



## **Prevalence of Suicide Ideation and its Gender Distribution Among Undergraduate of University of Cape Coast, Cape Coast, Ghana**

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### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** The purpose of the study was to find out the prevalence of suicide ideation among undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast and the gender distribution of suicide ideation among them.

**Methodology:** This study was a quantitative one and it used the quasi-experimental research design, specifically, the pre-test, post-test and control group design. A total of 30 undergraduate students from four colleges of the University of Cape Coast in the Central Region of Ghana was non-randomly assigned to two treatment groups, Individual Psychology and Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (IP and CBT) and one control group. Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation was used for the collection of data for the study. Descriptive Statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to analyse the data.

**Findings:** Results showed that two out of every 15 UCC undergraduate students experience suicide ideation continuously and persistently. Again, the rate at which female students think suicidal, that is, have suicidal ideas, is higher than the male students. In other words, female undergraduate students of University of Cape Coast experience suicide ideation more than their male counterparts. It was concluded that suicide ideation is prevalent, 13.3%, among undergraduate students of UCC.

**Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice:** Based on the findings, it was recommended that constant screening of suicide ideation be made part of the University's program and the Counselling Centre should be mandated to organise the screening exercise. This will help educate and create more awareness on suicide ideation and offer more people, per the screening, the opportunity to benefit from the therapies.

**Keywords:** *Suicide ideation, Suicide, College students, Undergraduate students, Prevalence, Gender*

## Introduction

When students enter into the tertiary level of education, especially, the university, they go through several changes (Arslan, Ayranci, Unsal, & Arslantas, 2009) and these changes and experiences can expose them to situations which can or may have impact on their lives (Tosevski, Milovancevic, & Gajic, 2010).

A loved one's suicide is an incredibly traumatic and painful life occurrence that affects a large proportion of the population of Ghana. Ghana records about 1,500 suicide cases annually; that is a suicide rate of more than four persons in a day. In the 2010 census, Ghana Statistics Service (2013), reported 3,705 suicides, and given that suicidal deaths are commonly underreported (Goldney, Clary & Snyder, 2010), the actual annual figure is likely to be higher. However, Dzorgbo (2014) indicated that scientific statistics of suicide in Ghana is hard to come by but agreed that the trend is increasing at a fast rate in the country.

Suicidality or suicidal behaviour occurs in a spectrum that ranges from the concept or intentions of suicide (ideation), to conversations linked to suicide, suicide attempts and eventually suicide (CDC, 2012). Suicide ideation is a critical part of the suicide process; it precedes suicide attempts and completed suicides (Harris & Barraclough, 1997). It is essential to identify this early step in the suicide process, so as to stop its progression into suicide plan or attempt (Arria, et. al., 2011; Harris & Barraclough, 1997). Thus, suicide ideation plays an important role in detecting and preventing suicidal behaviour (Palmer, 2004). According to Oppong, Kugbey, Osafo, Quarshie, and Sarfo (2017), Ghana has recorded few data where information on suicide ideation and suicidality among university students could be obtained. Again, visiting the various counselling centers of the university including the hospital, forty – five cases of attempted suicides were recorded within a span of four years (2015 – 2018).

Research highlights the urgency of developing and implementing effective assessment, prevention and treatment strategies. Theoretical frameworks form a basis for empirical study from which effective strategies evolve. The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (Joiner, 2005) contains the most up-to-date research in the field of suicide assessment and management of risk. The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide posits that two painful interpersonal states comprised of low belonging and misperceptions of being a burden are risk factors for suicidal desire. When these two psychological states occur simultaneously in an individual capable of lethal self-injury, the potential for suicide is most elevated. The unique strength of this theory lies in distinguishing between those who desire death by suicide, but do not attempt suicide and those who make a serious attempt to enact lethal self-harm.

According to World Health Organization (WHO, 2016) estimates, each year approximately one million people die from suicide and 10 or 20 times more people attempt suicide worldwide. This represents one death every 40 seconds and one attempt every 3 seconds. More people are dying from suicide than in all of the several armed conflicts around the world. In Ghana, it is estimated that 1500 people commit suicide annually, there is however a paucity of data of suicide mortality in Ghana (World Population Review, 2018).



Suicide rates vary markedly by age, sex and ethnicity. In the North American general population, rates of suicide increase in mid-adolescence (ages 15-19 years), especially for males (Nock, McMenamy, & Mitchell, 2008a). Adolescence and early adulthood are the times of greatest risk for the onset of suicidal ideation and behaviour (Nock et al., 2008a). For adolescents aged 12 to 17 years, lifetime prevalence of suicide ideation ranges from 19.8 to 24.0%, and for suicide attempts from 3.1 to 8.8%. The 12-month rates are similar, ranging from 15.0 to 29.0% for ideation, 12.6 to 19.0% for plans, and 7.3 to 10.6% for suicide attempts. Husky et al. (2012) reported that suicide among boys is four times greater than among girls. At the same time, female students are nearly twice as likely to consider or plan suicide as their male counterparts.

### **Research Questions**

1. How prevalent is suicide ideation among undergraduate students in the University of Cape Coast?
2. What is the gender distribution of suicide ideation among undergraduate students of UCC?

### **Methodology**

The research paradigm used for this study was positivism. Positivism is a philosophical approach based on experience and empirical knowledge of natural phenomena. Positivism represents a view that the goal of knowledge is to provide a depiction of the situation people have been through and the purpose of science which can be observed and measured (Trochim, 2006). Positivists believe that reality is out there and can be tested (Creswell & Plano, 2007). Positivists prefer to use quantitative data for their research and often conduct experiments, surveys and use statistics. They test hypotheses by carefully analysing numbers from the measures they employ. Thus, they depend mainly on figures and numbers that have been scrutinized and critiqued. This philosophy was applicable to this study since it aided the researcher to find the prevalence of suicide ideation and its gender distribution among undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast, Ghana.

The research approach adopted for the study was quantitative approach. The goal in conducting quantitative research study is to determine the relationship between one thing (an independent variable) and another (a dependent or outcome variable) within a population (Babbie, 2010).

The study employed the quasi-experimental design with the pre-test, post-test and control group which helped to establish the prevalence of suicide ideation and its gender distribution among undergraduate students of University of Cape Coast.

Beck's Scale for Suicide Ideation was used to collect the data with internal consistency of 0.89

### **Population**

The total number of regular undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast is 18,699. This includes students in all the five colleges of the University College: Humanities and Legal Studies, College of Health and Allied Sciences, College of Education Studies and College of

Agriculture and Natural Sciences. The target population was undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast and the accessible population was those who answered the screening inventory.

The multi-stage sampling technique was employed for the study. In the first stage, the purposive sampling was used to the University of Cape Coast for the study. From the five colleges of undergraduate students of the University, the researcher purposively selected four colleges of regular undergraduate students since undergraduate students of CODE, the fifth College, do not stay on campus but are scattered geographically and the researcher may not have access to them. From the colleges, one faculty each was purposively selected. Again, using the same purposive sampling method, four departments were chosen for the study. The targeted respondents from each of the department were subjected to the screening of the Beck's Scale of Suicide Ideation. A non-random criterion was then used to select 30 respondents, which means not every individual had the chance of being included in the study, from the various colleges based on the students that responded to the items on the Beck's Scale for Suicide Ideation.

The inclusion criteria are as follows;

- The person should be an undergraduate regular student of the University of Cape Coast.
- The person should be a student of any of the four colleges of the University indicated by the study.
- The student could be of any level of study.
- The student could be of either gender.
- The student should undergo screening to obtain a total score ranging from 19-38 to qualify for the intervention.

The targeted respondents from each of the department were subjected to the screening of the Beck's Scale of Suicide Ideation. A non-random criterion was then used to select 30 respondents from the various colleges based on the students that responded to the items on the Beck's Scale for Suicide Ideation. The total sample size was 30.

The distribution of the respondents is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: Sample Distribution**

College	Male	Female	Total	Sample
College of Agriculture and Natural Sciences	2806	835	3641	8
College of Education Studies	2985	2196	5181	8
College of Health and Allied Sciences	1478	1103	2581	8
College of Humanities and Legal Studies	4199	3097	7296	6

Total	11486	7231	18699	30
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Beck’s Scale for Suicide Ideation was used to measure the suicide ideation of undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast. The scale was in an adopted form. It is a 19-item instrument that evaluates the presence and intensity of suicidal thoughts.

To successfully gather data, an introductory letter was taken from the Department which helped the researcher introduce herself and explain the purpose of the study to the undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast. This gave me access to some students who went through the various treatments for the study.

Data from the field were cleaned, coded appropriately to make meaning out of them. Coding was done to facilitate data entering and a comprehensive analysis. With the aid of Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 25), descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages were used to analyse the data.

## Results

### Description of Participants

This section on the questionnaire (biographical) discusses the background information of the participants (students) who took part in the experiment. The results are presented in tables and graphs

**Table 2: Distribution of Students by College**

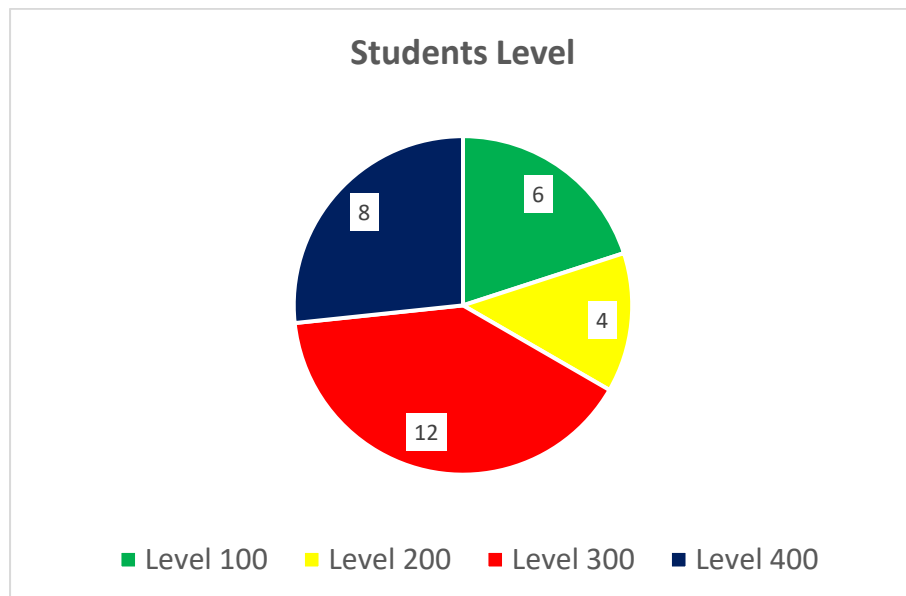
Colleges	Frequency	Percent (%)
College of Agriculture and Natural Science	8	26.7
College of Education Studies	8	26.7
College of Health and Allied Science	8	26.7
College of Humanities and Legal Studies	6	19.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field Survey (2020).

### Students Level

The results below show that level 300 students were the largest in proportion (n=12, 40.0%). Those in level 200 were the least (n=4, 13.3%).

**Graphical Presentation of the Students by Level**



*Figure 1:* A pie chart showing the distribution of the students' level

Source: Field Survey (2020).

**How prevalent is suicide ideation among undergraduate students in the University of Cape Coast?**

The main thrust of this research question was to explore the prevalence rate of suicide ideation among undergraduate students of the University of Cape Coast. The accrued results are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Prevalence of Suicide Ideation among Undergraduate Students**

Frequency of Suicide Ideation		
	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
Occasional	13	43.3
Intermittent	13	43.3
Persistent	4	13.3
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field Survey (2020).

The prevalence of suicide ideation among undergraduate students in the University of Cape Coast is presented in Table 3. The results suggested that most of the students occasionally and intermittently experience suicide ideation (n=13, 43.3%). Very few persistently and

continuously experience suicide ideation (n=4, 13.3%). In other words, two out of every 15 UCC undergraduate students experience suicide ideation continuously and persistently.

### **Research Question Two: What is the gender distribution of suicide ideation among undergraduate students of UCC?**

The researcher sought to explore the gender distribution of suicide ideation among undergraduate students of UCC. The results are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Gender Distribution of Suicide Ideation among Undergraduate Students of UCC**

Gender	Frequency (f)	Percent (%)
Male	12	40.0
Female	18	60.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Field Survey (2020).

The results from Table 4 suggest that a larger proportion of the students sampled for the study were females (n=18, 60%), while the males were less (n=12, 40%). This implies that, six out of every 10 undergraduate students of UCC having suicide ideation were females while the remaining four were males

## **Discussion**

### **Prevalence**

The results for the prevalence indicated that few students often and frequently experience suicide ideation, that is, two out of every 15 undergraduate students of University of Cape Coast think suicidal often or frequently.

A recent study by Owusu-Ansah, Addae, Peasah, Oppong and Osafo, (2019) on prevalence of suicide ideation on University students in Ghana obtained the following results; ideations 15.2%, attempted 6.3%, death wishes 24.3% and suicidal plan 6.8% and a study of secondary school students in Ghana also came out with the following results, 18.2%, 22.5% and 22.2% for ideation, plan and attempt respectively (Oppong et al., 2017; Baiden et al., 2019). Higher prevalence of suicide ideation has been reported among university students in Africa, reaching 47.5% among Botswana students and 32.3% among South African medical students (Korb, & Plattner, 2014; Van, Scribante, & Raubenheimer, 2012). Other studies also noted that during university years, 12% of students experienced suicide thoughts, with 2.6% of them expressing persistent suicide ideation (Wilcox et al., 2010)

The results of the study are consistent with other studies conducted in Ghana (Oppong et al., 2017; Baiden et al., 2019) and Africa (Korb, & Plattner, 2014; Van, Scribante, & Raubenheimer, 2012) and this could be as a result of the cultural revulsion people have against



suicide. Most people fear to report of being suicidal or engaging in suicidal thoughts because they see it as an abominable act and people who engage in those acts are considered as weak people. So, most people would prefer to keep to themselves and not report to be offered the needed help. Ghana, like many other countries, can register a death as suicide only when the media get to know of the situation or probably the person left a suicide note, whilst others require an assessment of suicidal intent. Also, in those countries where suicide is considered socially and culturally unacceptable, the death is more likely to be recorded as 'undetermined'. However, considering the higher prevalence in the African countries, different setting, environmental issues and the characteristics of the population involved could be attributed to the rise in prevalence of suicide ideation. This gives ample evidence to suggest the idea that the rate of suicide ideation varies widely across and within the different Colleges, Universities and countries around the world.

### **Gender and Suicide Ideation**

According to Eshun (2011), gender is a significant determinant for suicide ideation among Ghanaians. This study came with the findings that six out of every 10 undergraduate students of UCC having suicide ideation were females while the remaining four were males. According to Borges and Werlang (2006), suicide ideation tends to be more frequent in girls than boys. A study by Liu, Chen, and Lewis (2011), indicated that 16% of females are more suicide ideated than their male counterpart with 10.7%. Another study by Nowotny, Peterson and Boardman (2015), also gave its suicide ideation rate range for females to be 1.5% to 26.6% and that of males to be 1.7% to 15.4%. Additionally, Ram, Jagtap and Chandhury (2018), have also given out their finding on suicide ideation and the prevalence is more in females (5.32%) than in male (1.48%) students. However, Tyssen, Vaglum, Gronvold and Ekerberg (2001); Eskin, Voracek, Steiger and Altinyazar (2011) are of the view that despite it being widely accepted that females express a higher prevalence of suicide thoughts, it is also possible that there may be no differences between boys and girls on the matter of suicide ideation or that boys may express higher suicide thoughts.

One possible explanation for the consistency in higher suicide ideation in female, especially university students, compared to their male counterpart could be that most ladies are more interested in social and material comparison. This is when they compare their clothing, shoes, beauty products, accessories, phones, connections and even their academic records and results as the study considers students. This comparison, most of the time, makes them feel worse off, left out and decrease their sense of belongingness which in turn predispose them to suicide.

### **Conclusion**

Suicide ideation is prevalent among undergraduate students of UCC, but it is gender biased. This implies that, suicide ideation is more prevalent in females than in males. Therefore, workshop in Guidance and Counselling should be held occasionally to educate and create awareness on the efficacy of counselling therapies used in helping reduce suicide ideation. It is recommended that there is the need for annual or constant screening of suicide ideation as part of the University's program organised by the Counselling Center. This may help educate

and create more awareness on suicide ideation and bring in more people per the screening to benefit from counselling therapies.

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