



MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS IN ACADEMIA: AN SDG 3 PERSPECTIVE ON STUDENT SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

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Abstract

The growing incidence of student suicides challenges higher learning institutions on the crucial need to address the crisis. This study, examines suicidal ideation among students as a significant barrier to achieving good health and well-being. The research targeted students from various educational institutions in Chennai using a descriptive research design. Data were collected from 291 respondents through a structured questionnaire, and analytical methods like ANOVA, correlation & chi-square were employed for analysing causes of suicidal thoughts. Findings showed gender was not associated with suicidal thoughts ($p = 0.766$), indicating that both male and female students reported similar experiences. However, the results showed positive relationship which was moderate ($r = 0.473$) connecting academic pressure with financial problems, suggesting that students under academic stress are also more likely to cite financial difficulties as contributing factors. These results underscore the need for early intervention, mentoring, and professional counselling. In alignment with SDG 3, the study highlights the shared responsibility of families, educators, peers, and policymakers in building supportive environments that protect student mental health and promote overall well-being.

Keywords: *Mental health crisis, higher education, counselling, preventive strategies, SDG 3.*

Introduction

Suicide remains a serious global public health issue and ranks among the top reason for mortality in young people. Student mental health has been a challenge for higher education institutions worldwide. It is observed that it is the third most common reason for demise for individuals aged 15–29. Each year, more than 7,20,000 individuals lose their lives to suicide.

Official surveillance (NCRB's Accidental Deaths & Suicides in India) shows high and rising suicide mortality overall, with 13,000 student suicide deaths in 2022 alone.

Evolution of the Problem

Before 2017, suicide attempts in India were criminalized, which treated the act as an offense. This legal framework fostered fear, stigma, and social discrimination, often discouraging individuals, including students, from seeking psychological help. A major shift occurred with the Mental Healthcare Act (MHCA), 2017, particularly under Section 115, which recognized that a person attempting suicide is “under severe stress.” The Act decriminalized suicide attempts and placed an obligation on the government to provide care, treatment, and rehabilitation, reframing suicide as a public health concern rather than a criminal act (Government of India, 2017). From 2020 onwards, the Ministry of Education introduced the MANODARPAN initiative to offer psychological counselling and emotional support to students and their families, while the University Grants Commission (UGC) encouraged educational institutions to integrate mental well-being programs (Ministry of Education, 2020). In 2022, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare launched NSPS, targeting a 10% reduction in suicide related deaths (MoHFW, 2022). During 2022–2025, the government further strengthened support through Tele-MANAS, a 24×7 tele-mental health helpline (14416 / 1-800-891-4416), expanding nationwide to provide free counselling services (MoHFW, 2025). Additionally, in 2023, the UGC issued



comprehensive guidelines for universities and colleges to promote both physical and mental well-being, including establishing counselling centres, appointing trained counsellors, and prominently displaying helpline numbers on campuses (UGC, 2023).

Objectives of the study

1. To identify the major causes of suicidal thoughts among students in academic institutions.
2. To analyse the impact of suicide-related incidents on the academic community.

Review of Literature

Mateen et al. (2024), reported that medical undergraduates experience disproportionately high levels of depression and suicidal ideation, primarily due to academic workload, intense competition, and inadequate support systems. Singh and Kaur (2022) explored the psychological impact of academic stress on adolescents and found that excessive parental expectations and examination anxiety were major predictors of suicidal thoughts. Similarly, Ohlan and Taruna (2021) highlighted that loneliness, peer rejection, and poor family communication played major role in student's suicidal thoughts, underscoring crucial role of emotional and social support in maintaining mental well-being. Yadav and Srivastava (2020) conducted a correlation study among Indian students in Kota and identified substantial positive association among stress due to academics with suicidal thoughts, emphasizing the need for structured counselling mechanisms in educational institutions. In line with these findings, Ravikumar and Gopalakrishna (2019) observed that students enrolled in professional courses such as engineering, medicine, and management exhibited higher levels of suicidal thoughts compared to those in non-professional courses, attributing this to heavy workloads and career-related anxiety.

Research Methodology

To explore key factors contributing to suicidal thoughts among students, aligning with the objectives of SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-being. Data were gathered from 291 students representing different educational institutions in Chennai through a structured questionnaire. To analyze the data, chi-square and correlation tests were applied to examine the relationships between demographic, academic, and psychological variables influencing suicidal ideation

Analysis and Discussion

Chi-square test

Gender and suicidal thoughts

Null Hypothesis (H_0): There is no significant association between gender and suicidal thoughts.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): There is a significant association between gender and suicidal thoughts.

| | Value | Df | Asymp. Sig. (2-sided) | Exact Sig. (2-sided) | Exact Sig. (1-sided) |
|------------------------------|-------|----|-----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| Pearson Chi-Square | .089 | 1 | .766 | | |
| Continuity Correction | .023 | 1 | .879 | | |
| Likelihood Ratio | .089 | 1 | .766 | | |
| Fisher's Exact Test | | | | .773 | .439 |
| Linear-by-Linear Association | .089 | 1 | .766 | | |
| N of Valid Cases | 291 | | | | |



As the p-value exceeded 0.05, the null hypothesis (H_0) was retained. Chi-square analysis indicated that gender had no significant relationship with suicidal thoughts, indicating that both male and female students experience similar levels of suicidal ideation. This finding suggests that suicidal thoughts are influenced more by external stressors such as academic and financial pressures rather than gender differences. Therefore, mental health interventions should be inclusive and focus on providing equal emotional support to all students, regardless of gender.

| Correlation | | | | |
|--|--|-------------------------|--|--|
| Academic pressure and financial problems | | | | |
| This study aims to evaluate the extent to which academic pressure correlates with financial difficulties among students. | | | | |
| | | | Major causes for suicidal thoughts - Academic Pressure | Major causes of suicidal thoughts - Financial Problems |
| Spearman's rho | Major causes of suicidal thoughts - Academic Pressure | Correlation-Coefficient | 1.000 | .473** |
| | | Sig. (2-tailed) | . | .000 |
| | | N | 291 | 291 |
| | Major causes of suicidal thoughts - Financial Problems | Correlation-Coefficient | .473** | 1.000 |
| | | Sig.(2-tailed) | .000 | . |
| | | N | 291 | 291 |

Results indicated a moderate positive association ($r=.473$) of academic stress with financial problems, suggesting that students under academic stress are also more likely to cite financial difficulties as contributing factors. This suggests that academic and financial challenges are interconnected. Addressing both factors together through financial support programs and academic stress management initiatives may help improve student's overall mental well-being.

ANOVA: To determine whether suicidal thoughts significantly differ among students from different institutions.

Null Hypothesis (H_0): Students from various institutions do not differ significantly in terms of suicidal ideation.

Alternative Hypothesis (H_1): Students from various institutions differ significantly in terms of suicidal ideation.

Descriptives Suicidal thoughts

| | N | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|------------|-----|------|----------------|
| School | 165 | 1.76 | .430 |
| College | 120 | 1.86 | .350 |
| University | 6 | 1.67 | .516 |
| Total | 291 | 1.80 | .403 |

ANOVA

Suicidal thoughts



| | Sum of Squares | Df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
|----------------|----------------|-----|-------------|-------|------|
| Between Groups | .810 | 2 | .405 | 2.522 | .082 |
| Within Groups | 46.228 | 288 | .161 | | |
| Total | 47.038 | 290 | | | |

The ANOVA results indicated that although college students reported slightly higher mean levels of suicidal thoughts compared to school and university students, the difference was not statistically significant ($p = 0.082 > 0.05$). This suggests that the type of institution does not have a significant influence on students' suicidal ideation. Suicidal thoughts appear to be a widespread concern across all educational levels, influenced more by individual stress factors such as academic pressure, financial strain, and emotional well-being rather than institution.

Conclusion

The study highlights the growing concern of student mental health and suicidal ideation as a critical barrier to achieving SDG3. The findings reveal that while gender does not significantly influence suicidal thoughts, academic and financial pressures are moderately correlated, indicating that these stressors often coexist and jointly contribute to student's emotional distress. Furthermore, the absence of significant differences among various types of educational institutions suggests that suicidal ideation is a widespread issue affecting students across all academic settings.

Overall, the research emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive mental health initiatives within educational institutions. Early identification of stress, timely access to counselling, financial assistance, and continuous emotional support must be prioritized to mitigate psychological strain. Encouraging compassion, transparent communication, and resilience among families, teachers, and policymakers can help establish a secure and nurturing educational setting that will support student's emotional wellness and holistic development, advancing progress toward SDG 3.

References

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