knew little about services and therefore weren't aware that they might be helpful.

Research shows that youths often don't get services for their mental health issues, it has been found that nearly 80% of children in need of mental health services do not receive them. (Kataoka, Zhang, & Wells, 2002). If they do receive services, the majority (70-80%) receive them within the school system (Williams, Horvath, Wei, Van, & Jonson, 2007). Results from the current research study show that few students are getting support after the death of a peer. However, there were limitations to this study that did effect how generalizable the results were. While the study contained 620 subjects, there was a great deal of homogeneity on many of the demographic variables and there was a low response rate for many others that resulted in significant limitations on the interpretability of the results. The response rate difficulties included the small number of individuals that utilized support services and the overwhelming number of positive ratings of support services. Additional limitations were the large number of demographic variables and support services evaluated. Finally, all of the subjects were responding to questions about a peer death that could have happened as long as five years ago. After that amount of time, it might have been difficult for respondents to recall the services they accepted, their reasons for doing so, and how satisfied they were with the services they received. Although there were limitations to the study, the results confirmed the status of adolescents as a chronically underserved and often overlooked population in need of serious attention from service providers, school officials, at the community at large.