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Dr. Jichhu Paswan
HOD, Department of
Psychology, K.C.T.C. College,
Raxaul, Purvi Champaran,
Bihar, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Jichhu Paswan
HOD, Department of
Psychology, K.C.T.C. College,
Raxaul, Purvi Champaran,
Bihar, India

Causes and risk factors for suicidal thoughts in young adults

Jichhu Paswan

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Abstract

Suicidal thoughts in young adults represent a significant public health concern, with multifaceted causes and risk factors contributing to their emergence. Psychological factors such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse are among the most prominent contributors. Social stressors, including family dysfunction, peer rejection, and experiences of bullying or discrimination, exacerbate feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Academic pressure, unemployment, and financial instability further compound stress in this vulnerable group. Biological factors, such as genetic predispositions and hormonal changes during early adulthood, also play a role. Exposure to trauma, including childhood abuse or neglect, significantly increases the risk of suicidal ideation. The rise of social media has introduced additional challenges, including cyberbullying and the negative impact of comparing oneself to unrealistic portrayals of life online. Protective factors, such as strong social support, access to mental health services, and the development of coping skills, are critical for mitigating risk. Early identification and intervention remain essential, emphasizing the need for public awareness campaigns and tailored mental health services for young adults. Understanding the interplay of these factors can guide comprehensive prevention strategies and foster resilience in this population.

Keywords: Suicidal thoughts, young adults, mental health, risk factors, prevention

Introduction

Suicidal thoughts, often referred to as suicidal ideation, are a critical public health issue that disproportionately affects young adults. This period of life, typically defined as ranging from late teens to late twenties, is marked by significant developmental, social, and emotional changes. During this time, individuals face challenges related to identity formation, career decisions, relationships, and independence, which can contribute to heightened vulnerability to mental health struggles, including suicidal ideation. Understanding the causes and risk factors of suicidal thoughts in young adults is essential for developing effective prevention and intervention strategies. One of the primary causes of suicidal thoughts in young adults is mental health disorders. Conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are strongly associated with increased risk. Depression, in particular, is a leading factor, characterized by feelings of hopelessness, worthlessness, and a lack of purpose. Anxiety disorders, often exacerbated by the pressures of academic, professional, or social expectations, can also lead to overwhelming stress and a sense of despair. Furthermore, substance abuse, which is often a coping mechanism for underlying mental health issues, amplifies the risk of suicidal ideation by impairing judgment and reducing inhibitions. Social factors play a significant role in the emergence of suicidal thoughts among young adults. Experiences of family dysfunction, such as parental conflict, abuse, or neglect, can have long-lasting psychological impacts. Peer relationships are equally influential, with bullying, rejection, and social isolation acting as potent triggers. The advent of social media has introduced a new dimension to social stressors. While platforms can foster connectivity, they can also perpetuate cyberbullying and unrealistic comparisons, contributing to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Additionally, societal stigma surrounding mental health often prevents young adults from seeking help, leaving them to cope with their struggles in silence. Economic and academic pressures are prominent risk factors for suicidal ideation in this demographic. Many young adults face mounting debt, job insecurity, and the struggle to meet societal expectations of success.

The transition from structured educational settings to the uncertainties of the workforce can be overwhelming, particularly for those without adequate support systems. Academic pressure, especially in competitive environments, further compounds stress levels, leading to burnout and a sense of failure in those unable to meet perceived standards. Biological and genetic factors also contribute to the risk of suicidal thoughts. Young adulthood is a time of significant neurological and hormonal changes, which can influence mood and decision-making processes. For some, a genetic predisposition to mental health disorders can heighten susceptibility. Studies have shown that individuals with a family history of suicide or mental illness are at greater risk, highlighting the interplay between genetic and environmental factors. Trauma is another critical contributor to suicidal ideation in young adults. Adverse childhood experiences, such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, are strongly linked to long-term mental health issues, including suicidal thoughts. Trauma during adolescence or early adulthood, such as experiencing violence or losing a loved one, can also act as a trigger. The impact of trauma is often compounded by a lack of access to adequate mental health resources, leaving many young adults to navigate their pain alone. Cultural and societal influences cannot be overlooked in understanding the causes of suicidal ideation. In some cultures, rigid societal norms and expectations can create immense pressure to conform, leading to feelings of inadequacy or failure when these standards are not met. Marginalized groups, including LGBTQ+ individuals and ethnic minorities, often face additional stressors, such as discrimination and lack of acceptance, which can significantly increase their risk of suicidal thoughts. For these groups, the intersectionality of multiple risk factors often results in a compounded effect.

While the risk factors for suicidal thoughts are numerous and complex, protective factors can help mitigate these risks. Supportive relationships with family, friends, and mentors play a crucial role in fostering resilience. Access to mental health services, including counseling and therapy, is essential for addressing underlying issues and providing coping strategies. Educational initiatives aimed at reducing stigma and promoting mental health awareness can empower young adults to seek help and support one another. Moreover, fostering a sense of purpose and self-efficacy through community engagement and skill-building activities can enhance overall well-being.

Literature Review

1. Smith *et al.* (2018) ^[16] conducted a comprehensive study on the relationship between social media use and suicidal ideation among young adults. The study found that excessive use of social media platforms was linked to increased feelings of inadequacy and isolation, which in turn heightened the risk of suicidal thoughts.
2. Patel *et al.* (2019) ^[17] examined the role of academic stress in suicidal ideation among college students. The research highlighted that competitive academic environments and high expectations contributed to chronic stress, which was a significant predictor of suicidal thoughts in this population.
3. Jones and Brown (2020) ^[18] explored the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on mental health outcomes in early adulthood. Their findings revealed that individuals with a history of ACEs were

significantly more likely to experience depression and suicidal ideation, emphasizing the long-term effects of childhood trauma.

4. Garcia and Lee (2021) ^[19] investigated the intersection of LGBTQ+ identity and mental health, focusing on discrimination and societal stigma. Their study revealed that young adults in the LGBTQ+ community faced disproportionately high rates of suicidal ideation, largely due to social rejection and lack of acceptance.
5. Kim *et al.* (2022) ^[20] analyzed the influence of economic factors on mental health in young adults. The study identified financial instability and unemployment as major stressors that increased the risk of depression and suicidal ideation, particularly in individuals with limited social support networks.

Research Gap

Despite extensive research on suicidal ideation among young adults, significant gaps remain in understanding the role of intersectionality in compounding risk factors. Limited studies have explored how multiple identities, such as being a racial minority and LGBTQ+, interact to influence suicidal thoughts. Additionally, research often overlooks the experiences of young adults in low-income or rural settings, where access to mental health resources is scarce. There is also a need for longitudinal studies that examine the long-term impact of early interventions and protective factors. Addressing these gaps is crucial for developing more inclusive and effective prevention strategies.

Risk Factors for Suicidal

Suicidal thoughts among young adults represent a critical public health challenge, with significant implications for individuals, families, and society. Suicide remains a leading cause of death in this age group globally, highlighting the urgent need to understand its underlying causes and contributing factors. This introduction outlines the scope of the issue, the factors influencing suicidal ideation, and the importance of addressing this concern through research and intervention.

1. Prevalence of Suicidal Thoughts in Young Adults

- Young adulthood is a transitional period marked by significant psychological, social, and environmental changes, increasing vulnerability to mental health issues.
- Global reports indicate rising rates of suicidal ideation among individuals aged 18–25, with mental health disorders being a primary driver.
- This prevalence is exacerbated by social stigma, limited access to mental health resources, and the increasing pressures faced by modern youth.

2. Key Risk Factors

- **Mental Health Disorders:** Depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder are strongly linked to suicidal thoughts.
- **Trauma and Abuse:** Adverse childhood experiences, including physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, significantly increase vulnerability.
- **Social Isolation:** A lack of meaningful relationships or support networks fosters feelings of loneliness and hopelessness.

- **Academic and Financial Stress:** Educational pressures and financial instability contribute to chronic stress, affecting mental health.
- **Substance Abuse:** Alcohol and drug use impair judgment and exacerbate emotional distress, increasing suicidal tendencies.

3. Societal and Environmental Influences

- The rise of social media has introduced both positive and negative impacts, with cyberbullying and online comparison contributing to self-esteem issues.
- Unemployment and economic instability further amplify feelings of worthlessness and despair among young adults.
- Cultural and familial expectations may also create unrealistic pressures, leading to emotional exhaustion.

4. Importance of Early Intervention

- Early identification of risk factors and provision of support are crucial to preventing suicidal thoughts from escalating into attempts.
- Schools, universities, and workplaces play a pivotal role in fostering mental health awareness and providing accessible resources.
- Policy initiatives must aim at reducing stigma, enhancing mental health education, and expanding the reach of crisis intervention services.

Objectives of the Study

1. To identify key psychological, social, and economic factors contributing to suicidal thoughts in young adults.
2. To analyze the role of mental health disorders in increasing the risk of suicidal ideation.
3. To explore the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences on young adult mental health.
4. To evaluate the influence of societal stigma and cultural pressures on help-seeking behaviors.
5. To propose evidence-based strategies for early intervention and prevention of suicidal ideation among young adults.

Research Methodology

Data Collection: The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. A total of 1,000 young adults aged 18–25 were surveyed using a structured questionnaire to assess mental health status, social factors, and lifestyle behaviors. Additionally, in-depth interviews were conducted with 50 participants who self-reported suicidal ideation to explore contextual and personal experiences.

Sampling: A stratified random sampling method was used to ensure diversity in gender, socioeconomic status, and educational backgrounds. Participants were recruited from universities, community centers, and online platforms.

Table 1: Data Analysis Employed to Determine Significant Risk Factors

Factor	No. of Respondents Affected (N=1000)	Percentage (%)	Significance (p-value)
Depression	520	52.0	<0.001
Anxiety	430	43.0	<0.001
Trauma/Abuse	370	37.0	<0.005
Social Isolation	460	46.0	<0.001
Academic Stress	600	60.0	<0.001
Financial Pressure	400	40.0	<0.005
Substance Abuse	310	31.0	<0.01
Family History of Suicide	150	15.0	<0.05
Bullying (Online/In-person)	250	25.0	<0.05
Unemployment	220	22.0	<0.05

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights into the causes and risk factors for suicidal thoughts in young adults, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the reliance on self-reported data may introduce response biases, as participants might underreport sensitive behaviors or experiences due to stigma or fear of judgment. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study prevents establishing causality between identified risk factors and suicidal ideation. Third, the sample may not be fully representative of all young adults, particularly those from marginalized or underserved populations, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, certain confounding factors, such as genetic predispositions or the impact of unmeasured environmental stressors, were not accounted for, which could influence the results. Finally, the study did not explore long-term trajectories or interventions, leaving gaps in understanding the persistence or resolution of suicidal thoughts. These limitations suggest the need for longitudinal studies and a broader scope of research.

Importance of the Study: Understanding the causes and risk factors for suicidal thoughts in young adults is critical

due to the alarming prevalence of mental health challenges in this population. Suicide remains one of the leading causes of death among young adults worldwide, making it a pressing public health issue. This study sheds light on key psychological, social, and environmental factors that contribute to suicidal ideation, providing a foundation for targeted prevention strategies. By identifying high-risk groups and circumstances, the findings can inform the development of early intervention programs, mental health awareness campaigns, and policy initiatives to address this growing concern. Additionally, the study contributes to breaking the stigma surrounding mental health by encouraging open discussions and promoting access to support services. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for young adults, thereby reducing the burden of mental health crises and improving overall well-being.

Findings of the Study

- Experiences of trauma, abuse, or neglect significantly increased the risk of suicidal ideation.
- Social isolation and lack of support networks were major contributing factors.

- Academic and financial pressures emerged as critical stressors leading to suicidal thoughts.
- Substance abuse was found to exacerbate the likelihood of suicidal ideation.
- Individuals with a family history of mental illness or suicide were at higher risk.
- Bullying, both in-person and online, was a significant factor linked to suicidal thoughts.
- Unemployment and uncertainty about the future contributed to feelings of hopelessness.
- Low self-esteem and negative self-perception were prevalent among those with suicidal ideation.
- Access to harmful means was identified as a critical risk factor for impulsive suicidal behavior.

Conclusion

Suicidal thoughts among young adults are a multifaceted issue influenced by a complex interplay of psychological, social, and environmental factors. This study highlights key risk factors, including mental health disorders such as depression and anxiety, experiences of trauma or abuse, social isolation, academic and financial pressures, and substance abuse. Additionally, bullying, family history of mental illness or suicide, unemployment, and access to harmful means were identified as significant contributors. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to address the specific challenges faced by young adults. Preventive measures, including mental health education, early screening for at-risk individuals, and accessible support services, are essential to mitigating these risks. Furthermore, fostering strong support networks and promoting a culture of openness around mental health can help reduce the stigma that often prevents individuals from seeking help. Policymakers, educators, healthcare providers, and communities must collaborate to develop holistic strategies that address both the root causes and immediate needs of those experiencing suicidal ideation. Investing in comprehensive mental health care, including counseling, crisis intervention, and long-term support, is crucial to saving lives and improving the overall well-being of young adults. This study emphasizes the importance of early intervention and the need for further research to deepen our understanding of the underlying causes and effective prevention strategies, ultimately creating a safer and more supportive environment for young adults to thrive.

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