

# Childhood trauma key indicator of suicide ideation in college students

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New research from the School of Psychology at Trinity College Dublin has shown that cumulative exposure to childhood trauma was a key indicator of suicide ideation among university students. Screening for

adverse childhood experiences could help to improve college services and supports, according to the authors of the study.

The research, conducted by Madhav Bhargav, Ph.D. candidate, and Dr. Lorraine Swords, Assistant Professor in Child & Adolescent Psychology, has recently been published in the journal, BJPsych Open. The study was based on a cross-sectional survey of 321 college students primarily recruited from universities in Ireland.

Adverse childhood experiences refer to negative life events that individuals encounter during their first 18 years of life. They include neglect or maltreatment and significant dysfunction in the home, such as [domestic violence](#), drug or [alcohol addiction](#) and abuse.

A growing body of research has established a relationship between adverse childhood experiences, suicide thoughts, and suicidal behaviours and has indicated that the prevalence of suicidal phenomena is higher among individuals with a history of adverse childhood experiences. However there is a lack of understanding of the process by which adverse childhood events lead to [suicidal ideation](#) in particular.

The researchers found that adverse childhood experiences were common in college students with 35.2% reporting 1-3 such events and a further 39.6% reporting 4-12 adverse childhood experiences. The study, also found serious levels of suicide ideation among the research group meaning many students expressed feelings of burdensomeness, a belief that there are no solutions to problems, and planning, or communicating intent, to die by suicide.

Moreover, the research highlighted the relationship between higher adverse childhood experiences scores and poorer mental health in the form of psychological distress and suicide ideation.

The findings also provided strong evidence that factors such as feelings of not belonging and feelings of being a burden on others can mediate the relationship between higher cumulative adverse childhood experiences scores and suicide ideation.

Ph.D. candidate Madhav Bhargav said: "Adverse childhood experiences scores may be useful as an identifying marker for university services to ensure that students get the most out of their time in college. Creating a trauma-informed culture within the college community would foster an awareness of how past adverse experiences can affect students' present functioning so that appropriate supports can be advertised and provided. However, any attempt to screen for students exposed to potentially traumatic early experiences as part of a trauma-informed approach to college services must be done sensitively."

Dr. Lorraine Swords, assistant professor in child and adolescent psychology, added: "Dr. Lorraine Swords added: Our research shows that many [young people](#) enter college with prior potentially traumatic experiences that may have an impact on their academic and social life. It is important to acknowledge that young people who have experiences of early adversity are not a homogenous group, and not all are negatively affected in the long-term by these early encounters. Future studies that explore the role of risk factors known to exacerbate the effects of early adverse experience, such as low socio-[economic status](#), would be valuable in this research area."

The paper, titled "Role of thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness and psychological distress in the association between [adverse childhood experiences](#) and suicidal ideation in [college students](#)," was published online in *BJ Psych Open* recently.

**More information:** Madhav Bhargav et al, Role of thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness and psychological distress in

the association between adverse childhood experiences and suicidal ideation in college students, *BJPsych Open* (2022). DOI: [10.1192/bjo.2021.1087](https://doi.org/10.1192/bjo.2021.1087)

Provided by Trinity College Dublin

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