

# Prevalence and predictors of persistent suicide ideation, plans, and attempts during college

## MAJOR FINDINGS:

Suicide is a major preventable public health problem and the second leading cause of death among college-aged adults in the United States. The researchers hoped to learn more about the suicide ideation tendencies of college students to help inform prevention and treatment programs. Among 1,253 college students who were interviewed annually during their first four years of college, 12% had suicide ideation in at least one year. Of those students, 25% had persistent suicide ideation (2.6% of the overall sample), meaning they had suicide ideation in two or more years. Ten students (.9% of the entire sample) had a suicide plan or suicide attempt during the four years of college, and three of these students had both a plan and attempt.

There were significant differences between the students who had no ideation, a single episode of suicide ideation and those with persistent suicide ideation. Compared with non-ideators, students with a single episode of suicide ideation were more likely to be female, non-White, identify as non-heterosexual, and have exposure to domestic violence and victimization during childhood or adolescence. Low social support, childhood or adolescent exposure to domestic violence, maternal depression, and high self-reported depressive symptoms in the first year of college were all associated with increased risk for both one-time and persistent suicide ideation, holding constant demographics. Persistent and one-time ideators were largely indistinguishable, except that a greater proportion of persistent ideators had high depressive symptoms.

**Practice and Policy Suggestions:** “The results from this study may have important implications for identifying university students at risk for suicide on the basis of several risk factors measurable at college entry.” Maternal depression was the variable most strongly linked with a suicide attempt or plan during college (8 of 10 students reported a definite maternal history of depression). It appears doubtful that persistence of suicide ideation indicates a higher risk of suicide because the data do not show that suicide plan or attempt differed based on the number of episodes of ideation.

### *Of major interest to:*

- College Administrators
- Parents
- Educators
- Health Professionals
- Students
- Law and Policy Makers



*(Practice and Policy Suggestions Continued):* The knowledge gained from this study has the potential to help identify college students at risk for suicide ideation, plan, and attempt. Young adults are dealing with new stresses and are at risk for developing disorders closely related to suicide including depression, schizophrenia and drug and alcohol dependence. College health providers should consider the risk factors discovered in this study when screening for suicide risk. Additionally, results suggest intervention strategies that college campuses could adopt to reduce students risk for suicide, such as programs promoting social support.

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Wilcox, H.C., Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., Vincent, K.B., Pinchevsky, G.M., O'Grady, K.E. (2010). Prevalence and predictors of persistent suicide ideation, plans, and attempts during college. *Journal of Affective Disorders*. 127(1), 287-294.



### About the College Life Study (CLS)

The CLS is a longitudinal study of 1,253 college students at a large, public, mid-Atlantic university. This study is one of the first large-scale scientific investigations that aims to discover the impact of health-related behaviors during the college experience. Any first time, first-year student between 17 and 19 years old at the university in the fall of 2004 was eligible to participate in a screening survey. The researchers then selected students to participate in the longitudinal study, which consisted of two-hour personal interviews administered annually, beginning with their first year of college. A full description of the methods used is available.<sup>1</sup> Inherent to all self-reporting research methods is the possibility for response bias. Because the sample is from one large university, the ability to generalize the findings elsewhere is uncertain. However, response rates have been excellent and attrition bias has been minimal.

For more information about the study, please visit [www.cls.umd.edu](http://www.cls.umd.edu) or contact Amelia M. Arria at the University of Maryland, College Park, at [aarria@umd.edu](mailto:aarria@umd.edu).

<sup>1</sup> Arria, A.M., Caldeira, K.M., O'Grady, K.E., Vincent, K.B., Fitzelle, D.B., Johnson, E.P., Wish, E.D. (2008). Drug exposure opportunities and use patterns among college students: Results of a longitudinal prospective cohort study. *Substance Abuse*. 29(4), 19-38.

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