



9-29-2024

Addressing Adolescent Suicide in South Korea

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Recommended Citation

Kang, Alyssa (2024) "Addressing Adolescent Suicide in South Korea," *Journal of Nonprofit Innovation*: Vol. 4: Iss. 3, Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/joni/vol4/iss3/6>

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Addressing Adolescent Suicide in South Korea

Cover Page Footnote

Special thanks to Alyssa Augustus, Susan May Watts, and Becca Linford for editing and research contributions

Research Overview Paper

Addressing Adolescent Suicide in South Korea

TITLE

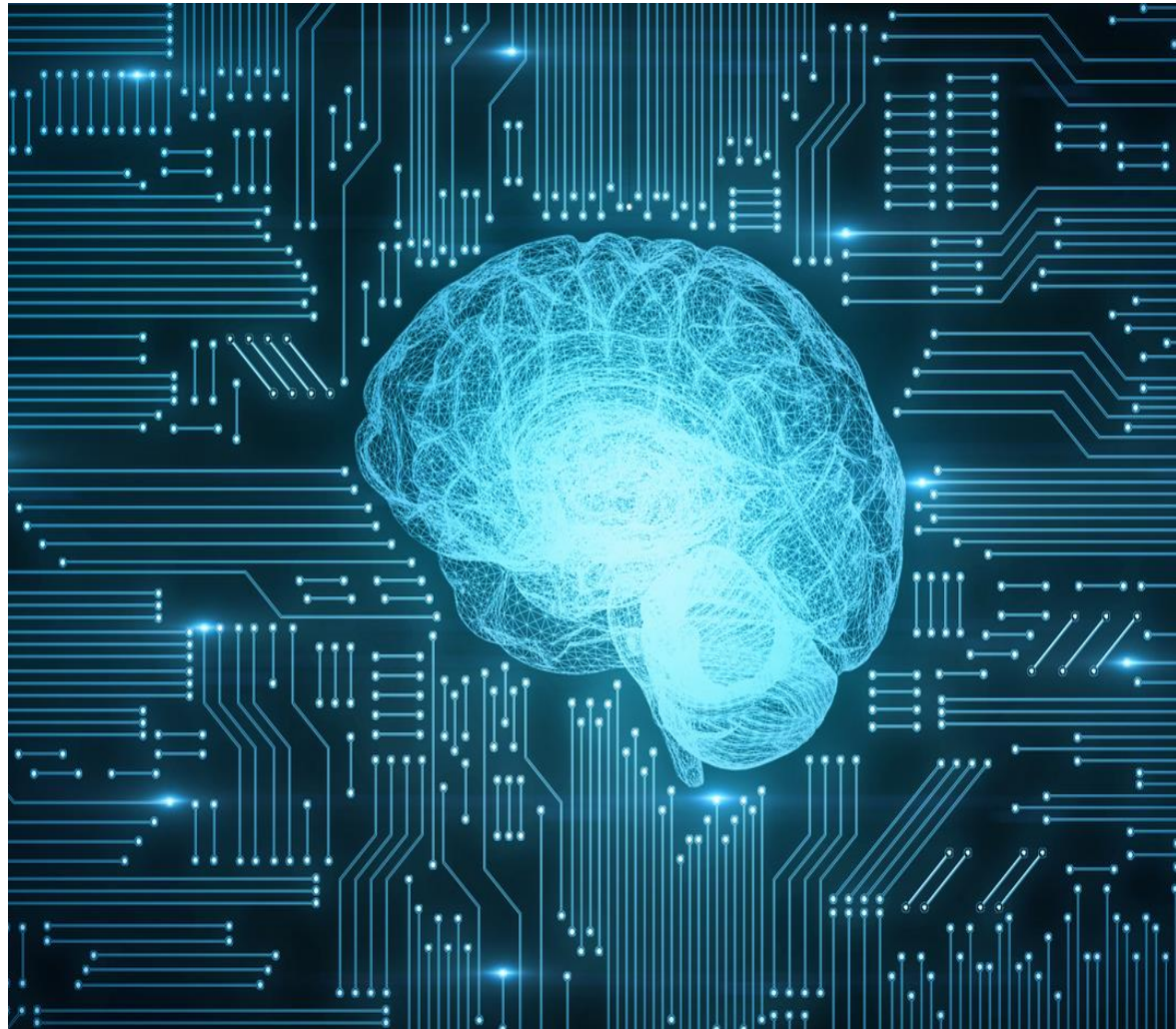
Addressing Adolescent
Suicide in South Korea

AUTHOR

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TOPICS

Suicide, South Korea,
Adolescent, Mental Health



Addressing Adolescent Suicide in South Korea

By Alyssa Kang

Summary: Suicide is a prevalent issue that widely affects all demographics in South Korea. In 2019, South Korea was ranked 12th highest in suicide rates globally, with 21.2 deaths per 100,000 people (World Health Organization, n.d.). This rate was also highest among all Asian countries and countries within the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (Donnelly et al., 2021; World Health Organization, n.d.). Among South Korean adolescents, suicide has been the leading cause of death since 2011, with a rate of 7 deaths per 100,000 people in 2021 (Statista, 2022b).

For Korean adolescents, the rate of suicide is twice the amount of deaths by unintentional injury (2nd leading cause) and three times the amount of deaths by cancer (3rd leading cause) (Jo et al., 2022). Between males and females, male adolescents have shown higher rates of suicide than their female counterparts (Lee, Park, Choi, & Park, 2022; Vizhub, n.d.). In 2019, the average suicide rate for males was about 2.4 and 1.84 for females (Lee, Park, Choi, & Park, 2022). However, statistics show that suicidal ideation is almost twice as high for females than for males. Among middle and high school students in 2021, the rate of suicidal ideation was 9.5% for boys and 16.1% for girls (Statista, 2022c). Whereas Korean male adolescents tend to display more externalized problems, such as impulse control and risk taking, which lead to more completed suicides, females tend to display more internalized problems, such as depressive symptoms or social exclusion, leading to more ideation (Lee, Park, Choi, & Park, 2022).

South Korean adolescents vary in their methods of attempting suicide. Research shows that jumping from high places was found to be the most common used method resulting in completed suicides, accounting for 56% of suicides among 10-19-year-olds in 2019 for both girls and boys (Song, Hong, et al., 2021; Jung, Lee, et al., 2019). Although jumping was the most common method for suicide attempts, hangings tended to be the most lethal method of suicide used by youth (Song, Hong, et al., 2021; Jung, Lee, et al., 2019). Many adolescents also use other less lethal methods to attempt suicide, including cutting and drug intoxication, which often do not result in death (Park, Kim, et al., 2015).

Depression is also a factor that influences adolescent suicides and is a high predictor for attempts and ideation (Kwon, Song, et al., 2016). In 2018, a nationwide study of adolescent students reported that about 17.6% of suicides were related to psychiatric disorders, such as depression (Liu, 2020). Within the country, the overall prevalence of suicide attempts in adolescents is 5.2%, but having depression increases the likelihood of an adolescent

attempting suicide 8 times (Park, 2008). This research reveals that depression correlates to higher rates of suicide. In a study of 106 depressed participants, 47.2% of the adolescents had attempted suicide (Kwon, Song, et al., 2016). Another study found that rates of suicide attempts for Korean adolescents categorized in the depressed and potentially depressed groups were 5.4 and 2.4 times higher than the non-depression group, respectively (Bee et al., 2022).

There are also proportionately higher rates of suicide among adolescents with specific characteristics. Those who struggle with problematic internet use are at higher risk for suicide due to increased ideation and were shown to be 5.82 times more likely to have suicidality than non-problematic users (Park, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2012; Lee, Park, Han, et al., 2016). Because internet use predicted depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation, those who display these behaviors were more at risk of attempting (Park, Kim, Lee, & Kim, 2012). Individuals of low socioeconomic status have also been shown to be at risk for suicide. Within Korea in 2016, 17% of adolescents who committed suicide came from very low socioeconomic status (Im et al., 2017). A study revealed that 25.8% of adolescents who had suicidal ideation perceived their socioeconomic status as low, compared to 16-17% who perceived their status as high (Kang, Hyun, Choi, et al., 2015). Additionally, stress stemming from a low income, unemployment, financial difficulties, poor working conditions, and extended shifts were risk factors for suicide (Raschke et al., 2022). Many studies also identified substance abuse as a risk factor; adolescents who used drugs were 4.6 times at higher risk for suicidal behavior than those without substance abuse risks (Park & Kim, 2016; Kong & Kim, 2016).

Contributing Factors

Cultural Influence and Stigma

Cultural upbringing and stigma towards mental health negatively affect how Korean adolescents handle suicidal ideations and increase the rate of suicide attempts. Because of the collective nature of Korean society, the idea of reaching out for help may cause individuals to forgo receiving

treatment to preserve their or their families' reputations and minimize, tolerate, or suppress difficult emotions (An et al., 2022). Research shows that only 1 in 4 Korean adolescents seek professional treatment, while the remaining 3 are more likely to try and fix their problems independently without support (Do et al., 2019).

Korean culture is also widely centered on perfectionist expectations in behavior and lifestyle, which contributes to a "success or failure" mentality for many adolescents. This negative labeling can make many struggling mentally feel "socially failed" or "useless members of society" (Donnelly et al., 2021). This feeling, as well as the expectation to conform to social norms, is a key contributor to suicide stigma (An et al., 2022). Because of this, adolescents withhold information for fear of not meeting cultural standards. A lack of information prevents parents, teachers, peers, and medical professionals from recognizing their suicidal ideation and intervening in possible attempts (Liu, 2020; Beteta, 2020; Kim, Hong, & Hong, 2020; Kim & Lee, 2023). Studies found that 70% of Korean adolescent students who committed suicide did not show any unusual emotional or behavioral characteristics at school, and teachers found it challenging to detect suicidal ideation in students because they observed the students to be mentally healthy (Lee, Lee & Hong, 2020). Other studies observed the difficulties associated with the belief that admitting a mental illness was shameful. Because many adolescents refrain from engaging in help-seeking behaviors with family, friends, and teachers, they are at a greater risk of suicidal ideation (Liu, 2020; Kwak & Ickovics, 2019).

One source showed that having a mental disorder is a risk factor for suicidal ideation, which leads to suicide attempts (Lee, Kim, & Lee, 2018). Because Koreans generally hold a stigmatized view of mental health, many with mental illness are not diagnosed (An et al., 2022; Beteta, 2020). This underdiagnosis can prevent struggling adolescents from receiving treatment, increasing their risk for suicide (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019). A study found that only 15-23% of individuals in Korea received treatment for mental disorders. To compare, about 44% of people receive treatment

in Western states (Roh, Kim, et al., 2016). Among the 17.6% of adolescent suicides caused by psychological disorders, primarily depression, only 11-22% of those individuals received psychiatric treatment (Liu, 2020). This relative lack of treatment increases suicidal ideation and attempts (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019).

Academic Stress

Because of pressures and expectations on students regarding grades, futures, and overall academic success, suicidal ideation and attempts correlate to academic stress. A nationwide study found that academic stress primarily contributed to suicide, accounting for 12% of adolescent suicide deaths (Liu, 2020), and a study revealed that as of 2020, 27% of adolescents in Korea experienced suicidal ideation, 40% reported that it was due to academic stress (Jo et al., 2022).

This stress consists of immense competitive pressure and expectations influenced by Korean culture (Park, Im, & Ratcliff, 2014) and are placed on adolescents starting at a young age (Jo et al., 2022). In 2022, 20.3% of middle school and high school students in South Korea had suicidal ideation because of anxiety about their futures and careers (Statista, 2022a). A study observed a statistically significant link between grade pressure, depression, and suicidal risk among Korean adolescents (Song, 2016). One study also reported that 26.7% of adolescents who perceived their academic performance as poor had suicidal ideation within the past year, 9.2% had attempted suicide compared to those who perceived theirs as excellent (16.2% and 3.8%, respectively) (Kang, Hyun, Choi, et al., 2015).

Research has also shown that among children who attended four or more hours of tutoring each day, 30% had clinically significant elevations of depressive symptoms. They also were 3 times more likely to show symptoms of depression than children who spent less than 4 hours per day in tutoring (Phosalay et al., 2019). As the duration of studying increases and leisure time decreases, rates and severity of depression increase (Lee & Bae, 2015), which can be a significant risk factor for suicide.

Bullying and Discrimination

Bullying is another risk factor influencing Korean adolescents' likelihood of suicidal ideation and attempts. Researchers reported that Korean adolescent students who experienced school bullying were twice as likely to report suicidal ideation and 40% more likely to suffer from depression from those experiences than those not bullied. Adolescents who experienced physical bullying (hitting) were 3.05 times more likely to attempt suicide than those not bullied. Similarly, victims of cyberbullying were found to be 2.94 times more likely to attempt suicide than those not bullied. Whether in traditional forms or online, bullying can greatly influence Korean adolescents and their mental state, leading to suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Roh, Yoon, et al., 2015).

Cyberbullying, suicidal ideation, and suicidal attempts have become more prevalent in recent generations because of increased internet use. In a national sample of over 7,000 Korean Children and Youth Rights Study students of the 17.7% of cyberbullied adolescents, 28.4% had suicidal ideation in the past 12 months. Additional research showed that suicidal ideation increases with cyberbullying severity—35% of students suffering from low levels of cyberbullying had suicidal ideation, and 52.4% had suicidal ideation with high levels of cyberbullying (Lee, Choi, Kim, & Park, 2021). This shows that the presence and intensity of cyberbullying increases risk for adolescent suicidal ideation and attempts.

Family Structure and Conflict

Family structure plays a significant role in influencing the mental state of an adolescent, which can influence the presence of suicidal ideation. Korean adolescents who live in restructured families (families with stepparents) or with single or divorced parents tend to have a greater risk for suicide. In 2018, single-parent families made up 10.9% of all families in Korea (Park & Lee, 2020). Studies show that adolescents in homes with single parents, stepparents, or orphaned were 4%, 14%, and 23% more likely to experience suicidal ideation than those with both-parent families, respectively. Researchers also found that those who were orphaned or had stepparents were 36% more likely to attempt

suicide than those with both biological parents (Lee, Park, Han, et al., 2016). This may be due to the emotional strain on children, as shifting family structures can lead to tenuous relationships between children and parents (Bong et al., 2021).

Consequences

Risk for Future Attempts

Having a history of suicide attempts or a form of non-suicidal self-injury was found to be a key risk factor for future suicides. Of students who attempted suicide or died by suicide in Korea, 28.4% had a history of self-harm, and 29.1% had previously attempted suicide (Song, Hong, Kim, et al., 2021). Other studies showed that 41.5% of adolescent attempters had a history of suicide attempts when visiting the emergency room (Lee, Bang, Min, et al., 2021). This data reveals that adolescents who have attempted in the past have a likelihood to attempt suicide multiple times, increasing the chance of death (Lee, Bang, Min, et al., 2021). These increased rates also correlate to the observation that adolescents can be more impulsive and emotionally unstable than adults, causing them to attempt suicide more unexpectedly (Lee, Kim, & Lee, 2019).

Effect on Family

After a suicide, family members of suicide victims are often affected immediately and personally. Because of the traumatic events of a suicide, family members and close friends of the suicide victim are often referred to as suicide survivors (Lee, Choi, & Kim, 2017). Survivors deal with the incident's aftermath and experience emotional effects such as grief, anger, and hopelessness (E. Lee, 2022). A study identified that Korean families that experienced the death of a teenage suicide victim were emotionally disturbed and socially isolated during bereavement (E. Lee, 2022). Because adolescents have less experience with mourning the death of people they know, the effects of suicide on a child survivor within the family can include grief and negative psychological (depression, post-traumatic stress) and emotional effects (shame and guilt) that can increase the risk of suicide later (Kim, Hong, & Hong, 2020).

Family members also experience a higher risk for mental illness. A study compared 272 suicide survivors to 5,200 individuals from the general population of Korea and found that the presence of major depressive disorder was 9 times higher among suicide survivors, and suicide attempts were 6 times higher (Jang, Lee, Seo, et al., 2020). This increase in mental illness can also put family members at higher risk for suicide. A study showed that compared to bereaved families of non-suicide deaths in Korea, the risk of suicide in suicide-bereaved families was 3 times higher. This same study found that the risk of suicide was second highest in mothers of a suicide victim, following a spouse of a suicide victim. This study, however, did not identify the age range of the children and was not specific to adolescent age (Jang, Park, Kim, et al., 2022).

Effects on Community and Society

Suicide also impacts the society surrounding the victim because the negative effects of suicide involve the communities of those individuals and the economy. A single suicide affects about 60 people on average, including family, close friends, and coworkers; as such, the average Korean has a 21.8% chance of being exposed to suicide over their lifetime (Jang, Lee, Seo, et al., 2022). Based on the rate of adolescent suicides, this means that there are approximately 34,000 survivors from adolescent suicide in Korea each year (8.15 million adolescents in Korea) / (100,000) x (7 adolescent suicides per 100,000) x (60 suicide survivors per suicide) = 34,230 suicide survivors by adolescents). Research found that childhood suicide survivors who lost a friend to suicide had persistent symptoms of depression and suicidal ideation up to eight months after their death. Additionally, 27.3% of these individuals were reported to be at risk for high levels of depression (Kim, Hong, & Hong, 2020). Data has also shown that suicide in communities contributes to adolescent depression, which can increase suicidal risk (Table 4 Two-Level Multilevel Logistic Regression Analysis of Individual- and Community-Level Factors Associated with Adolescent Depression).

Other studies explored the bereavement process of teachers of adolescent suicide victims. They

found that teachers experienced conflicting feelings about handling the suicide because of personal and professional factors. Though they did experience shock and grief from the incidents, the sociocultural beliefs placing negative perceptions on suicide resulted in a rejection of those suicides (Kim, 2019). Schools in Korea also tend to keep silent about student suicides for fear of shame or blame (Kim, 2019; Liu, 2020), making it difficult for teachers to grieve due to lack of time and pressure to conform with their organization (Kim, 2019). This study also found that teachers who were suicide survivors experienced a renewed perception of their role in suicide prevention as teachers to help students.

Suicide also has a significant impact on the economy. An analysis showed that the total social loss from suicides in Korea equals about \$5.9 billion. This loss occurs because those who have lost their lives to suicide can no longer contribute to the economy, resulting in a decline in economic productivity (Garg & Kothari, 2018). Many investments made by parents towards their child's education and healthcare are lost when their child commits suicide. Studies show that Korean parents spend between 15–30% of their family budget on private education for their children (Jarvis 2020). As a result, a suicidal act is a financial burden left on the individual's family, which is often a negative return on investments made by parents for their children (Garg & Kothari, 2018).

Innovative Solutions

Mental Health Services

South Korea has many mental health services for adolescents targeted for suicide prevention. These services include counseling (Jo et al., 2022), psychotherapy, school-based programs (Kong & Kim, 2016), and medical care. Because of the wide range of stressors contributing to Korean adolescents' mental health (many of which are predictors of suicide), more adolescents have sought counseling services within the past few years. In 2018, 5 million Korean adolescent students sought counseling services due to psychological difficulties (Jo et al., 2022).

Impact

Many studies have suggested that referral to specialized mental health institutions through schools can help promote mental health and reduce the risk of suicide. A study showed that suicide risk for adolescents who experience suicide attempts or self-injury decreases when they consult with specialized mental health institutions through school-based services (Kim, Hong, & Hong, 2020). Korean adolescents reported fewer negative emotions and psychological difficulties related to depression and anxiety after receiving these counseling intervention treatments. They also reported fewer difficulties with school and family and better interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers (Jo et al., 2022).

Gaps

There have been positive effects for Korean adolescents through this intervention; however, many of these services are limited and require more research on mental health, suicide, and evidence-based interventions (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019). Because social stigmas towards mental health persist, many adolescents shy away from seeking help, which delays mental health care and increases the risk of suicide ideation and attempts (Kwak & Ickovics, 2019). A lack of governmental support for these services also limits their effectiveness and development. Although their government's budget for mental care-related fields doubled from \$18 million in 2010 to \$43 million in 2014, it only accounted for less than 3% of the country's healthcare expenditures, which is significantly lower than the World Health Organization's (WHO) recommendation of 15-50% (Liu, 2020).

Multiple studies have proposed revisions to current mental health methods, emphasizing the need for school-based programs that can help students learn to identify mental illness symptoms like depression and suicide, build positive thinking skills, and create connections between struggling students and healthcare professionals (Kong & Kim, 2016; Kwak & Ickovics, 2019; Park, Im, & Ratcliff, 2014; Roh, Yoon, et al., 2015). Research suggests that implementing programs that collaborate between schools, parents,

communities, and governments and include long-term goals and guidelines can have a greater impact on preventing suicide risk in adolescents and will fill in gaps that are currently present in available programs (Liu, 2020; Kong & Kim, 2016; Park, Na, Kwon, et al., 2020).

Nonprofit Spotlight(s)

Gatekeeper Training

Although efforts are still ongoing, Korea has focused on training "gatekeepers" to detect early signs of suicide in adolescents (Park, Na, Kwon, et al., 2020; Na, Park, Kwon, et al., 2020).

Gatekeepers are individuals within a community such as teachers, counselors, or peers that are in the position to identify individuals at risk for suicide and refer them to treatment or supporting services (Burnette et al., 2015). In 2011, the non-governmental organization, "Korea Association for Suicide Prevention" (KASP), developed the Standardized Suicide Prevention Program for Gatekeeper Intervention under the support of the Life Insurance Philanthropy Foundation (Park, Na, Kwon, et al., 2020). This program included "Suicide CARE", which is a program that focuses on training individuals to detect and respond to early warning signs of suicide risk by emphasizing careful observation, active listening, risk evaluation, and referral to experts towards at-risk persons (Park, Na, Kwon, et al., 2020). This program was able to provide suicide prevention training to 1.2 million individuals in Korea by 2019 (Paik, 2014). Research showed that the referral rate for these types of programs was about 81.2% in 2017 and have shown to mitigate the risk of suicide death of survivors by 4.59 times, while those not referred are 1.87 times at higher risk of death by suicide (Kim, Hong, & Hong, 2020).

KASP also partnered with AstraZeneca to promote "safeTALK", which is another program that focused on training young peer supporters as gatekeepers, helping them to engage with other adolescents to identify and respond to suicide risks (AstraZeneca, n.d.). Through their efforts, they reached 88,000 young people about mental health and suicide awareness, trained 1,794 young gatekeeper peers and 782 teachers about risks, and involved 1,732 additional parents,

teachers, politicians and community leaders in the program (AstraZeneca, n.d.). However, because available research is limited, the ongoing impact of these efforts are yet to be determined.

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