

Chapter 4

Suicide Ideation and Attempts Reported by Maine Middle and High School Students

Information on suicide ideation and self-reported suicide attempts is available for middle and high school students from the Maine Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), a statewide survey of students enrolled in publicly-funded schools. The YRBS is conducted in the spring of odd numbered years, and has included suicide ideation and behavior questions since 1995. In 1995, the YRBS included only high school students, but in subsequent years both middle and high school students were surveyed. In 1999, Maine did not achieve the 60 percent overall response rate needed to disseminate YRBS data; therefore, no data are available for that year.

The YRBS queries students on a variety of risk behaviors including: unintentional and intentional injuries, tobacco, alcohol and other drug use, sexual behaviors, dietary behaviors, and physical activity. With respect to suicide ideation and behavior, the high school YRBS includes four separate questions asking, “During the past 12 months:”

- “did you seriously consider attempting suicide?”
- “did you make a plan about how you would attempt suicide?”
- “how many times did you actually attempt suicide?”
- “if you attempted suicide, did any attempt result in an injury, poisoning, or overdose that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse?”

The middle school YRBS also includes questions about suicide ideation and behavior, with different wording from the high school questions. They include:

- “Have you ever seriously thought about killing yourself?”
- “Have you ever made a plan about how you would kill yourself?”
- “Have you ever tried to kill yourself?”

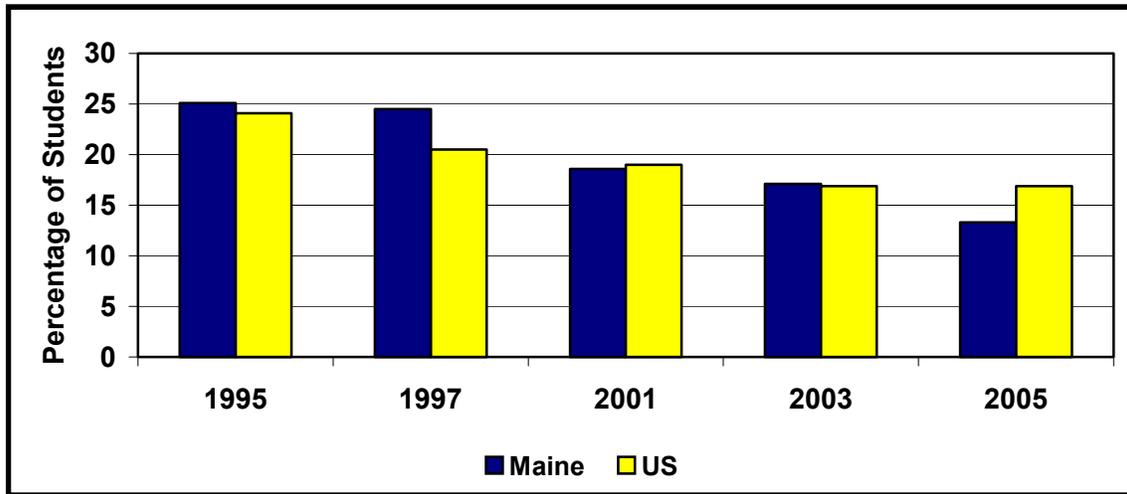
In 2001, the Maine YRBS began including a question asking students if they “felt so sad or hopeless almost every day for 2 weeks or more in a row that they stopped doing some usual activities” (here called “depression”) in the survey administered to high school students.

Exact wording of YRBS questions and selected YRBS data can be found in the appendix of this document. In addition to the state YRBS, national YRBS data for high school students using the same core questionnaire and sampling scheme were used, allowing for state-national comparisons of the high school population. The questions used for the national survey can be found at <http://www.cdc.gov/HealthyYouth/yrbs/index.htm>. National YRBS data are not available for middle school students, preventing Maine-national comparisons of middle school data.

Considered or Thought About Suicide

The percentage of high school students reporting having seriously considered suicide in the past 12 months has decreased in Maine over time (Figure 4.a.). In 1995, one in four (25 percent) of Maine high school students reported having considered suicide in the past twelve months. By 2005 that percentage dropped to one in ten (13.3 percent), a 47 percent decrease. The same trend was apparent nationally with 24.1 percent of U.S. high school students reporting having considered suicide in 1995, and 16.9 percent in 2003.

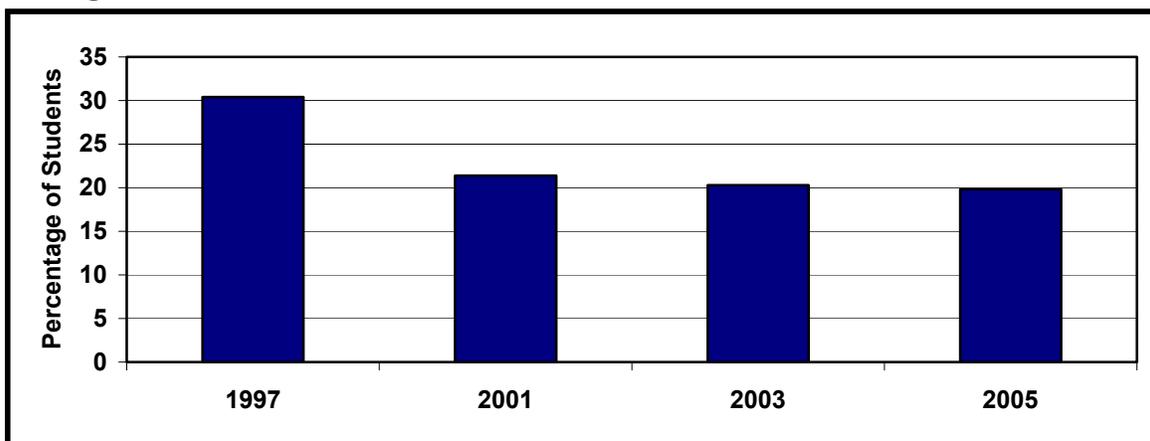
Figure 4.a. Percentage of High School Students Who Reported Having Considered Suicide in the Past 12 Months.



*Data Source: YRBS, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2005

As shown in Figure 4.b., similar declines were observed for Maine's middle school students from 1997 to 2005. In 1997, 30 percent of students reported having ever considered suicide, which declined by 35 percent to 19.8 percent in 2005.

Figure 4.b. Percentage of Maine Middle School Students Who Reported Having Ever Thought About Killing Themselves.

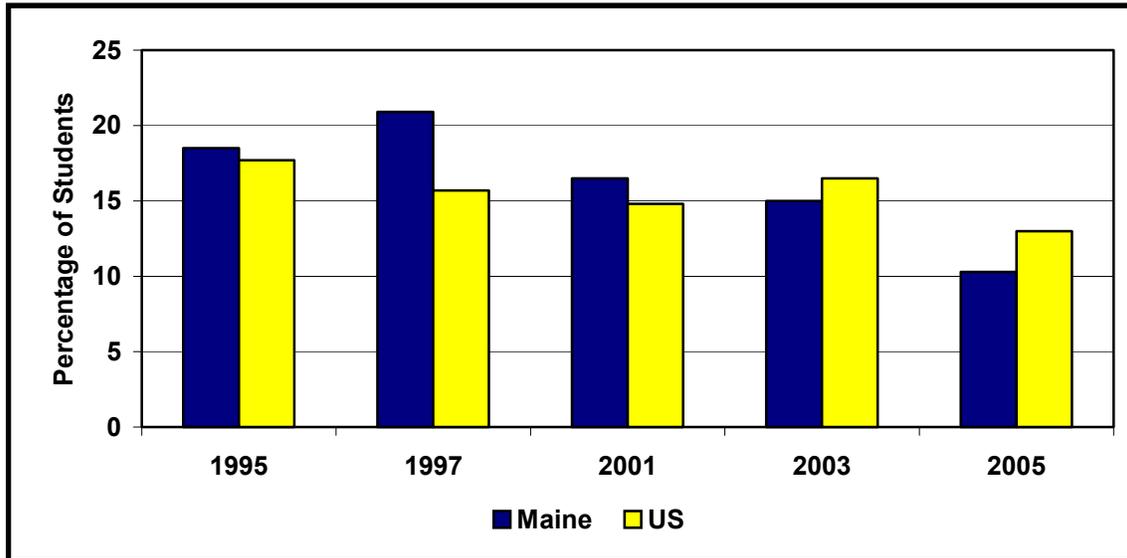


*Data Source: YRBS, 1997, 2001, 2003, and 2005

Planned a Suicide

There is no clear trend in the percentage of high school students nationally who reported having planned suicide in the past twelve months, while in Maine, the percentage has decreased since 1997 (figure 4.c.).

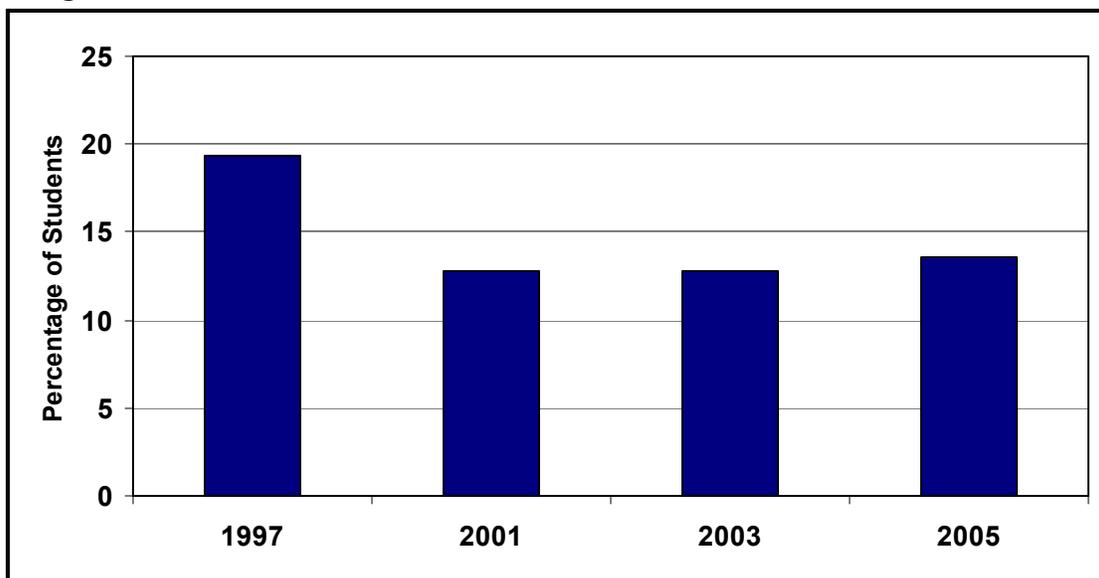
Figure 4.c. Percentage of High School Students Who Reported Having Planned Suicide in the Past 12 Months.



*Data Source: YRBS, 1995, 1997, 2003 and 2005

Among middle school students, the percentage of participants who reported having ever made a plan about how they would kill themselves decreased from 19 percent in 1997, to 13 percent in 2001, since which it has remained stable (Figure 4.d.).

Figure 4.d. Percentage of Maine Middle School Students Who Reported Having Ever Made a Plan About Killing Themselves.

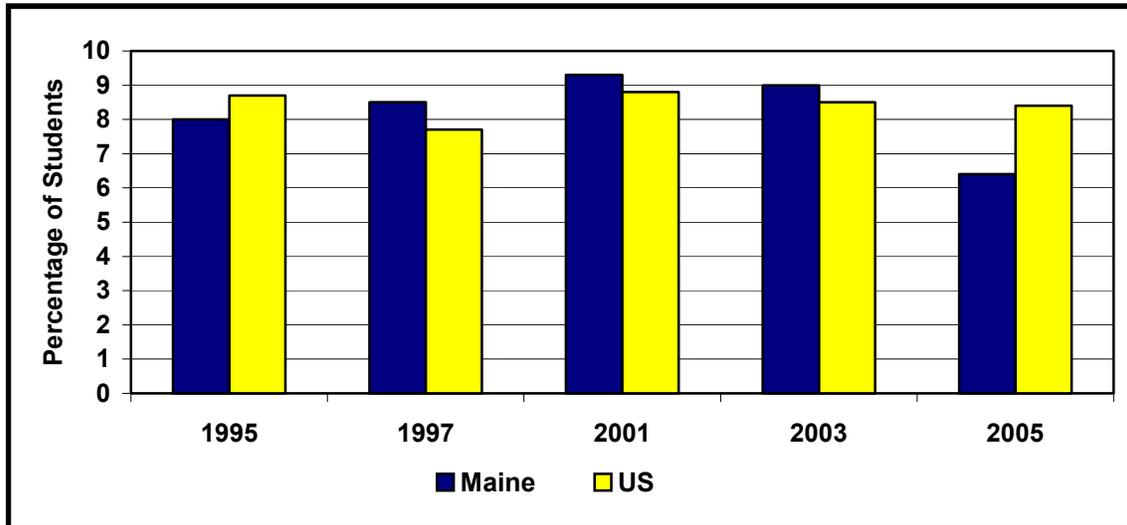


*Data Source: YRBS, 1995, 1997, 2003 and 2005

Suicide Attempts

The percentage of high school students nationally who reported having attempted suicide in the past 12 months has remained relatively stable since 2001. YRBS data specific to Maine high school students revealed a decline in 2005 (Figure 4.e.). However, prior to 2005, the percentage was unchanged or even slightly increased. It is not clear whether the 2005 percentage will remain or simply represents variability in the estimate.

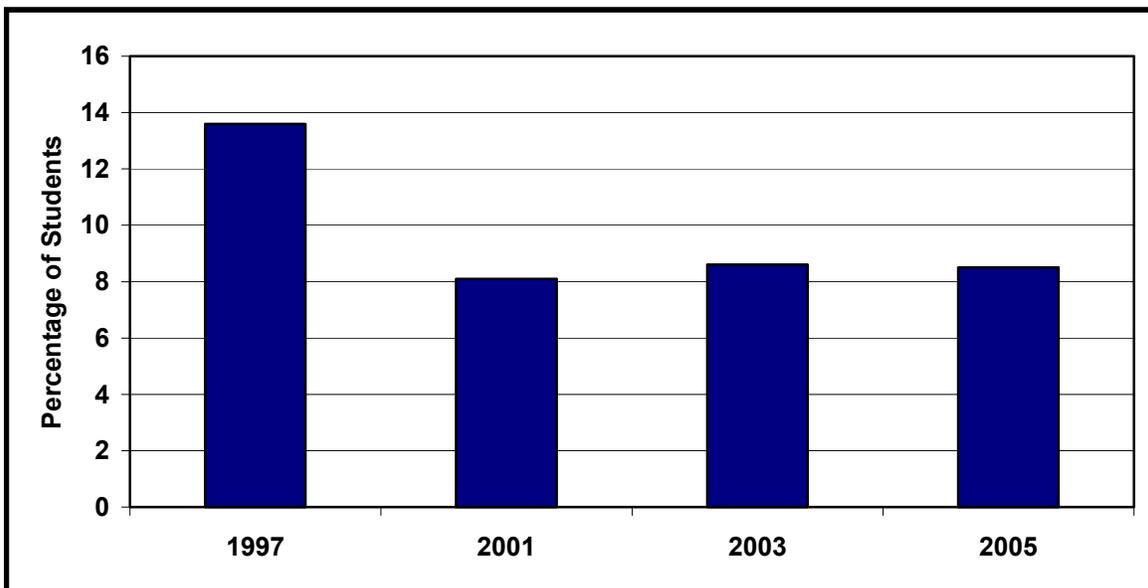
Figure 4.e. Percentage of High School Students Who Reported Having Attempted Suicide in the Past 12 Months.



*Data Source: YRBS, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2003, and 2005

In 1997 nearly 14 percent of Maine's middle school population reported having ever attempted suicide; the 2005 data shows a decline to less than 8.5 percent.

Figure 4.f. Percentage of Maine Middle School Students Who Reported Having Ever Tried to Kill Themselves.

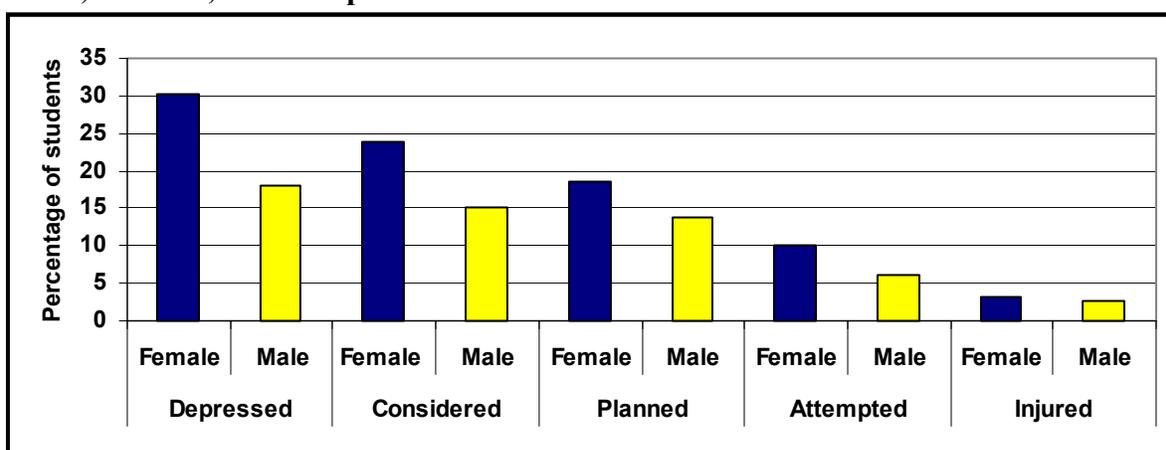


*Data Source: YRBS Data, 1997, 2001, 2003, and 2005

Suicide Ideation and Attempts by Gender

Figure 4.g. illustrates that in all five categories (had been depressed, considered, planned or attempted suicide, and were injured by a suicide attempt), female high school students were more likely to report suicide ideation and behavior than males. Almost 33 percent of high school girls reported feelings of depression within the previous 12 months, nearly 25 percent considered suicide, and 17 percent planned suicide. Among high schools boys, about 17 percent reported depressive feelings, 15 percent considered committing suicide and 14 percent planned suicide. About 1 in 10 high school girls and 1 in 17 boys reported actually attempting suicide within the past year. Of the 11 percent of females who attempted, one third (32 percent) required medical attention; of the 6 percent of males who attempted suicide, almost half (46 percent) required medical attention. Although fewer males reported attempting suicide, their attempts were more likely to cause serious injury.

Figure 4.g. Percentage of Maine High School Students Who Reported Depression or Having Considered, Planned, or Attempted Suicide in the Past 12 Months.

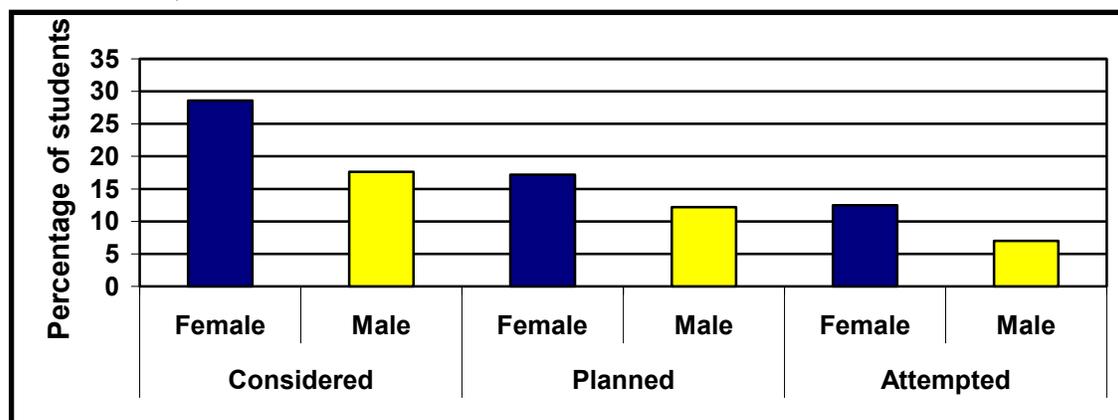


*Data Source: YRBS Data, 1995, 1997, 2001, 2003, and 2005

**The category "depressed" includes only data from 2001, 2003, and 2005.

In all three categories, female middle school students were more likely than males to report having ever thought about suicide, having made a suicide plan, and trying to kill themselves. (Figure 4.h.)

Figure 4.h. Percentage of Maine Middle School Students Who Reported Having Ever Thought About, Made a Plan, or Tried to Kill Themselves.



*Data Source: YRBS Data, 1997, 2001, 2003 and 2005

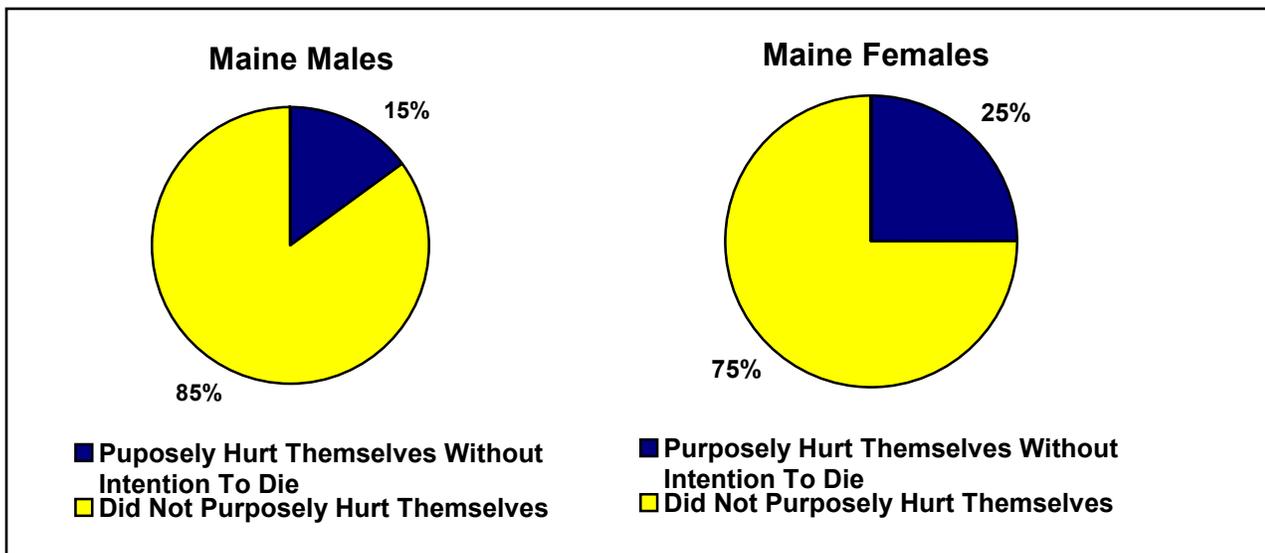
Non-Suicidal Self-Injurious Behavior

Most self-injurious behavior is not intended to cause death. Self-injurious behavior, defined as the deliberate destruction or alteration of body tissue without suicidal intent among adolescents, is not a new phenomenon and has been shown through studies to be increasing among both boys and girls. There are five key concepts in defining self-injurious behavior. First, it is an act done to the self, second, it is done by the self, third, it must include a type of physical violence, fourth, it is not done with the intent to kill oneself, and fifth, it is an intentional act.¹

Researchers argue that the difference between self-injurious behavior (SIB) and suicidal behavior is that people who engage in SIB are trying to manage stress and to feel better. Suicidal individuals want to escape from the pain by ending their life. SIB is associated with a motivation to live and relieve the pain they are experiencing whereas suicidal individuals are motivated to cease living.² Both SIB and suicidal behavior indicate a need for assessment and intervention.

On the 2005 Maine YRBS, one in five high school students (20 percent) reported that they had purposely hurt themselves without wanting to die in the 12 months prior to the survey. (Figure 4.j.) Female high school students (25 percent) were more likely to report this behavior than male high school students (15 percent).

Figure 4.j. Percentage of High School Students Who Have Purposely Hurt Themselves Without Wanting to Die in the 12 Months Prior to the Survey.



*Data Source: Maine YRBS, 2005

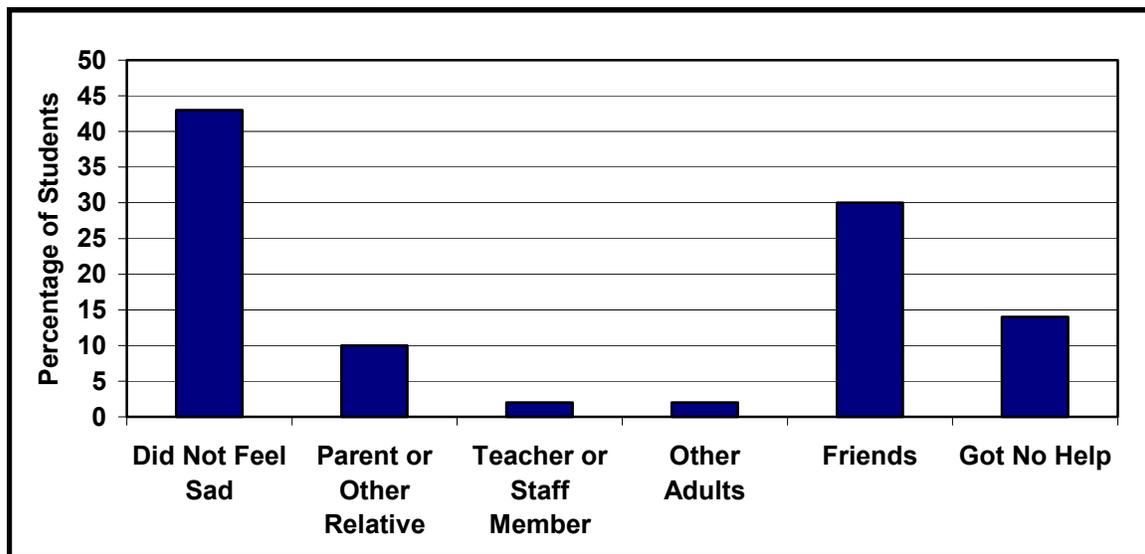
¹ Self-Injury: A Search For Understanding. <http://www.thehelpline.net/selfinjury.html> 9 May 2006.

² Muehlenkamp, Jennifer, MA, and Peter Gutierrez, PhD. An Investigation of Differences Between Self-Injurious Behavior and Suicide Attempts in a Sample of Adolescents. *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 34 (1) Spring 2004.

Where High School Students Got Help

In 2001, students were asked on the YRBS, “when you felt sad or hopeless, from whom did you get help.” Forty-three percent (43%) of high school students reported that they had not felt sad or hopeless in the 12 months preceding the survey (Figure 4.k.). Three in ten high school students (30%) reported that they got help from their friends when they felt sad or hopeless in the past year. Ten percent (10%) reported getting help from their parents or other adult relatives. Fourteen percent (14%) did not get help when they felt sad or hopeless.

Figure 4.k. Where High School Students Got Help When They Felt Sad or Hopeless in the 12 Months Preceding the Survey.



*Data Source: Maine YRBS, 2005