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iJOINED ETCOR
P - ISSN 2984-7567
E - ISSN 2945-3577



The Exigency
P - ISSN 2984-7842
E - ISSN 1908-3181

Suicidal Ideation Among College Students

Joan Ebias-Uy*¹, Dr. Mae V. Cañal²

¹Northwest Samar State University-San Jorge Campus, ²Samar State University

*Corresponding Author email: joan.ebias@nwssu.edu.ph

Received: 02 September 2025

Revised: 03 October 2025

Accepted: 08 October 2025

Available Online: 11 October 2025

Volume IV (2025), Issue 4, P-ISSN – 2984-7567; E-ISSN - 2945-3577

<https://doi.org/10.63498/etcor479>

Abstract

Aim: This study assessed the level of suicidal ideation among first-year college students and explored its relationships with selected demographic variables, including age, sex, socioeconomic status, parents' education, number of siblings, household size, and family structure.

Methodology: A descriptive-correlational design was employed using total enumeration. A total of 354 first-year students from one university in Eastern Visayas participated by completing the Adult Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (ASIQ) and a demographic survey. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Spearman's rho, and chi-square tests to determine significant associations.

Results: Findings revealed that 40.4% (n = 143) of the respondents scored within the ASIQ "For Referral" range (T ≥ 70), indicating a high level of suicidal ideation. Younger age demonstrated a significant negative correlation with suicidal ideation (rs = -0.150, p < .005). Sex was also significantly associated ($\chi^2(2) = 15.190$, p < .001), with females more represented in the referral group (female = 103; male = 40). No significant relationships were found between suicidal ideation and socioeconomic status, parental education, number of siblings, household size, or family structure.

Conclusion: A substantial proportion of first-year students exhibited elevated suicidal ideation levels, with age and sex emerging as significant indicators of vulnerability. The findings underscore the need for routine mental health screening, gender-sensitive interventions, peer support initiatives, and strengthened campus-based psychological services.

Keywords: suicidal ideation; college students; demographic correlates; screening; mental health intervention

INTRODUCTION

Suicidal ideation (S.I.) refers to suicidal thoughts or ideas, contemplation or fantasies, and preoccupations with death or about taking one's own life (Harmer et al., 2023). According to the American Psychological Association (2018), suicide ideation involves varying degrees of seriousness, from transient thoughts to detailed plans. Passive thinking about death without a specific plan or active thinking with a particular plan is categorized as suicidal ideation. When suicidal ideation progresses to the act of suicide, it is often the result of a complex interplay of psychological, social, and environmental factors. These include mental health conditions, access to lethal means, a history of trauma, substance abuse, social isolation, or inadequate support systems (Franklin et al., 2017). In the United States, suicide deaths rose from 48,183 in 2021 to 49,449 in 2022—a 2.6% increase—remaining the 11th leading cause of death (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023).

Currently, suicide is recognized as a major global health issue linked to mental health problems such as depression, substance use disorders, and psychosis, with a mortality rate of 1.4% (Bachmann, 2018). According to the World Health Organization (2025), more than 720,000 people die by suicide each year, with an estimated 727,000 deaths globally in 2021. Suicide ranked as the fourth leading cause of death among individuals aged 15 to 29 in 2019, with 77% of these deaths occurring in low- and middle-income countries (World Health Organization, 2021). In the Philippines, the suicide rate was 2.5 per 100,000 population in 2019, as reported by the Department of Health (2019). Deaths due to intentional self-harm increased by 25.7% from 2019 to 2020, rising from 2,808 to 3,529 cases (PSA, 2021).



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A report by the Philippine News Agency cited data from the Police Regional Office 8 showing that 145 suicide cases occurred across six provinces in Eastern Visayas in 2020—up from 105 in 2019 (Amazona, 2021). The victims included both males (118) and females (27), with the youngest being a 10-year-old girl. These rising figures reflect a worrying trend of emotional distress and mental health vulnerability among Filipinos, particularly the youth. Studies have emphasized the need to strengthen family and institutional support systems, especially in schools, to address such psychosocial challenges.

To combat the growing mental health crisis, the Philippines enacted Republic Act No. 11036 or the Mental Health Act in 2017. However, its implementation remains inconsistent due to inadequate funding, limited awareness, and poor interagency coordination (Felisilda, 2024). Addressing mental health concerns requires not only policy-level action but also educational institutions' commitment to research-driven interventions and emotional support mechanisms for students.

Certain demographic factors have been found to increase suicide risk in college populations, such as female gender, sexual minority status, low socioeconomic background, and living alone (Mortier et al., 2018). At one university in Eastern Visayas, three students were identified with elevated suicidal ideation scores and one attempted suicide. However, limited research has explored the specific demographic correlates of suicidal ideation among Filipino college students, particularly in regional institutions. Existing literature often focuses on depression, anxiety, and stress in isolation, overlooking how demographic and psychosocial variables interact. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the relationship between demographic profiles and suicidal ideation, thereby helping schools and policymakers design targeted prevention and intervention programs.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Mental health extends beyond the absence of illness—it encompasses emotional resilience, meaningful relationships, and the ability to adapt to life's demands (American Psychological Association, 2018). Within this context, suicidal ideation, defined as persistent or severe thoughts of ending one's life, has become a major concern among college students. Studies estimate that 10–15% of students report suicidal ideation annually, highlighting its prevalence in higher education (Mortier et al., 2018). These thoughts are not merely fleeting; they significantly increase the risk of future suicide attempts.

Psychological disorders such as depression and anxiety remain major predictors of suicidal ideation (WHO WMH-ICS Collaborators, 2018). However, environmental and social stressors—such as academic overload, discrimination, and financial strain—can exacerbate the problem. Gender differences also play a role; women are more likely than men to report suicidal thoughts or attempts. These findings affirm the need to examine not just mental states but also the socio-demographic circumstances that shape them.

Socioeconomic status (SES) has consistently emerged as a significant risk factor. Students from lower-income households were more prone to suicidal ideation even after adjusting for depressive symptoms. Similar findings by Mortier et al. (2015) revealed that financial hardship quadrupled suicide risk. These insights emphasize the need for equitable access to mental health resources and financial assistance. Moreover, research by Carvajal et al. (2024) supports this view, asserting that social inequality and overhelping or underhelping in institutional support can profoundly affect psychological well-being and self-worth.

Family-related variables are equally influential. Students from divorced or single-parent households reported higher suicidal ideation rates. Supportive family dynamics serve as protective factors, whereas conflict-ridden or distant relationships elevate risks. Similar findings were reported by Abenojar et al. (2025), who found that family engagement and collaborative communication enhance emotional regulation and resilience among learners, indirectly reducing psychological distress.

At the institutional level, universities play a pivotal role in promoting mental health. Students attending universities with limited mental health services exhibited higher suicidal ideation rates. In contrast, comprehensive support systems—such as counseling, peer mentorship, and wellness programs—were associated with better outcomes. Carvajal et al. (2025) further emphasized that educational institutions must future-proof their programs by integrating well-being and resilience training into their curricula to help students navigate academic and social challenges effectively.

In sum, suicidal ideation among college students results from the interaction of psychological, demographic, familial, and institutional factors. Demographic attributes such as gender, age, SES, and family background increase vulnerability, while strong social and educational support structures serve as protective buffers. These patterns provide the empirical foundation for the present study, which explores how selected demographic characteristics relate to suicidal ideation among first-year college students in the Philippines.



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Theoretical Framework

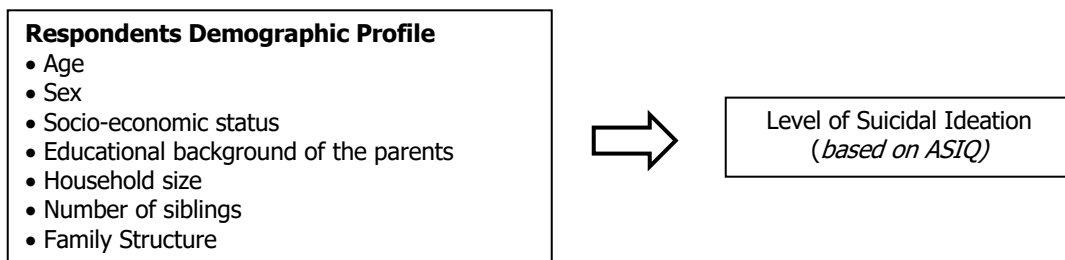
This study is grounded in four psychological frameworks that collectively explain how demographic factors influence suicidal ideation among college students. Erikson’s Psychosocial Development Theory asserts that individuals in the Identity versus Role Confusion stage—typically late adolescence to early adulthood—grapple with identity formation, self-concept, and purpose. Failure to resolve these conflicts, compounded by social and gender pressures, may increase vulnerability to suicidal thinking.

Beck’s Cognitive Behavioral Theory emphasizes how negative thinking patterns and cognitive distortions shape emotion and behavior. Students from low-income families or with less-educated parents may internalize self-defeating beliefs, such as hopelessness or inadequacy, which heighten suicidal tendencies. Joiner’s Interpersonal Theory of Suicide highlights perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness as primary precursors to suicidal desire—states often influenced by family size, structure, and support quality. Bandura’s Social Learning Theory complements these by proposing that individuals learn coping strategies through observation. Exposure to maladaptive coping within families or communities normalizes negative responses to stress.

These frameworks are further supported by the reflective leadership and psychosocial models that argue that personal resilience and positive modeling within social systems foster adaptive coping and emotional regulation. Together, these perspectives underscore that suicide risk is not purely psychological but shaped by environmental and developmental factors that institutions must recognize to craft responsive interventions.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the relationship between selected demographic factors and suicidal ideation among college students. Independent variables include age, sex, socioeconomic status, parents’ educational attainment, number of siblings, household size, and family structure. These factors are hypothesized to influence the dependent variable—suicidal ideation—as measured by the Adult Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (ASIQ). This framework aligns with the integrated psychosocial approach, emphasizing how academic institutions and family environments jointly shape students’ mental and emotional outcomes.



Statement of the Problem

Suicide remains a growing public health concern among young people, and recent studies indicate that college students are increasingly vulnerable due to developmental, academic, and socio-environmental pressures. Despite rising awareness, few empirical studies in the Philippines have explored how demographic factors such as age, sex, socioeconomic status, and family structure relate to suicidal ideation among first-year college students. This study was conducted to address this gap by assessing the level of suicidal ideation among college students in Eastern Visayas and determining its relationship with their demographic characteristics. The findings aim to serve as a basis for designing intervention programs and strengthening campus mental health initiatives.

Research Objectives

General Objective:

To assess the level of suicidal ideation among college students and examine its relationship with selected demographic variables.

Specific Objectives:

1. To describe the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of:
 - a. age;



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- b. sex;
 - c. socioeconomic status;
 - d. educational background of parents;
 - e. number of siblings;
 - f. household size; and
 - g. family structure.
2. To determine the level of suicidal ideation among first-year college students.
 3. To examine the relationship between students' demographic characteristics and suicidal ideation.
 4. To propose an intervention program based on the results of the study.

Research Questions

1. What is the demographic profile of college students in terms of:
 - 1.1 age;
 - 1.2 sex;
 - 1.3 socio-economic status;
 - 1.4 educational background of the parents;
 - 1.5 number of siblings;
 - 1.6 household size; and
 - 1.7 family structure?
2. What is the level of suicidal ideation among college students?
3. Is there a significant relationship between the demographic profile of students and their level of suicidal ideation?
4. What intervention program can be proposed to address suicidal ideation among college students based on the findings of the study?

Hypothesis

The following hypothesis was tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

- H_0 : There is no significant relationship between the students' demographic profiles and their level of suicidal ideation.

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a descriptive-correlational research design to investigate the level of suicidal ideation among first-year college students. This design was appropriate for identifying relationships between suicidal ideation and various demographic variables without manipulating the environment or conditions. Respondents were screened using the Adult Suicide Ideation Questionnaire (ASIQ) to measure the severity of suicidal ideation. Based on their ASIQ scores, students who exhibited elevated levels of ideation were identified for further analysis. The approach focused on recognizing patterns and associations between suicidal ideation and demographic profiles. This type of non-experimental design is particularly useful in educational and psychological research, where ethical constraints limit experimental manipulation (Amihan & Sanchez, 2023).

Research Environment

The research was conducted at one of the universities in Eastern Visayas, a region known for its close-knit student communities and diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. The data collection took place during the second semester of the 2023–2024 academic year. The educational setting provided an ideal environment to study student well-being, given the academic and social transitions students experience during this phase. As Carvajal et al. (2025) noted, educational institutions play a critical role in shaping the overall mental and emotional resilience of learners, emphasizing the need for responsive and data-driven campus interventions.

Sampling Procedure

The study targeted all first-year college students as respondents, recognizing their unique psychological vulnerabilities during the transition from secondary to tertiary education. This period is marked by academic stress, social adaptation, and emotional adjustment, all of which may contribute to suicidal thoughts or ideation. To ensure



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inclusivity and accuracy, the study utilized total enumeration, involving all students within the identified population. However, the results' generalizability remains limited since all participants came from a single university in Eastern Visayas. Thus, findings may not fully represent students in other institutions with differing socio-cultural and educational contexts (Pangilinan, 2025).

Data Gathering Procedure

The data collection process began with the submission of a research proposal to the Institutional Research Review Ethics Committee (IRREC) for approval. Once permission was granted, formal consent was sought from the Campus Administrator to implement the study. The Adult Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (ASIQ) was administered to respondents in a controlled classroom setting to ensure consistency and minimize environmental influence on responses. Following data collection, results were tabulated, coded, and statistically analyzed using descriptive and correlational techniques. This systematic procedure reflects emphasis on methodological transparency and data integrity in contemporary educational research (Sanchez, 2025).

Ethical Considerations

The researchers strictly adhered to ethical research standards to protect participants' safety and welfare. Ethical clearance was obtained from the IRREC prior to data collection. The study upheld the principles of fidelity, integrity, and respect for human dignity, ensuring that participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was strictly maintained. Respondents were clearly informed about the purpose of the study, their right to withdraw at any stage, and the measures implemented to protect their data. To enhance the trustworthiness of findings, the study observed the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Ethical and transparent practices are essential in maintaining public trust in educational and psychological research (Carvajal et al., 2024; Sanchez, 2025).

RESULT and DISCUSSION

Table 1. *Level of Suicidal Ideation of the Student-Respondents*

T-score	Description	No. of Students	Percent
≥ 70	For Referral	143	40.4
≤ 69	Normal	211	59.6
Total		354	100.0

Note. T-scores ≥70 indicate high suicidal ideation.

Table 1 shows the level of suicidal ideation of student respondents. It presents those 143 students (40.4%) who scored a T-score of 70 or higher, which is categorized as "For Referral". This score range is typically considered a cause for concern, indicating a need for further evaluation or intervention. 211 students (59.6%) scored a T-score of 69 or lower, which is categorized as "Normal." This score range is generally considered within the typical or expected range for the measured trait. It is important to note that although 59.6% of students scored in the "Normal" range (T-score ≤ 69), this does not necessarily indicate the absence of psychological distress. Some students may exhibit subclinical symptoms that require preventive support and monitoring.

Table 2. *Age and Sex Distribution of Students Identified for Referral*

Age	Female	Male	Total
	(For Referral)	(For Referral)	(For Referral)
25 & Older	4	1	5
23 - 24	5	3	8
21 - 22	21	9	30



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19 - 20	50	19	69
17 - 18	23	8	31
Total	103	40	143

The age and sex distribution are presented in Table 2. Of the 143 students in the For Referral group, 103 were female and 40 were male. The largest proportion of referred students belonged to the 19–20 age group (n = 69), followed by the 21–22 group (n = 30), the 17–18 group (n = 31), the 23–24 group (n = 8), and the 25 and older group (n = 5).

Table 3. Correlation Between Demographic Variables and Suicidal Ideation

Profile	r_s/χ^2 -Value	df	p-value	Evaluation
Age ¹	-0.150	-	<0.005	Significant
Sex Category ²	15.190	2	< 0.001	Significant
Socio-economic Status ²	2.440	3	0.486	Not Significant
Educ Mother ²	1.867	5	0.867	Not Significant
Educ Father ²	5.515	5	0.356	Not Significant
No. of Siblings ¹	-0.096	-	0.071	Not Significant
Household Size ¹	0.023	-	0.666	Not Significant
Family Structure ²	6.229	4	0.183	Not Significant

Significant at 0.05 significance level; 1-spearman rho; 2-chi-square

Spearman’s rho and chi-square tests were conducted to examine the relationship between suicidal ideation and selected demographic variables. Significant associations were found for two variables: age ($r_s = -0.150$, $p < .005$) and sex ($\chi^2(2) = 15.190$, $p < .001$). No significant relationships were observed for socioeconomic status ($\chi^2(3) = 2.440$, $p = .486$), mother’s education ($\chi^2(5) = 1.867$, $p = .867$), father’s education ($\chi^2(5) = 5.515$, $p = .356$), number of siblings ($r_s = -0.096$, $p = .071$), household size ($r_s = 0.023$, $p = .666$), and family structure ($\chi^2(4) = 6.229$, $p = .183$).

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore a significant mental health concern among first-year college students, with 40.4% of the respondents exhibiting clinically relevant levels of suicidal ideation. This supports the global trend in rising mental health challenges among youth, particularly in academic settings. Suicidal ideation is increasingly acknowledged as a multidimensional issue, affected not only by psychological conditions but also by demographic and environmental stressors (Harmer et al., 2023; Franklin et al., 2017).

The significant association between age and suicidal ideation is consistent with the literature identifying late adolescence and early adulthood as high-risk periods for the onset of mental health disorders. College students aged 17 to 22 were found to be the most vulnerable in this study, which aligns with findings by Mortier et al. (2018), who documented heightened suicidal thoughts in similar age brackets.

Additionally, female students were more likely to report higher levels of suicidal ideation. This gender-based disparity mirrors prior findings that suggest women are more likely to internalize distress, report suicidal thoughts, and seek help, whereas men are more likely to die by suicide due to using more lethal methods (Carretta et al., 2023). Such findings call for gender-sensitive mental health programming on campuses to tailor support services to the unique coping mechanisms and risks across genders.



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In contrast, socioeconomic status, parental education, household size, and family structure were not significantly associated with suicidal ideation in this study. This contradicts some earlier research suggesting that socioeconomic disadvantage contributes to psychological distress (Lam et al., 2019). However, it also aligns with emerging views that emotional and psychosocial dynamics (e.g., social support, perceived isolation, and coping capacity) may play a more critical role in mental health outcomes than purely economic factors (Santini et al., 2019)

The persistence of high suicidal ideation rates despite the implementation of the Philippine Mental Health Act (Republic Act No. 11036) further suggests a disconnect between policy and practical intervention, particularly in the collegiate setting. Stea et al. (2024) emphasize that social pressure and lack of support remain potent predictors of psychological distress, particularly in collectivist cultures where academic success is often a communal expectation. Thus, mental health initiatives must go beyond policy and aim for systematic campus-wide implementation of screenings, interventions, and awareness campaigns.

Moreover, the prevalence of suicidal ideation in Eastern Visayas, as noted by local reports, contextualizes the urgency of the findings (Amazona, 2021). With suicide cases spanning even children and adolescents, a regional mental health crisis is evident and should prompt collaboration between educational institutions, local health agencies, and community leaders.

This study has several limitations. The use of self-reported data introduces the possibility of response bias, as students may underreport or overreport suicidal thoughts due to stigma or fear. Additionally, the sample was limited to one university, which restricts the generalizability of findings to other settings or populations. Finally, the cross-sectional design does not allow for causal interpretations.

Conclusion

This study reinforces the urgent need to address suicidal ideation among first-year college students. Age and sex emerged as key vulnerability indicators, suggesting the need for more tailored mental health strategies. Future research should investigate emerging stressors such as social media influence, peer dynamics, and academic competitiveness. Higher education institutions must invest in proactive, context-sensitive mental health systems to promote sustainable student well-being.

Recommendations

Based on the findings that 40.4% of first-year college students exhibited clinically significant levels of suicidal ideation, with younger age groups and females being particularly vulnerable, higher education institutions need to implement routine mental health screening programs using validated tools like the Adult Suicidal Ideation Questionnaire (ASIQ) to enable early identification of at-risk individuals. Given the statistically significant relationship between suicidal ideation and both age and sex, tailored interventions must be developed to support younger and female students through gender-sensitive counseling, psychoeducation, and targeted support groups (van der Star et al., 2025). Schools should also invest in peer-led mental health initiatives and mentoring programs to provide students with accessible and empathetic avenues for support (Arango et al., 2021). Strengthening campus-based mental health services by hiring more licensed professionals and ensuring these services are both confidential and culturally responsive is equally vital (WHO, 2021). Moreover, incorporating mental health literacy into the general curriculum may help reduce stigma, improve coping strategies, and promote help-seeking behavior (Mori et al., 2022). While socioeconomic status and parental education were not statistically significant in this study, involving families through awareness campaigns can still foster a supportive home environment and reinforce mental wellness practices (Lam et al., 2019).

Additionally, it is imperative to revisit the implementation of the Philippine Mental Health Act (Republic Act No. 11036), ensuring that schools not only comply with national policy but also evaluate and strengthen their mental health programs in practice. Finally, future research should explore indirect psychosocial stressors such as social media use, academic competitiveness, and bullying, which may influence suicidal ideation beyond demographic variables. By addressing these factors in a comprehensive, evidence-based, and contextually relevant manner, universities can foster safer and more supportive academic environments.

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P - ISSN 2984-7842
E - ISSN 1908-3181

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