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National Report Shows Suicide Research Critically Underfunded

Action Alliance's first-ever Portfolio Analyses calls for substantial suicide prevention research investments

Washington, DC -- The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, today, issued a crucial report on the state of the nation's suicide research efforts. Results from the "[U.S. National Suicide Prevention Research Efforts: 2008-2013 Portfolio Analyses](#)" show that investments in suicide research are severely lagging relative to research on other leading causes of death. In 2013, over 41,000 Americans died by suicide. Suicide, the 10th leading cause of death in the U.S., receives a small fraction of research dollars in comparison with conditions which cause comparable numbers of deaths such as influenza or hypertension.¹ With a large-scale research investment focused on a comprehensive prevention strategy, timely and effective evidence-based interventions could save thousands of lives per year, especially among middle-aged Americans, an age group with an increasing suicide rate.

"This initial base-line *Portfolio Analyses* provides clear direction to guide a strategic, full-scale national response to preventing suicides. It details under-studied research areas that can contribute to the driving down of U.S. suicide rates," said Phil Satow, Co-Founder and Board Chair of The Jed Foundation, and private sector co-lead of the Action Alliance's Research Prioritization Task Force. "Suicide is one of our nation's most preventable leading causes of death. Yet, it continues to be historically overlooked and prevention efforts continue to be underfunded. A commitment to a vigorous research effort will prevent both suicides and suicide attempts."

An encouraging trend in the Action Alliance's *Portfolio Analyses* is that approximately one-third of the \$72 million per year (average) of research funding involved studies of interventions aimed at preventing

¹ This report found suicide funding from all sources was a yearly average of \$72 million. [National Institutes of Health funding](#) totals for these conditions are \$222 million for influenza research (30,700 annual deaths) and \$304 million for hypertension research (56,000 annual deaths), http://report.nih.gov/categorical_spending.aspx. The total numbers do not take into account research funding by other agencies or foundations for influenza or hypertension.

suicidal behavior. One of the challenges for suicide prevention has been the lack of empirically-tested intervention methods. The *Portfolio Analyses* reveals there is a growing knowledge base of intervention research. “Due to some very targeted funding by a number of agencies, we do have a growing tool kit of approaches to detect high risk individuals, as well as effective interventions for attempt survivors,” said Thomas Insel, M.D., Director of the National Institute of Mental Health. “However, there is very limited research on reducing access to lethal means, one of the most effective ways to rapidly reduce suicide deaths.” The report also notes that, despite a growing [list](#) of vetted suicide prevention programs, there are gaps in identifying evidence-based, community based prevention programs.

“Suicide is finally being prioritized as a public health issue that can be prevented through research-informed strategies,” said Doryn Chervin, Dr.P.H., Executive Secretary of the National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention, and Vice President and Senior Scientist at Education Development Center, Inc. “The *Portfolio Analyses* underscores what research we have, and what we need. It is a body of work that will guide our next steps in suicide prevention research. We are indebted to all the public and private funders who have made the effort to participate in this analysis, and are enthusiastic about coordinating efforts going forward.”

“We know today that investments in research, and effective approaches to prevention and treatment have reduced mortality rates in other leading causes of death,” said [Robert Gebbia, CEO](#) of the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#). “We believe that similar investments in suicide prevention, as called for in the *Portfolio Analyses*, can help achieve our goal of reducing the annual rate of suicide by 20 percent by 2025. As the largest private funder of suicide research, AFSP intends to use the *Portfolio Analyses* to guide future funding decisions.”

The report describes the investments of nine Federal agencies and two private foundations that support suicide research. During the time period of the analyses (2008-2013), the National Institutes of Health (NIH) invested the greatest proportion of funding, with about 40% of the government’s share of research money. The Department of Defense and the Veterans Health Administration were the next highest ranked funders of U.S. suicide research. Recent efforts that address suicide research gaps, especially specific calls for research to detect suicide risk, come from the NIH, the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, and the [American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#).

This first-ever *Portfolio Analyses* report on U.S.-funded suicide research was one of many activities initiated by the Action Alliance's [Research Prioritization Task Force](#). The Task Force produced the *2014 Prioritized Research Agenda for Suicide Prevention: An Action Plan to Save Lives*, which focused on research, intended to reduce the burden of suicide.

The National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (www.ActionAllianceforSuicidePrevention.org) is the public-private partnership working to advance the *National Strategy for Suicide Prevention* and make suicide prevention a national priority. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, through the Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC) operates the Secretariat for the Action Alliance, which was launched in 2010 by former U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and former U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates with the goal of saving 20,000 lives in five years.