

# The relationship between parental marital status and suicidal ideation and attempts by gender in adolescents: Results from a nationally representative Korean sample

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## Abstract

**Objective:** Suicide in adolescents is a major problem worldwide. The purpose of this study was to identify differences in suicidal behaviors with respect to parental marital status.

**Methods:** The data used in this study were obtained from the Korea Youth Risk Behavior Web-based Survey (KYRBWS) of middle and high school students in 2010. Using a national representative sample, this study analyzed data from 73,238 subjects. With respect to gender, the odds ratios of suicidal behavior were calculated based on the parental marital status, living situation, and family affluence scale (FAS).

**Results:** After adjusting for age, achievement, sadness, and substance use, the prevalence of suicidal ideation in adolescents with a remarried parent significantly increased among boys to 1.364 [95% confidence interval (CI) = 1.027–1.813] and among girls to 1.511 (95% CI = 1.215–1.879). The odds ratio of suicide attempts increased to 1.808 (95% CI = 1.119–2.923) for adolescent boys and to 1.947 (95% CI = 1.609–2.356) for adolescent girls. However, having a single parent did not affect the prevalence of suicidal ideation in either gender. In girls, as family affluence decreased, the odds ratio of suicidal ideation notably increased. For girls whose families were in a low tier of the FAS, the odds ratio of both suicidal ideation and suicide attempts increased.

**Conclusions:** Both boys and girls were more likely to report suicidal ideation and attempts after a parent's remarriage, whereas family affluence was inversely related to suicidal ideation and attempts in girls.

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## 1. Introduction

In South Korea, one person commits suicide every 34 min. The rate of suicide in Korea is ranked second in the world and first among countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [1]. The suicide rate in adolescents was 3.5 suicides per 100,000 adolescents in 2006 but rapidly increased to 5.2 suicides per 100,000 in 2010. In the past, suicide was the second leading cause of

death after motor vehicle accidents, but it recently became the highest cause of death and, as a consequence, developed into a major social issue among adolescents [2].

The family unit is one of the most important factors contributing to the mental well-being of adolescents. Adolescents who have a dysfunctional family structure or who do not receive emotional support from their families are more likely to experience social maladjustment (e.g., problems at school, conflicts in relationships, and delinquent behaviors) and self-destructive behaviors, such as suicide [3]. Furthermore, adolescents in one-parent or step-parent families are more likely to exhibit depressed moods, have more suicidal thoughts, and attempt suicide more often than their peers [4]. Both socioeconomic status (SES) and family structure affect deviant behaviors in adolescents [5]. An

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adolescent's family structure even influences his or her academic performance [6]. For example, having a single mother or no parents adversely influences the academic performance of adolescents [7]. Furthermore, family dysfunction influences emotional difficulties, such as depression, and therefore has an indirect effect on behaviors such as suicide [8]. Other factors, such as experiencing the death of a parent, also increase the risk of suicide in adolescents [9], and a family's SES has been found to affect adolescent suicidal ideation and attempts [10].

Adolescence is a period during which gender differences caused by secondary sexual characteristics are evident [11]. It has been found that whereas the greatest cause of death in all Korean adolescents is suicide, among boys, suicide is the second leading cause of death [2]. Furthermore, it has been found that early onset of puberty is a risk factor among girls, because it influences future suicide attempts [12]. The impact of the parents' marital status on suicidal behavior differs between teenage boys and girls [13]. Gender-specific effects of parental divorce on their children's suicidal ideation appear to differ, and gender-specific analyses have revealed conflicting results [14–17]. Such differences might be explained by childhood stressors, adverse childhood experiences, etc. [17], but the conclusions are not yet clear.

Accordingly, it is crucial to identify risk factors for adolescent suicide. Existing studies have revealed that family structure has a significant influence on adolescent suicidal behavior, but most of these studies used small samples of adolescents [13,18,19]. It is also necessary to specify the previous definition of family structure into possible subcategories, such as parental marital status, the existence of siblings, and the existence of living grandparents, to achieve a more detailed and accurate analysis. To increase objectivity, the SES index, which is often used when comparing adolescents of different nations, was used as a more objective measure than self-reporting.

Therefore, this study examined the effects of family relationships and SES on adolescent suicidal behaviors after adjusting for major factors of suicide, such as depression (sadness) and substance use (especially alcohol use) by gender.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Study subjects

This study used data from the 2010 Korea Youth Risk Behavior Web-based Survey (KYRBWS) that was conducted by the Korea Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (KCDC). The KYRBWS was approved by Statistics Korea (approval No. 11758) and has been conducted annually as an anonymous, online, self-reporting survey. The survey consisted of 128 questions assessing demographic characteristics and 14 areas of health-related behaviors, including cigarette smoking, alcohol drinking, obesity, physical activity, eating habits, injury prevention, sexual behaviors,

mental health, oral health, allergic disorders, personal hygiene, internet addiction, drug abuse, and health equity.

The survey's target population was students in grades 7 through 12 in South Korea. From each grade level, one sample class was chosen, and all students from the six sample classes from each school were chosen as sample students. During the survey, participants were assigned identification (ID) numbers and guaranteed anonymity.

A total of 73,238 out of 74,980 students completed the survey for a 97.7% participation rate. The test–retest reliability of the KYRBWS questionnaire has been reported to be stable [20]. As this study used public data from an anonymous KCDC sample pool, it did not require approval from any institutional review board.

### 2.2. Variable measurements

#### 2.2.1. Suicidal behaviors

Answering “Yes” to the sadness question “In the last 12 months, feelings of sadness or despair have interrupted my daily activities for at least two weeks” was considered a sign of depression. Answering “Yes” to the question “In the last 12 months, have you seriously considered suicide?” indicated suicidal ideation. In addition, answering “Yes” to the question “In the last 12 months, have you attempted suicide?” indicated suicidal attempt(s).

#### 2.2.2. Family factors

Family structure was based on answers to questions regarding the existence of family members (father, stepfather, mother, and stepmother). Having both a father and a mother was categorized as having both parents, and having either a father or a mother was categorized as only having one parent. Having a father and a stepmother, or a mother and a stepfather, was categorized as having step-parents. The category about siblings was separated into questions about having either older siblings or younger siblings. Having either a grandfather or a grandmother was categorized as having a grandparent.

To measure the material wealth of a family, the Family Affluence Scale II (FAS-2) was used. Scores from each item were added, and total scores ranged from 0 to 9. A low FAS (score = 0–2) indicated low affluence, a medium FAS (score = 3–5) indicated middle affluence, and a high FAS (score = 6–9) indicated high affluence.

### 2.3. Statistical analysis

A  $\chi^2$  test was used to evaluate the baseline characteristics of the target sample. To examine the relationships among variables that affect suicide and suicide attempts, a logistic regression was used. The association between suicidal behavior and family factors appears to vary by gender. In model 1, the dependent variable was either suicidal ideation or attempted suicide. Analyses regarding the relationship between suicidal behavior and independent factors, including the FAS, family factors (e.g., family structure, siblings, grandparents, and live with family), academic achievement, and age were performed separately for each gender. In model 2, the presence of sadness and substance

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