Prevalence data have raised concerns that child and adolescent mental health issues are at an epidemic level. For example, Knopf, Park, and Mulye (2008) suggested that 20-25% of all youth experience symptoms of distress. Researchers have also estimated that one in five adolescents in the United States have a diagnosable mental health disorder, and one in ten with a disorder that would be considered severe (Kessler, Berglund, Demler, et al., 2005; Knopf, Park, & Mulye, 2008). Yet, the training of clinical mental health counselors who work with adolescent populations has received limited attention in the counselor education literature. Although the 2016 CACREP clinical mental health counseling standards require students to be knowledgeable and skilled in the diagnosis and the treatment of mental and emotional disorders, there are no specific guidelines for working with adolescent populations. Without such training, counselors may run the risk
of being ineffective with, or even doing unintended harm to adolescent clients. Adolescents who do not receive adequate care may experience negative effects in school performance, juvenile delinquency, substance use, and potentially pose harm to other people, as evidenced by the recent murder of 20 first graders and six educators at Sandy Hook Elementary School by a young gunman who had experienced mental health problems in his youth.

The purpose of the present study was to establish baseline data on the training that clinical mental health counselors receive before working with adolescent populations. Specifically, members of the American Mental Health Counselor Association (AMHCA) were surveyed about their preparation to work with adolescents. A total of 188 clinical members of AMHCA completed the survey, and data were analyzed through covariate adjusted comparisons, using analysis of covariance. The results showed that the majority of the sample reported having expertise related to adolescent populations in domains of traditional individual counseling. However, the participants reported less expertise in the specialized skills necessary to operate within a system of care to address clinical mental health concerns in adolescents. It was additionally determined that taking a specific course in counseling children and/or adolescents had the most influence on key training areas, while program accreditation had minimal impact. These findings suggest that clinical mental health counselor programs should offer specific coursework that addresses the more specialized skills necessary to successfully treat adolescents with more complex mental health needs.