



Exploring Suicidal Risk Factors through the Lenses of University Students in South Africa: A Case Study Approach

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explored students' viewpoints on the common factors that lead to suicide-driven behaviours at a selected university in South Africa. Despite the existence of numerous preventive measures, suicide remains a significant national and global concern. This study aimed to bridge this gap in the literature by examining the perspectives of at-risk students, ensuring that suicide prevention programmes are appropriately tailored and adapted. The significance of this study is underscored by its potential implications, as it amplifies the voices of individuals at risk of suicide, often overlooked in research. The research objective is to explore common factors that lead to suicide-driven behaviours among students from a selected university in the Western Cape. The research used a qualitative approach and was guided by person-centred theory, specifically client-centred therapy, developed by Carl Rogers. The study aimed to explore the experiences and perspectives of university students of a selected university on suicide-driven factors, support systems, and interventions. The results show that socioeconomic pressures (financial limitations, unemployment), interpersonal factors (family dynamics, relationships), and past mental health issues all play a role in suicidal thoughts. Interventions must successfully manage mental health issues and address these factors. This study contributes to scholarship by bridging a critical literature gap by amplification of at-risk students' voices and providing insights that can inform the design of more appropriately tailored and adapted suicide prevention programmes in higher education settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Unequivocally, the high suicide rates among students are a pressing concern, whether globally, regionally, or in South Africa.¹ The increasing tragic events on campuses and mounting mental health crisis have led many experts to suspect that the world may be experiencing a mental illness epidemic among university students.² This general background illustrates the urgency for educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals to address student mental health proactively.

¹ Heather Allen, "School Counselors' Perspectives on the Factors Contributing to the Rise in Suicide Rates Among Adolescent Girls in the United States" (California Lutheran University, 2024); Jason Bantjes, Xanthe Hunt, and Dan J Stein, "Anxious, Depressed, and Suicidal: Crisis Narratives in University Student Mental Health and the Need for a Balanced Approach to Student Wellness," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 6 (2023): 4859.

² Bantjes, Hunt, and Stein, "Anxious, Depressed, and Suicidal: Crisis Narratives in University Student Mental Health and the Need for a Balanced Approach to Student Wellness."

Despite numerous preventive measures, current research indicates a critical gap in our understanding of how students themselves perceive the factors driving suicidal behaviours. Although many studies have explored the risks of suicidal thoughts and actions, including considerable obstacles in accessing appropriate support, including feelings of hopelessness and stigma and stigmatisation associated with seeking assistance, fear of judgement, lack of awareness, mistrust, and concerns about confidentiality.³ A lack of culturally sensitive risk factor assessment and a lack of adequate consideration of contextual elements like social media and academic pressure exacerbate the problem.⁴ Social media can perpetuate harmful comparisons and expectations, while academic pressure can lead to overwhelming stress and anxiety. The increase in stress and anxiety among students has also exacerbated the risk of suicidal behaviour.⁵ This has led to increased mental health concerns and social isolation, creating a vicious cycle of distress. This environment requires an extensive understanding of students' views on risk factors to build specific and effective interventions.

In response, the objective of this study is to explore, through the lenses of at-risk students, the common factors that lead to suicide-driven behaviours in a selected university in the Western Cape, South Africa. The anticipated outcomes include a nuanced understanding of how the above-mentioned and other related risk factors contribute to suicidal ideation from students' perspectives.

The structure of the paper is organised as follows: A comprehensive literature review, a theoretical framework using the person-centred theory by Carl Rogers, and a methodology section providing details of the qualitative approach used, including the techniques used to collect data, ethical considerations, and the analysis. The findings are presented in relation to the themes that emerged, such as the impact of interpersonal factors on mental health and well-being, socioeconomic factors as an aggravating factor for the susceptibility of mental health, implications of vulnerability in mental health on suicide susceptibility, and the phenomenon of peer pressure and comparison aggravating suicidal ideation. Recommendations are then offered for targeted interventions. Finally, the conclusion is provided about the contribution of the study.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Suicidal behaviour among university students is increasingly acknowledged as a multifaceted issue influenced by a combination of personal, social, and cultural factors. These individuals often encounter various stresses during their academic pursuits, which can exacerbate feelings of despair or hopelessness, potentially resulting in suicidal ideation or attempts. This literature review aims to explore the various risk factors implicated in suicidal behaviours among university students, drawing from a range of empirical studies.

To investigate the global prevalence research on student suicide from 2015 through 2020, Pillay systematically reviewed scholarly journals, and the United States, China, and the United Kingdom producing most of these publications.⁶ The research highlighted critical themes, including social stress and academic pressures that are closely related to student well-being.

Most of the papers reviewed by Pillay covered themes related to socioeconomic stressors and the influence of academic pressures.⁷ The findings revealed that these factors exacerbate the risk of suicidal behaviour among students, underlining the importance of addressing these challenges in the context of mental health support.

Pre-existing mental health issues and exposure to other traumatic events significantly increased the susceptibility to suicidal ideation. This means that people with primary health issues are more likely

³ Franchesca Castro-Ramirez et al., "A Qualitative Examination of the Impact of Suicidal Thoughts and Behavior on Help-Seeking among University Students in Colombia and Mexico," *Journal of Behavioral and Cognitive Therapy* 33, no. 2 (2023): 67–80; Jessica Dagani et al., "The Role of Psychological Distress, Stigma and Coping Strategies on Help-Seeking Intentions in a Sample of Italian College Students," *BMC Psychology* 11, no. 1 (2023): 177; Jennifer L Hughes et al., "Suicide in Young People: Screening, Risk Assessment, and Intervention," *Bmj* 381 (2023).

⁴ Ailyn D Diaz, "Assessment of Suicide Risk and Cultural Considerations in Forcibly Displaced Migrant Youth," *Academic Pediatrics* 24, no. 5 (2024): 25–31.

⁵ Bantjes, Hunt, and Stein, "Anxious, Depressed, and Suicidal: Crisis Narratives in University Student Mental Health and the Need for a Balanced Approach to Student Wellness."

⁶ Jace Pillay, "Suicidal Behaviour among University Students: A Systematic Review," *South African Journal of Psychology* 51, no. 1 (March 11, 2021): 54–66, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0081246321992177>.

⁷ Pillay, "Suicidal Behaviour among University Students: A Systematic Review."

to engage in suicidal behaviours when they encounter additional stress. Bachmann discovered that the main risk factors for suicide among college students include depression, drug abuse, psychosis, anxiety, personality disorders, eating disorders, trauma-related illnesses, and organic mental diseases.⁸ This underscores the vulnerability of students who may struggle with pre-existing mental health challenges, which significantly heighten their susceptibility to suicidal behaviours.

Peer pressure and social comparison have become more important factors in understanding youth suicidal ideation.⁹ The social media platform's historical hallmark of harmful comparison and perception of inadequacy leads to feelings of loss and other depressive symptoms.¹⁰ Therefore, researchers and policymakers must focus on solutions that address the impact of social media on mental health.

The relationship between interpersonal factors, socioeconomic stresses, vulnerability, and peer pressure plays a huge role in the risk of suicidal thoughts among students. These findings highlight the urgent need for more engaging and culture-sensitive activities that will consider the experiences of the students. By understanding these aspects, interventions that successfully address suicide can be developed to promote the well-being of this vulnerable population.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Person-centered theory

Carl Rogers created client-centered therapy, commonly called person-centered therapy or client-centered counselling, in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1960s, person-centered therapy developed a close relationship with the Human Potential Movement. This kind of psychotherapy sees patients as human beings rather than as diagnoses, and it is predicated on the idea that people are inherently motivated to acquire healthy psychological functioning. At this point, a person can reach their full potential. Rogers suggested that negative self-perceptions could hinder healing and self-actualisation.¹¹

Theoretical Application

The theory could prove helpful to the examination of the effectiveness of intervention to combat suicide from the standpoint of the students (clients). Therefore, this strategy presupposes that empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard must be met for therapy to be effective.

Empathy is a critical component in client-centered therapy, where the therapist actively listens to the client's feelings and ideas to grasp their inner world accurately. According to Rogers, reflection is a helpful technique to demonstrate genuine empathy and help clients process their feelings after hearing them repeated by others. Since the effectiveness of suicide prevention therapy depends on the connection between the client and the counsellor, congruency is crucial in the client-therapist interaction. Ideally, successful relationships depend on mutual trust, sincerity, and pleasant feelings. One further essential component of client-centeredness described by Carl Rogers is unconditional positive regard. This means that instead of passing judgement on the patient, the therapist offers unwavering acceptance and support. This strategy aids in establishing a secure setting for unrestricted self-exploration, fostering psychological development, and improving self-awareness. Effective suicide interventions must be provided in a welcoming and pleasant environment. The client's intrinsic desire for development and self-actualisation is the foundation of person-centered therapy, which eventually results in therapeutic change. The concept places a strong emphasis on human improvement. The study aimed to explore the experiences and perspectives of university students of a selected university on suicide-driven factors, support systems, and interventions.

The study aimed to answer the following research question:

- What are the common factors that lead to suicide-driven behaviours among students from a selected university in the Western Cape?

⁸ Silke Bachmann, "Epidemiology of Suicide and the Psychiatric Perspective," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 15, no. 7 (July 6, 2018): 1425, <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph15071425>.

⁹ Andrea Joensen et al., "The Impact of the Initial and Second National COVID-19 Lockdowns on Mental Health in Young People with and without Pre-Existing Depressive Symptoms," *Journal of Psychiatric Research* 149 (May 2022): 233–42, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpsychires.2022.03.001>.

¹⁰ Yumi Lee, Dayoung Lee, and Hyun Ju Hong, "Gender-Based Multilevel Analysis of Influential Factors for Suicide Attempts among at-Risk Non-Referred Adolescents in Korea," *Clinical Psychopharmacology and Neuroscience* 18, no. 1 (2020): 116.

¹¹ Lucy Yao and Rian Kabir, "Person-Centered Therapy (Rogersian Therapy)," 2023.

Study Objectives

- To explore common factors that lead to suicide-driven behaviours among students from a selected university in the Western Cape.

Study Contextualisation

The study, a descriptive and explorative one, is set in the context of a selected university setting in South Africa, where mental health concerns and suicidal behaviours among students have become a growing concern. The increased prevalence of student suicides and mental health problems, as well as the need for a better understanding of the factors influencing these concerns, are the driving forces behind the research. The researcher's interest in this subject was motivated by seeing students deal with problems that go untreated, such as relationship problems, financial stress, social isolation, and academic pressure. The study aimed to explore the experiences and perceptions of university students about suicide-driven factors, support systems, and interventions.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The current study employed a qualitative research methodology to explore in-depth insights, experiences, and perspectives of suicide-driven factors among university students in a selected university in the Western Cape. This approach seeks to uncover the underlying reasons, beliefs, and motivations that shape the experiences of students who consider suicide or harbour suicidal ideation, providing a rich and nuanced understanding of the research context. Conceptually, the research design follows the study's architectural blueprint.¹² This study employed an exploratory research design that uses a descriptive approach to investigate the current research question. The exploratory study approach allowed for a thorough investigation of the phenomenon of suicide, producing comprehensive knowledge of the suicide-driven factors and the experiences of students considering suicide or harbouring suicidal ideation. The descriptive study approach further provided a detailed description of the experiences and perspectives of students investigated for considering suicide or harbouring suicidal ideation.

Data Collection

Data was gathered through in-depth interviews with ten selected students. The interviews took place in a quiet and comfortable setting, and they were audio-recorded with the participants' approval. The interviews focused on the students' perspectives on suicide-driven factors. A research instrument is used to collect, measure, and analyse participant data related to the study topic.¹³ Creswell also mentioned that the researchers use instruments to evaluate accomplishment, assess individual ability, monitor behaviour, construct an individual's psychological profile, or interview a person. The current research used an interview guide as a research instrument. This guide comprises a series of open-ended questions aimed at delving into the experiences, thoughts, and perspectives of students investigated considering suicide or harbouring suicidal ideations. Interview guides are frequently utilised in qualitative research due to their flexible structure that facilitates comprehensive exploration of participants' experiences.¹⁴ The research was conducted at a designated higher education institution in the Western Cape, South Africa. The selected university is in the geographical centre of Cape Town, Western Cape. The selected university provides a unique context, with a diverse student population, academic demands, and social dynamics that may contribute to suicide-driven factors. Through exploration of this context, the study sought to inform strategies for promoting mental health, well-being, and resilience of students.

¹² John Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*, SAGE, Ca; Ofprnia (California: Sage Publications, 2013); Shingirai Paul Mbulayi and Simon Kang'ethe, "Social Constructions of Successful Ageing: The Case of Ruware Park in Marondera, Zimbabwe," *Social Work* 55, no. 3 (2019): 329–40.

¹³ Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*.

¹⁴ Jessica R Toste et al., "'Eye Opening and Chaotic': Resilience and Self-Determination of Secondary Students with Disabilities amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)* 26, no. 2 (2021): 157–83.

Sampling Procedure and Techniques

The study's research population consisted of students from a selected institution of higher learning in the Province of Western Cape. Many sampling methods are feasible while doing research. However, qualitative researchers often focus on relatively small samples.¹⁵ To collect data, this study employed a non-probability purposive sampling methodology. Given its ability to select participants who can provide rich data and thorough narratives of their experiences, this method was suitably used in this qualitative research.¹⁶ Nonprobability sampling allowed for the selection of participants willing to share their experiences and insights, resulting in a more in-depth understanding of the topic under investigation. Within the scope of nonprobability, purposive sampling further ensured that participants met the desired characteristics and experiences. This is the actual number of samples to be investigated. The unit of analysis used in this study was 12. The principal researcher considered the number sufficient because the qualitative research approach respects the significance of the information acquired more than the number of participants participating.

Data Analysis

The researcher utilised thematic analysis to decipher the vast amounts of raw data, adhering to Creswell's framework.¹⁷ This methodical approach commenced with the transcription of audio data, followed by a rigorous cleaning process to eliminate irrelevant and incoherent content. The refined data was then systematically coded, categorising similar concepts together. Through this process, the researcher distilled the data into coherent themes that directly addressed the study's primary questions. Specifically, the study explored the factors driving suicidal thoughts and behaviours, as shared by participants in their own words, providing a raw and unfiltered perspective on the complex issues surrounding suicide. To add depth and context, verbatim quotes were seamlessly integrated into the research report. Using Creswell's six-step thematic analysis approach, researchers ensured a comprehensive and structured examination of the qualitative data, generating insightful findings.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers followed safety protocols and ethical requirements before and during the research project.¹⁸ To conduct a sensitive study on student suicide, the following strategy was used to obtain permission and interact with gatekeepers. The researcher sought approval from the institutional research ethics committee (REC) by preparing a formal request that outlined the study's details. The request clearly explained the study's goals, methodology, and purpose and addressed confidentiality, privacy, and ethical considerations. In addition to the formal request, the researcher provided supporting documents, such as the research proposal, consent forms with informed consent, interview guidelines, and ethical clearance and approval from the REC. The researcher maintained ongoing communication with gatekeepers and authorities throughout the research process. To protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants, pseudonyms were used.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

This section presents the results related to factors that lead to suicide-driven behaviours, the impact of these prevalent factors on university students' mental health, and how they influence suicidal thoughts, behaviours, and intentions through students' lenses. The first section of the findings presents the demographic characteristics of the research participants, while the second section presents the emerging themes.

¹⁵ Emily Weyant, "Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches: By John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell" (Taylor & Francis, 2022).

¹⁶ Carina Cornesse et al., "A Review of Conceptual Approaches and Empirical Evidence on Probability and Nonprobability Sample Survey Research," *Journal of Survey Statistics and Methodology* 8, no. 1 (2020): 4–36.

¹⁷ Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches*.

¹⁸ P. Ndebele, *Research Ethics. The SAGE Handbook of Health Care Ethics* (London: Sage, 2011).

Table 1: The Demographic Profile of the Participants

Participant ID (Pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Academic Year	Field of Study	Personal/ history of mental concerns	Socioeconomic Insights
Anelisa	F	24	Black	4 th	BA Psychology	No	Middle class
Zethu	F	22	Black	3 rd	Bachelor of Social Work	Yes	Middle class
Mila	M	25	Black	3 rd	Bachelor of theology	Yes	Lower class
Siyavuya	M	27	Black	4 th	B. Ed	No	Lower Class
Viwe	F	27	Black	1 st	Bachelor of Pharmacy	No	Lower Class
Mlungisi	M	29	Black	2 nd	B. Accounting Science	Yes	Lower Class
Lelo	F	26	Coloured	3 rd	Bachelor of Oral health (BOH)	No	Middle class
Asiphe	F	30	Black	1 st	B Nursing	No	Lower class
Sipho	M	23	Black	2 nd	BA Sport, Recreation and exercise	No	Lower class
Memo	F	27	Black	3 rd	BSc Chemical Sciences	No	Middle class
Nikita	F	30	Coloured	4 th	BA Psychology	No	Middle class
Cameron	F	23	Coloured	2 nd	Bsc complement ary health science	No	High Class

Age

The ages of the participants ranged from 22 (the youngest participant) to 30 (the oldest). The age distribution appears relatively consistent, with no notable extreme values. According to the South African demographic profile, this population belonged to the youth category. Perhaps the motivation to investigate incidents of suicide among this group could be motivated by global, regional, and national statistics on suicide that indicate a higher probability of this group contemplating suicide or being vulnerable as far as suicide-related tendencies are concerned.

Gender Identity

A study of 12 participants (8 females, 4 males) revealed a feminisation of insights on suicide, possibly due to gender-specific factors like culture and stigma. This highlights the need for gender-friendly interventions, awareness campaigns that address gender-related obstacles, and nuanced approaches to suicide prevention strategies that consider gender differences.

Ethnicity

Black ethnic groups dominated the study population, with coloured people representing a narrow spectrum of ethnic backgrounds among the participants. While this mirrors the ethnic reality of the country, suicide interventions must be both ethnically friendly and diverse, where all ethnic groups and races are taken care of. Ethnicity must be diversity-compliant.

Academic Year and Field of Study

The study includes students from various academic years (first-year first year to final year) and diverse fields of study (psychology, sociology, computer science, etc.), ensuring a range of responses across age, level, and discipline and providing an interdisciplinary perspective on suicide.

Personal or Family History of Mental Health Concerns

Approximately a quarter of the participants reported a personal or family history of mental health problems. These points relate to the validity and reliability of the participants selected for the investigation of suicide matters.

Participants' Socioeconomic Backgrounds

The study participants came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, mostly middle-class and low-income. Although financial constraints may not directly affect their access to these resources, other external socioeconomic factors such as poverty, financial struggles, and unaffordable necessities, affect their well-being and mental health. Understanding the relationship between financial stability and suicidal ideation is crucial for developing targeted interventions that address students' unique needs and promote mental health awareness.

Table 2 : Emergent Themes

No.	Themes
1	The impact of interpersonal factors on mental health and well-being.
2	Socioeconomic Stressors as an aggravating factor for the susceptibility to mental health
3	The implications of vulnerability in mental health on suicide susceptibility
4	The Phenomenon of peer pressure and comparison aggravates suicidal ideation.

The Impact of Interpersonal Factors on Mental Health Wellbeing

Analysis of the data showed that interpersonal factors, such as family dynamics and relationships, play a crucial role in suicide tendencies, highlighting the importance of addressing these factors in interventions implemented. The following sentiments support the finding:

"It was school, divorce, and my grandmother died—everything in one year. So, towards the end of the year, I was very fatigued and emotionally exhausted to the point that I wanted just to leave." (Anelisa)

"My mother died a long time ago, and my brothers treated me as an outsider, which affected my sense of identity and belonging, and as a result, I did not know what my purpose in life was." (Sipho)

The above sentiments indicate family and relationship challenges as drivers of mental health issues, including suicide. This is also compounded by not being able to cope during these challenging times, leading to the contemplation of suicide as an escape.

Socioeconomic Stressors as an Aggravating Factor for the Susceptibility to Mental Health

Study findings demonstrate that family poverty and students' inability to afford necessities were identified as risk factors for suicidal ideation. The following sentiments supported the finding:

"Last year, I was facing some difficulties in finding employment. It was tough for me. I set a deadline for myself. I had already decided that, should nothing come up until a certain time, I would take my life". (Anelisa)

"There is no employment in South Africa. People have families that look up to them for help, while here you are without a job. One just feels useless. That is very stressful." (Mlungisi)

The sentiments above uncover the detrimental impact of economic vulnerabilities and the impact they have on the mental well-being of students, underscoring the need for mental health professionals to consider these factors in their sessions when addressing suicide with students.

The Implications of Vulnerability in Mental Health on Suicide Susceptibility

The present study identified a significant association between prior mental health challenges and susceptibility to suicide, with findings indicating that adequately managed anxiety and depressive

disorders can exert a protective influence on suicidal ideation. The subsequent sentiments reinforce the discovery:

"I think it started with not achieving anything I tried doing. I noticed that I was getting severe stress, and I started cutting myself, sometimes to distract from the emotional pain. So, when I could not take it anymore, I saw no other option but to relieve myself from the pain and take my life. I was utterly tired." (Mlungisi)

"I lost my mother when I was starting university; I struggled with that to the point where I would experience panic attacks and too much anxiety. This worsened because I did not see what I was living for." (Nikita)

The findings and sentiments above suggest that individuals with a history of mental health issues are at an elevated risk of contemplating suicide. In contrast, effective interventions and management of these conditions can significantly reduce this risk.

The Phenomenon of Peer Pressure and Comparison Aggravates Suicidal Ideation

Study findings revealed that when students try to match up to their peers but fail to achieve their peer-driven desirable goals, they experience stress and other debilitating emotional disorders. These are crucial predictors of susceptibility to suicide, with findings suggesting that effectively addressing these challenges with students can significantly mitigate the likelihood of suicidal ideation. The following expressions substantiate this conclusion:

"I feel like everyone is trying to keep up with everyone else. I feel like trying is not enough. They are trying to keep up with whatever they are seeing on social media and with other people." (Anelisa)

"As we grow up, we have dreams that may be, at this point in time, I want to be in this place, and I want this life, so when time goes by, and it seems impossible to live the life you want and see people's lives going on, that can also cause you to lose the purpose." (Mlungisi)

"I was like stuck, and others were progressing, and I did not know what to do. So, it was much stress, but I decided to go back." (Zethu)

The sentiments above emphasize that peer pressure can be stressful and emotionally draining, especially when students try to live up to their peers' expectations, match what media presents, and fall short of their goals. It is the failure to reach certain levels of expectations that motivates suicidal tendencies or the commission of suicide.

DISCUSSION

The study consisted of 12 participants, aged 22-30, with no notable outliers, belonging to the youth category. This is supported by the World Health Organisation, pointing out that suicide has become the second leading cause of death among youths (15 to 29 years of age), among whom students of higher education institutions (HEIs) represent a significant subset.¹⁹ The majority of participants of the study were female (8) and from black ethnic groups, with some coloured participants. This is consistent with South Africa's ethnic reality, in which diversity has an enormous impact on mental health interventions. According to Draheim et al., suicide interventions should be distinct and accessible to all ethnicities.²⁰ Students from various academic years and fields of study were included, providing an interdisciplinary perspective. Newman emphasises the value of interdisciplinary perspectives when working with college students.²¹ In particular, a quarter of the participants reported a personal or family history of mental health concerns. The study revealed a feminisation of insights on suicide, highlighting the need for gender-friendly interventions. Participants came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, primarily middle-class and low-income, with external factors like poverty and financial struggles affecting their well-being. The above findings corroborate statistics by WHO and confirmed by Wisevoters, suggesting that approximately seventy-seven percent of the world's annual suicide deaths (700,000) come from low- to

¹⁹ World Health Organization, "Suicide. World Health Organization (WHO)," June 17, 2021, <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide>.

²⁰ Amanda A Draheim et al., "Suicidality and Discriminatory Experiences with Healthcare Providers in Lgbt Emerging Adults," *Sexual and Gender Diversity in Social Services* 36, no. 4 (2024): 467–86.

²¹ Joshua Newman, "Incentivising Interdisciplinary Research Collaboration: Evidence from Australia," *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management* 46, no. 2 (2024): 146–65.

middle-income countries.²² Understanding the relationship between financial stability and suicidal ideation is crucial for developing targeted interventions that address students' unique needs and promote mental health awareness.

Interpersonal Factors, such as Family Dynamics and Relationships, play a Crucial Role in Suicidal Ideation among Students

The study found that students with family instability are more vulnerable to developing suicidal thoughts. These results suggest that when the family structure has stability, it provides predictability, but disruption coming from their parents' increased vulnerability makes them prone to mental health issues. Specifically, participants emphasised the importance of family stability to reduce the likelihood of suicidal thoughts in students. For instance, one participant shared that his mother died a long time ago, and his brothers treated him as an outsider, which was affecting his sense of identity and belonging, and consequently, he did not know what his purpose in life was. The vulnerability that develops from family instability is consistent with previous research on suicide risk factors. According to Zhou et al., a sense of identity and belonging has consistently shown an aggravating impact on suicide among students.²³ Research by Fallahi et al. revealed the profound impact of family background, grief, and communication.²⁴ This means that practical conflict resolution skills within families contributed to adaptive problem-solving strategies and reduced chronic stress.²⁵ The present study thus contributes to this body of evidence, suggesting that good conflict resolution can serve as an effective stress management method that may lead to reduced suicide prevalence among students. Additionally, this highlights the role of family interactions in shaping an individual's well-being. The well-being of students is closely related to their family dynamics.²⁶

Socioeconomic Stressors, including Financial Constraints and Unemployment, contribute to Suicidal Ideation

Furthermore, the data unequivocally demonstrate that the interplay between family financial strains and suicide is complex and crucial. Specifically, suicide ideation is influenced by various factors, including family unemployment and students' inability to afford necessities.²⁷ Therefore, consistent evidence suggests that lower income households often struggle to meet daily needs, resulting in elevated stress levels that can adversely affect students from such backgrounds and result in increased suicidal ideation or commission.

Prior Mental Health challenges increase Susceptibility to Suicidal Ideation

Furthermore, the present study identified a significant association between prior mental health challenges and susceptibility to suicide. This is consistent with previous studies. UNICEF found that depression, anxiety, sadness, and hopelessness in children and young people are linked to suicidal ideation and attempts.²⁸ Furthermore, more than 90% of adolescents who attempt suicide also engage in self-harm.²⁹

²² WHO, "Suicide Worldwide in 2019," June 16, 2021, <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240026643>; Wisevoter, "Suicide Rate by Country," 2023, <https://wisevoter.com/state-rankings/suicide-rates-by-state/>.

²³ Chunfen Zhou et al., "Suicidal Behavior, Depression and Loneliness among College Students: The Role of School Belonging," *Psychology, Health & Medicine* 28, no. 6 (2023): 1520–26.

²⁴ Masoud Fallahi-Khoshknab et al., "Instability of Emotional Relationships and Suicide among Youth: A Qualitative Study," *BMC Psychiatry* 23, no. 1 (2023): 50.

²⁵ Maria Cristina Gugliandolo et al., "The Conflict Resolution Styles in Adolescence: The Modeling Role of Parents.," *Canadian Journal of Behavioural Science/Revue Canadienne Des Sciences Du Comportement*, 2023.

²⁶ Linda Rajhvajn Bulat, Nika Sušac, and Marina Ajduković, "Predicting Prolonged Non-Suicidal Self-Injury Behaviour and Suicidal Ideations in Adolescence – the Role of Personal and Environmental Factors," *Current Psychology* 43, no. 2 (January 24, 2024): 1533–44, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-023-04404-8>.

²⁷ J. J. Stephan Rabie and Watson M., "Mental Illness Op-Ed: Suicide Is a Global Emergency and the Second-Leading Cause of Death among Our Young People," *Daily Maverick*, September 8, 2022, <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2022-09-08-suicide-in-south-africa-tiome-to-tackle-stigma-of-this-global-emergency/>; UNICEF, "Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children 2020.," 2020.

²⁸ UNICEF, "Global Status Report on Preventing Violence Against Children 2020."

²⁹ Eva Duarte, Sofia Silva, and Maria Gouveia-Pereira, "Adolescents' Perceptions About Non-Suicidal Self-Injury, Suicidal Ideation and Suicide Attempts," *European Journal of Mental Health* 18 (2023): 1–11.

A history of suicide attempts is the most significant risk factor.³⁰ The findings of the study and existing research suggest that strengthening preventive measures for mental health in higher education is crucial.³¹ This research contributes to the growing body of evidence highlighting the benefits of early mental health interventions. In response to the link between university students' mental health and suicide rates, student counselling, well-being programmes, and mental health initiatives are gaining popularity. Research shows that students with better mental health tend to have lower suicidal tendencies. Therefore, universities should consider incorporating mental health education into their student wellness programmes, and healthcare professionals can advise prioritising mental health as a key aspect of stress management techniques.

Peer Pressure and Comparison Aggravate Suicidal Ideation

The present study also found a significant influence of peer pressure on mental well-being among university students. According to a related study, peer pressure is a strong predictor of mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression, and mental health is also significantly influenced by the family environment and peer groups.³² Higher education settings can be a significant source of stress for young people, due to intense academic demands and social pressures.³³ The university environment is characterised by fierce competition, where students often feel compelled to excel academically due to expectations from lecturers, parents, and their peers. This pressure cooker environment can increase students' susceptibility to mental health problems, including suicidal thoughts, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.³⁴ Parallel to this, the results of the current study show that students frequently fall victim to peer pressure when they feel pressured to measure up to their peers. These findings, together with the above-related studies, further align with Treynor's Theory of Peer Pressure, as they highlight the significant impact and reciprocal influence of peer pressure and comparison culture, which can result in suicidal thoughts when people are unable to manage and resist these factors.³⁵ The above discoveries underscore the importance of addressing these issues to empower students to resist peer pressure and equip them with the tools they need to manage challenges during this period. Understanding the intricacies of peer pressure is critical to promoting ethical decision-making and mental health.

CONCLUSION

This study looked at the factors that led to suicidal thoughts in students at a South African university. Suicidal ideation is influenced by interpersonal factors (family dynamics, relationships), socioeconomic pressures (financial limitations, unemployment), and past mental health issues, according to the findings. Interventions must effectively treat mental health issues and address these factors. Recognising that a one-size-fits-all strategy would not be adequate, mental health providers must first implement targeted interventions that address identified problems and risk factors and customise tactics to students' needs and circumstances. This is crucial in improving the effectiveness of interventions from the students' perspectives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher recommends that mental health providers offer precise guidelines to reduce risk factors for suicide by teaching educators, loved ones, and students about protective factors, coping mechanisms, and early warning indicators, as shown by student concerns in the findings. This can ensure that they

³⁰ María Irigoyen et al., "Predictors of Re-Attempt in a Cohort of Suicide Attempters: A Survival Analysis," *Journal of Affective Disorders* 247 (2019): 20–28.

³¹ Bernadette Mazurek Melnyk et al., "The State of Mental Health, Burnout, Matterings and Perceived Wellness Culture in Doctorally Prepared Nursing Faculty with Implications for Action," *Worldviews on Evidence-Based Nursing* 20, no. 2 (2023): 142–52; Judith Proudfoot et al., "Implementation of an Augmented Stepped Mental Health Care Service in Australian Primary Care: A Mixed Method Study," *Advances in Mental Health* 19, no. 1 (2021): 75–93.

³² Javzan Badarch, *Health Risk Behaviors among Adolescents in Mongolia: Cross-Sectional National School-Based Surveys from 2013 and 2019* (Szegedi Tudományegyetem (Hungary), 2022).

³³ Bijoy Chhetri et al., "Estimating the Prevalence of Stress among Indian Students during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Cross-Sectional Study from India," *Journal of Taibah University Medical Sciences* 16, no. 2 (2021): 260–67.

³⁴ Wisevoter, "Suicide Rate by Country."

³⁵ R Rokhim et al., "Peer-Monitoring, Credit Discipline Training, and Ultra-Microcredit Loan Repayment Performance: The Case of Mekaar Program in Indonesia," in *Contemporary Research on Business and Management* (CRC Press, 2021), 44–47.

have the skills to cope, acquire the necessary skills and be able to overcome any suicidal thoughts that may arise during difficult times. It is vitally important for students to receive workshops and awareness campaigns that educate them about possible suicide-leading factors and how to handle situations related to such. This ensures that they make solid and sound decisions on various aspects of challenging student life. As highlighted by the student clients, to prevent suicide, it is necessary to acknowledge that a lot of these suicide-driving factors come from their surroundings, including family and peers. This could be accomplished by obtaining the help of families, friends, and the university community by providing social support to students. Finally, while developing interventions, it should be ensured that students have a voice and that the interventions have been modified to address the factors they have raised. This will help foster trust, resilience, and understanding.

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