

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Suicidal Ideation and its Correlates among Juvenile Delinquents in South Korea

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Abstract

Objectives: This study investigated suicidal ideation and its correlates among juvenile delinquents in South Korea.

Methods: Suicidal ideation, psychological health status, and health-related behaviors were assessed using a self-administered questionnaire in 1682 juvenile offenders aged between 15 and 18 years in 2012.

Results: The prevalence of suicidal ideation in juvenile delinquents was 15.2%. Girls were more likely to report suicidal thoughts than boys (30.3% vs. 12.7%). Suicidal ideation was more common among adolescents who were not living with their family prior to entering detention centers (22.6% vs. 13.2%) than their counterparts. The likelihood of suicidal ideation was significantly associated with problem drinking [odds ratio (OR) = 1.84], psychedelic drug use (OR = 2.04), feeling unhappy (OR = 3.05), feeling sad or depressed (OR = 13.37) after controlling for sociodemographic factors, other health behaviors and perceptions.

Conclusion: The present study provides evidence for an association between suicidal ideation and psychological health and health risk behaviors among juvenile delinquents. It also highlights the importance of mental health and behavioral interventions for this population to prevent suicidality.

1. Introduction

Suicide acts as a serious public health problem and a major risk factor leading to dangerously unhealthy lives [1]. According to the report of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), an

association of wealthy and industrialized nations, in 2011, South Korea showed the highest suicide rate among the 30 OECD countries (33.3 deaths per 100,000) and had a 10-fold difference compared to Greece where suicide rates were the lowest (3.1 deaths per 100,000) [2]. In particular, suicide has been the first leading cause of death

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among Korean adolescents and young adults aged 15–24 years since 2002 [3]. Suicide is the major cause of death in youth in several countries. In the US, suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents aged 15–24 years. Among 15–24-year-olds, suicide accounts for 20% of all deaths annually [4].

Suicide is completed through several steps of suicidal ideas, plans, and action. Suicidal thought is believed to precede the onset of suicidal plans and action. Thus, it is considered to be one of the strong indicators of future suicide [5,6]. To prevent suicide, it needs interventions to prevent progression of thought to suicidal attempts [7–9]. Korea Youth Risk Behavior Web-based Survey (KYRBWS) in 2011 found that 19.3% of youth from third-grade in middle school to high school students had thoughts of suicide in the past 12 months [10]. In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance in 2011 reported that 15.8% of youths in Grades 9–12 had seriously considered attempting suicide [4].

Adolescent exposure to delinquency is more dangerous in terms of suicidal ideation risk. Bjorkenstam et al [6] found that adolescents who were delinquents repeatedly were three times more likely to attempt suicide than other youths. Thompson et al [11] also found that delinquent youths tended to have more suicidal ideation than general youth. Juvenile delinquents are defined as the group at high risk for suicide because they are exposed to higher risks of suicide, suicidal attempts, and suicidal ideas than general adolescents [12]. These findings support that suicide problems are related to adolescent delinquent behavior.

Early identification of high-risk groups of adolescents will be important for the prevention of suicide. There have been many studies that define characteristics of adolescents who have suicidal ideation. Sex, poor sociality and family functioning, mood disorder, alcohol abuse, cigarette smoking, and illicit substance use were considered as influential factors of suicidal ideation [13–18]. Poor mental health status also has been a risk factor for suicidal ideation, and an issue in predicting the suicidal ideation [19]. Various studies have been done on the relationship of suicidal idea to health behavior characteristics that be extended to sleeping pattern and physical activity [20,21].

Juvenile delinquents have been pointed out as a high-risk group for suicidal thoughts and attempts but there is a paucity of data on their prevalence and correlates. Therefore, this study defined juvenile delinquents as a high-risk group, and the aims were: (1) to identify the prevalence of suicidal ideation among inmates in youth detention facilities; (2) to identify the differences in suicidal ideation, health behaviors, and perceptions between juvenile delinquents and general adolescents; and (3) to find the correlates of suicidal ideation among juvenile delinquents.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Data

Data were collected from a self-report questionnaire at 10 juvenile correctional facilities in South Korea. The participants of the study were 1682 juvenile detainees aged 15–18 years, excluding 28 inmates who refused to respond to the survey questions. In collaboration with the Juvenile Division of the Korean Ministry of Justice, the survey was conducted twice in 2012, once in February–March, and once in August–September. The delinquents under probation for < 1 month were excluded from the study. Almost every juvenile delinquent participated in this survey, therefore, the study participants were the representative juvenile detainees in South Korea.

To compare the data of juvenile delinquents with those of general adolescents, participants in the Eighth KYRBWS in 2012 served as a general youth group. The Eighth KYRBWS at national level used two-stage cluster sampling, and a systematic sampling method within each stratum. Schools were a primary sampling unit and classes at different grades served as a secondary sampling unit. A total of 41804 general adolescents aged 15–18 years were recruited to complete the online survey. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Korea Association of Health Promotion, Seoul, Korea (IRB No. KAHP-12-B-04).

2.2. Measurement of variables

Self-reported questionnaire items on suicidal ideation, health-related behaviors and perceptions were drawn from the Eighth KYRBWS questions. However, some items were revised to be suitable for use in the controlled environment of juvenile facilities. The suicidal ideation was measured using the question: “During the past year, did you ever seriously consider attempting suicide?” Measures on sociodemographic factors included sex, age, level of academic achievement, living with family prior to entering the correctional facilities, and level of household income. The levels of academic achievement and household income were classified as “high or above average”, “average”, and “below average or low”. The measures on living arrangements of adolescents prior to entering the juvenile facility were dichotomized into “lived with family” or “lived apart from family”.

In order to identify behavioral factors associated with suicidal thoughts, we measured smoking, problem drinking, psychedelic drug use, physical activity, and skipping breakfast which were shown to be related to suicidal phenomenon in previous studies [14,22]. For smoking, alcohol drinking and drug use, they were not allowed in the highly controlled detention centers, juvenile detainees were investigated their prior experiences of these risk behaviors prior to entering correctional facilities. Smoking status was assessed in four categories: smoked every day, smoked on some

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