

# Suicide ideation among college students: A multivariate analysis

## MAJOR FINDINGS:

Campus health providers need more information on which to base suicide prevention strategies. The researchers had four goals when they began this study:

- to estimate the prevalence of suicide ideation among college students;
- to estimate the proportion of college students with suicide ideation who meet criteria for clinically significant depression;
- to develop a multidimensional explanatory model that might explain college suicide ideation;
- and to examine suicide ideation among college students without depression.

Out of 1,249 students interviewed, 75 endorsed current thoughts of suicide and 55 met the criteria for high depressive symptoms. Although depressive symptoms were strongly associated with suicide ideation, the researchers found it interesting that among students with suicide ideation, only 40% also had high depressive symptoms.

A lack of social support was a prominent risk factor for suicide ideation, even holding constant depressive symptoms. Similarly, previous research has shown students in sororities and fraternities were less likely to have suicide ideation, possibly reflecting greater social support. Consistent with prior evidence, the relationship between students and their parents was an important factor of suicide ideation. “Higher levels of conflict with either parent increased the likelihood of suicide ideation, although conflict with a mother figure has a statistically significant influence only in the context of higher depressive symptoms.”

The researchers also noted that suicide ideation among college students is associated with affective dysregulation, a personality trait characterized by difficulty controlling one’s emotion. For example, affective dysregulation might be manifested by excessive anger, getting into fights, and acting impulsively. Finally, suicide ideation was also associated with alcohol use disorders (AUD), but only in the absence of high depressive symptoms.

### *Of major interest to:*

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



**Practice and Policy Suggestions:** These findings suggest that campus health center personnel should not rely solely on depression screening tools to identify students at risk for suicide. On the contrary, it is clear that college students who are free of high levels of depression are not necessarily without suicide ideation. More comprehensive screening and assessment tools for suicide risk in college students are needed, and the present findings point to several potentially useful domains to screen, such as social support, conflict with parents, and affective dysregulation. Because suicide ideation was associated with AUD (absent high levels of depressive symptoms), “this study provides further evidence that AUD in college students might be an important target for intervention and suicide prevention.”

The complete publication referenced in this research brief can be found here: Arria, A.M., O’Grady, K.E., Caldeira, K.M., Vincent, K.B., Wilcox, H.C., Wish, E.D. (2009). Suicide ideation among college students: A multivariate analysis. *Archives of Suicide Research*. 13(3), 230-246



### 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., Fizzelle, 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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