

Suicide among College and University Students In the United States



Suicide is a leading cause of death among college and university students in the United States.^{1,2} In addition, many other college and university students have suicidal thoughts and attempt suicide. Suicide and suicidal behaviors are a major concern for colleges and universities, and efforts are underway to introduce suicide prevention programming on many college and university campuses.

This information sheet summarizes the data available on suicidal thoughts, attempts, and deaths, and describes risk and protective factors that are common among college and university students. Since there are no national databases or registries, and no single study compiling and analyzing suicide deaths, attempts, and/or thoughts among college and university students, the data presented here are from sources that have been selected as the most comprehensive and up to date.

Suicidal Thoughts and Attempts

The following chart shows rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts among young adults in the past 12 months for the year 2012.*

	Undergrads only^{3, 4, 5}	Undergrads + grads combined^{6, 7, 8}	Not enrolled in college full-time, ages 18–22^{9**}
Seriously considered suicide	6.6%–7.5%	7.1%–7.7%	9.0%
Made a plan	2.2%–2.3%	2.3%	3.1%
Attempted suicide	1.1%–1.2%	0.6%–1.2%	2.2%

*A range of rates means two sources were included. A single rate means only one of the sources had that data.

** Matched by age, sex, and race

Suicide Deaths

The following chart draws on three studies of college and university students and compares their suicide rates to those of the general population, matched by age, sex, and race.

All numbers are per 100,000 people.

Study	Dates studied	Students (undergrads and grads)			General population		
		Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females
Big Ten Student Suicide Study ¹⁰	1980–1990	7.5	10.0	4.5	15.0	23.7	6.4
Schwartz ¹¹	1991–2004	6.6	N/A	N/A	12.6	N/A	N/A
Schwartz ¹²	2004–2009	7.0	10.9	3.1	12.1	20.5	3.7

In all three studies, college and university students had about half the rate of suicide per 100,000 people compared to a matched sample in the general population. Male students accounted for the majority of the

suicides and had about half the rate of suicide compared to males in the general population. The rates for female students did not differ much from those of same-age females in the general population.

Risk Factors

Risk factors for suicide refer to characteristics that are associated with suicide. People who are affected by one or more risk factors may have a greater probability of suicidal behavior. Some risk factors cannot be changed—such as a previous suicide attempt—but they can be used to help identify someone who may be vulnerable to suicide.

There is no single, agreed-upon list of risk factors; however, the list below summarizes the risk factors identified by the most recent research.^{13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20,21}

Behavioral Health Issues/Disorders

- Depressive disorders
- Substance abuse or dependence (alcohol and other drugs)
- Delinquency/Conduct disorders
- Other disorders (e.g., anxiety disorders, eating disorders)
- Previous suicide attempts
- Self-injury (without intent to die)

Note: The presence of multiple behavioral health disorders (especially the combination of depressive and disruptive behavior problems or substance use) increases suicide risk.

Individual Characteristics

- Hopelessness
- Loneliness
- Social alienation and isolation, lack of belonging
- Anger, hostility
- Risky behavior, impulsivity
- Low stress and frustration tolerance
- Poor problem-solving or coping skills
- Perception of being a burden (e.g., to family and friends)

Adverse/Stressful Life Circumstances

- Interpersonal difficulties or losses (e.g., relationship breakup, dating violence)
- School or work problems
- Financial problems
- Physical, sexual, and/or psychological abuse (current and/or previous)
- Chronic physical illness or disability
- Insomnia and nightmares

Family Characteristics

- Family history of suicide or suicidal behavior

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- Parental mental health problems
 - Family violence or abuse (current and/or previous)
 - Family instability and/or loss
 - Lack of parental support

School and Community Factors

- Limited access to effective care for health, mental health, or substance abuse disorders
- Stigma associated with seeking care
- Negative social and emotional environment, including negative attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and interactions of staff and students
- Exposure to stigma and discrimination against students based on sexual orientation, gender identity, race and ethnicity, disability, or physical characteristics (such as being overweight)
- Access to lethal means
- Exposure to media normalizing or glamorizing suicide

Protective Factors

Protective factors are characteristics that reduce the likelihood of suicide. They can buffer the effects of risk factors. The capacity to cope positively in the face of challenges and adversities is called *resilience*. Actions by campus staff to enhance protective factors are an essential element of a suicide prevention effort. Strengthening protective factors also protects students from other risks, including violence, substance abuse, and academic failure.

Like risk factors, there is no single, agreed-upon list of protective factors; however, the following list summarizes the protective factors identified by the most recent research.^{22,23,24,25,26,27}

Individual Characteristics and Behaviors

- Psychological or emotional well-being, positive mood
- Positive beliefs about and hopes and plans for the future
- Desire to finish school
- Internal locus of control, i.e., feeling like one has an impact on one's world and the world of others
- Problem-solving and coping skills, including conflict resolution
- Frustration tolerance and ability to regulate emotions
- Self-esteem
- Spiritual beliefs or regular church attendance
- Cultural and religious beliefs that affirm life and discourage suicide
- A sense of responsibility to family or friends, not wanting to hurt family or friends
- Physical activity, especially aerobic activity

Social Support

- Family: Support from and connectedness to family, closeness to or strong relationship with parents, parental involvement
- Friends: Social involvement and support from friendships and romantic relationships

- Teachers, mentors, and other adults, such as student group leaders, coaches, faith leaders, and workplace supervisors: Concern, understanding, and caring
- Ongoing support and support to call on in times of crises

School and Community Factors

- Supportive and inclusive peer and mentor environment
- A sense of connectedness to school and of belonging within the school community
- Availability and accessibility of student support services and personnel
- Involvement in extracurricular activities, e.g., joining a student club or organization
- Access to effective care for mental, physical, and substance abuse disorders
- Restricted access to lethal means, especially firearms (e.g., firearms are not allowed on campus)
- Monitoring and control of alcohol use

For More Information

The [Suicide Prevention Resource Center's website](#) contains many resources on suicide prevention for colleges and universities. See the following:

- [Colleges and Universities](#) pages
- [College-University](#) resources in the library
- [College-University](#) resources in the Best Practices Registry

Endnotes

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² Suicide Prevention Resource Center. (2004). *Promoting mental health and preventing suicide in college and university settings*. Waltham, MA: Education Development Center, Inc. Retrieved from http://www.sprc.org/sites/sprc.org/files/library/college_sp_whitepaper.pdf

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- ⁷ Healthy Minds Network, Health Minds Study
- ⁸ SAMHSA, NSDUH Mental Health Tables
- ⁹ Ibid.
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- ¹⁶ Martino, S. (2011). Individual and family history. In D. A. Lamis & D. Lester (Eds.), *Understanding & preventing college student suicide* (pp.108–118). Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas Publisher.
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