

What factors influence suicide attempts and suicidal ideation for street-involved youth?

What you need to know:

For street-involved youth, depression and non-suicidal self-harm behaviours are linked with suicide attempts and suicidal ideation. More research is needed to address how bullying also affects youth homelessness.

What is this research about?

Suicide rates for street-involved and homeless youth are higher than the general youth population. Previous research has focused on the risk factors that increase suicide attempts and suicidal ideation (thoughts) among street youth. These include current and past experiences with unstable housing, victimization, depression, and substance abuse. This study considers the impact these factors may cause on both suicide attempts and suicidal ideation.



ABOUT THE RESEARCHERS

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The Canadian Homelessness Research Network (CHRN) has partnered with the **Knowledge Mobilization (Kmb)** Unit at York University to produce Research Summaries on the topic of Youth Homelessness in Canada. The CHRN focuses on education, networking and knowledge mobilization in order to move towards effective long-term solutions to homelessness.

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Summary Date: September 2013

KEYWORDS

attempted suicide, suicidal ideation, homelessness, street-involvement, mental health, youth

ARTICLE SOURCE

Frederick, T., Kirst, M., and Erickson, P. (2012). Suicide attempts and suicidal ideation among street-involved youth in Toronto. *Advances in Mental Health* 11 (1), 8-17.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers used data collected for a larger project on the pathways towards independent living or housing instability for street-involved youth. The Youth Pathways Project (YPP) involved researchers from the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and the University of Toronto. They held private interviews with 150 youth aged 16 to 21 years who accessed services for street-involved youth in Toronto.

To measure suicide attempts and suicidal ideation, youth were asked to select a number between “0” and “6 or more” to describe how many times they thought about or attempted to commit suicide in the past 12 months. The researchers wanted to measure these outcomes with variables on:

- **Demographic factors:** age, gender, sexual orientation.
- **Abuse and victimization:** physical or sexual child maltreatment, involvement on the streets;
- **Street-involved activities:** duration and number of moves on the street in the last four months, perceived discrimination, self-rated health, ties to street economy, and previous arrest.
- **Mental health problems:** prior diagnosis of a mental health problem, or feeling depressed.
- **Drug use:** problems and dependence on drugs or alcohol.

The data was first analyzed to measure the impact that grouped variables had on attempted suicide and suicidal ideation. These three groups were: background and street life experiences, mental health problems and drug use. After, the data were analyzed to see the links between each individual variable with attempted suicide and suicidal ideation.

What did the researchers find?

Relationships were observed with both suicide attempts and suicidal ideation and:

- Being female;
- Having a history of sexual abuse;
- Experiencing discrimination;
- Self-harm behaviour;
- Depression.

Suicidal ideation was also linked with one’s age, being bullied, sleeping on the streets, poor self-rated health and drug and alcohol dependence. However, these were not strongly linked with suicide attempts.

Between the individual variables, **depression was the only factor that predicted both suicide attempts and suicidal ideation.** Self-harm behaviour was also a serious influence on suicidal ideation. While the relationship between bullying and suicidal ideation was not as strong, it may be that the after-effects of bullying could also operate through depression and self harm. Young women also showed higher rates of suicide attempts, since they also experienced higher rates of depression.

HOW CAN YOU USE THIS RESEARCH?

More research is needed to address these multiple factors to improve interventions. As the study suggests, this research may inform changes or priority areas for interventions with street-involved youth. Social service and health care providers may use the findings to address some of the variables that were significantly linked with suicide attempts and suicidal ideation. Focusing on depression and bullying may help to serve the complex and distinct needs of youth experiencing homelessness.