

Anxiety and depression as risk factors for suicidal ideation in adolescents

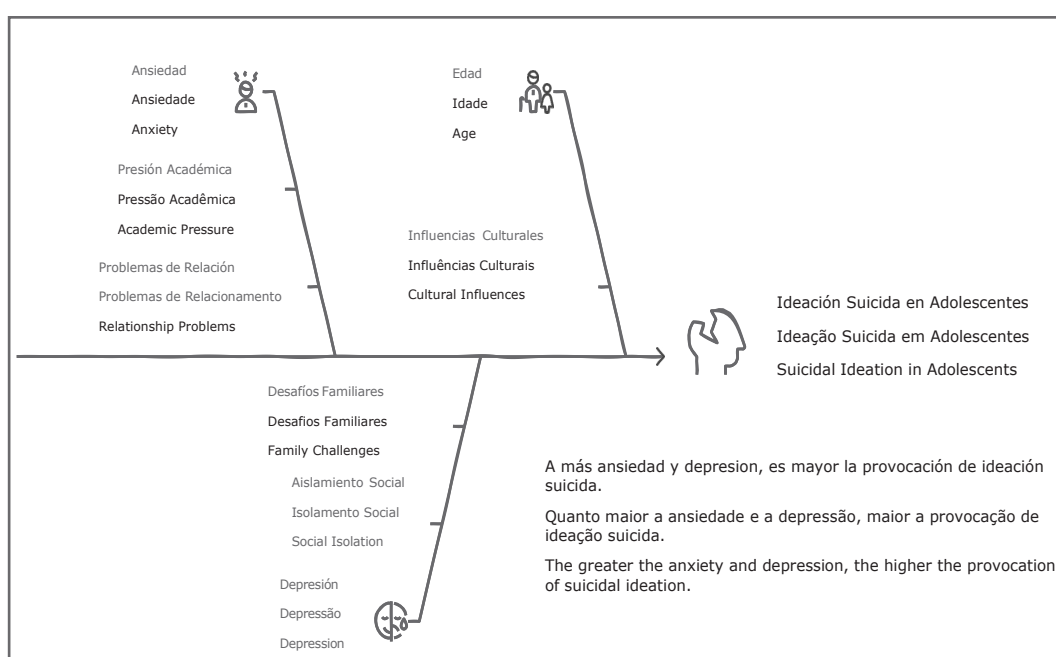
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Graphical Abstract

Highlights

- Suicide is a public health issue present in all stages of life.
- Addressing suicidal thoughts and risk factors in students is essential for prevention.
- Schools should strengthen emotional skills to reduce suicidal ideation.
- A higher number of depressive symptoms increases the risk of suicide, highlighting the urgency of intervention.



Abstract

Suicidal ideation in adolescents is a complex and multifactorial problem that has gained significant relevance in recent decades. Stigmatized as a critical stage, adolescence is a period in which emotions are more intense, as cognitive development is still in progress, making young people more vulnerable. It is considered by some as the most problematic phase, where high-risk issues, including suicidal ideation, emerge. For many, adolescence represents the healthiest period from a biological perspective, with its understanding being more of a cultural construct rather than solely a biological transition. Consequently, this study aimed to understand the factors influencing suicidal ideation in students from a Secondary Education Institution in the city of Juliaca, Peru. The research followed a cross-sectional design with a descriptive-explanatory approach. A total of 801 students from the first to the fifth year of secondary school participated in the study, all enrolled and actively attending their academic activities. The average age was 14.97 ± 1.92 years, with 423 being female (52.8%) and 378 male (47.2%). The research findings revealed significant results in three factors: anxiety ($\beta = 0.395$; $P < 0.001$), depression ($\beta = 0.258$; $P < 0.01$), and adolescents' age ($\beta = 0.101$; $P < 0.001$). In this context, preventive interventions, emotional education, and family support are essential to mitigate the risk of suicide in adolescents.

Keywords: Adolescence. Anxiety. Depression. Stress. Suicidal Ideation.

Associate Editor: Edison Barbieri
Mundo Saúde. 2025;49:e16672024
O Mundo da Saúde, São Paulo, SP, Brasil.
<https://revistamundodasaude.emnuvens.com.br>

Received 05 october 2024.
Approved: 19 march 2025.
Published: 08 april 2025.

INTRODUCTION

Suicidal thoughts or suicidal ideation are a significant public health concern affecting individuals across different life stages. Within the spectrum of suicidal behavior, suicidal ideation can progress to a suicide attempt or even result in death¹. Certain risk factors may increase the likelihood of developing suicidal ideation, including anxiety, depression, and stress, among others, which tend to be more recurrent during adolescence. However, this is not an absolute condition exclusive to a specific age or stage of life. The etiology of suicidal ideation is undoubtedly complex and multifactorial, and its treatment faces numerous challenges, such as social stigma, personal fears and denial, and difficulty in expressing emotions and thoughts².

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), approximately 700,000 people die by suicide each year, which equates to one death every 40 seconds³. Additionally, suicide is the fourth leading cause of death among adolescents. The rates of suicidal ideation and suicide vary significantly across countries, but factors such as mental disorders, substance abuse, and personal or economic crises increase the risk. According to WHO, 73% of suicides occur in low-income countries. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) emphasizes that suicide prevention is closely linked to improving quality of life, better child-rearing practices, and, most importantly, timely mental health assessments for adolescents. Likewise, cultural factors—including age and gender—must be considered when designing suicide prevention strategies⁴. According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), adolescent suicide cases in Argentina have tripled over the last decades, increasing from 12.7 per 100,000 adolescents. As a result, this issue has become the second leading cause of death among individuals aged 10 to 19⁵.

Anxiety is one of the factors associated with suicidal ideation in school environments. For instance, a study conducted with adolescents by the Don Bosco Project Foundation in Ambato, Ecuador, found a significant correlation between anxiety and suicidal ideation, with values of $p < 0.001$; $r = 0.481$ ⁶. Furthermore, the World Health Organization reports that approximately 4% of the global population currently suffers from an anxiety disorder. In 2019, 301 million people worldwide were diagnosed with an anxiety disorder, making it the most prevalent of all mental disorders. These disorders manifest through feelings of impending dan-

ger, panic, or doom³.

Suicidal ideation among adolescents faces several challenges. According to Álvarez *et al.*, studies have found a strong relationship between suicidal ideation and depression⁷, leaving lasting marks on how individuals perceive themselves⁸. Regarding the causes, Amaral, citing Álvarez, states that depression and suicidal ideation are key factors in predicting suicide risk⁷. Additionally, Biswas *et al.* conducted a study across 82 countries, surveying 275,057 adolescents divided into age groups (12–13 years, 14–15 years, and 16–17 years)⁹. The results indicated that the overall pooled prevalence of suicidal ideation was 14.0% (95% CI: 10.0–17.0%) and 9.0% (7.0–12.0%), respectively. However, in another initial sample of 1,881 students aged 14 to 19 years, the findings revealed that approximately 4% of adolescents had attempted suicide at least once in their lifetime¹⁰.

In Peru, around 1.7 million people suffer from depression, making it a serious public health issue¹¹. According to the Ministry of Health (MINSA), 280,917 cases of depression were treated in 2023, of which 75.5% corresponded to women and 16.5% to adolescents. Likewise, anxiety was the most frequently treated mental health disorder in the country, with a total of 433,816 cases reported in 2022. A 2021 survey conducted among 619 adolescent students found that 21.5% had experienced suicidal ideation, with higher prevalence among females and those living in rural areas. Furthermore, 12% of adolescents showed symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder, which doubled their risk of suicidal ideation ($p = 0.001$)—findings consistent with international statistics. Suicidal ideation is defined as thoughts related to ending one's own life. Additionally, Rodríguez *et al.*¹² describe it as encompassing thoughts of meaninglessness, desires to die, mental images of suicide, and even planning actions to carry it out. Baños identifies family-related issues as the primary motivation for suicidal ideation (59.2%), followed by conflicts with other family members (10.5%) and academic factors (7.9%)¹³. According to Arguelles, suicidal ideation among high school students is strongly influenced by bullying and domestic violence in most case studies¹⁴. According to Arguelles, suicidal ideation among high school students is strongly influenced by bullying and domestic violence in most case studies¹⁵.

On the other hand, according to Huanca, suicidal behavior among adolescents from Secondary

Educational Institutions (SEI) “Comercial 45” in Puno and Gran Unidad Escolar “José Antonio Encinas” in Juliaca (2016) aligns with data reported by the Ministry of Health of Puno (MINSA Puno). The reasons cited for suicide attempts among these adolescents varied: at SEI “Comercial 45”, students experiencing suicidal thoughts were found to be affected by economic difficulties, domestic violence, and parental separation; at SEI “José Antonio Encinas”, cases of students who died by suicide were linked to romantic breakups and abuse within the school environment¹⁶. However, it is essential to emphasize that romantic breakups and abuse within educational institutions are not necessarily direct causes of suicidal behavior. Rather, they

should be understood as risk factors that increase the probability of suicide.

Similarly, Taucaya found that students aged 13 to 15 years accounted for 68.5%, while those aged 16 to 18 years represented 31.5%. Among them, 97.5% reported a moderate frequency of suicidal thoughts, while 2.5% exhibited a high frequency¹⁷.

Given the above, the purpose of this academic study is, first and foremost, to explore suicidal ideation through the lens of anxiety and depression as risk factors, recognizing it as a public health issue. This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the problem, fostering the development of strategies to mitigate this growing social issue among school-aged adolescents.

METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted at a public Secondary Education Institution in the city of Juliaca, department of Puno – Peru, during the months of September and October 2024, -15.48777539199284, -70.12405737534135. The study followed a cross-sectional descriptive-explanatory design, which allows for estimating the prevalence of habits, attitudes, and behaviors. Additionally, this design is used to obtain an accurate description of a situation or phenomenon while also attempting to explain its underlying causes or relationships¹⁸.

Participants were given access to a Google form, enabling them to answer a series of questions as well as the standardized instruments “DASS-21” and the Beck Scale for Suicidal Ideation (BSSI). Prior to participation, a consent form was provided for their guardians to complete. The form did not collect personal data, such as email addresses or student names. The explanation regarding how to complete the survey was provided in person. Coordination was made with class tutors so that they could inform parents about the study to be conducted.

Two standardized instruments were used to detect this issue¹⁹. The first, called “DASS-21,” consists of 21 items, allowing for the measurement of the presence and intensity of affective states such as depression, anxiety, and stress. The rating scale was as follows: 0: Did not occur to me; 1: Occurred a little, or for part of the time; 2: Occurred considerably, or for a good part of the time; 3: Occurred

a lot, or for most of the time. For this instrument, a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.954 was obtained, considered good. On the other hand, the instrument called “Beck Scale for Suicidal Ideation: BSSI” consists of 20 items distributed across 4 factors and/or characteristics, allowing for the measurement of suicidal intent, or the degree of seriousness and intensity with which someone has thought about or is thinking about suicide. For this instrument, a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.925 was obtained, also considered good. It is worth noting that these instruments are validated and used internationally.

Finally, this test was applied virtually to students from the first to the fifth year of secondary education. Each participant was informed about the research objectives, and informed consent was obtained. The test took approximately 15 minutes to complete.

For data analysis, Pearson correlation was used, with a significance level set at $p < 0.05$. Additionally, a multiple linear regression model was employed, in which the considered factors included anxiety, depression, stress, gender, age, and living conditions. Statistical processing was performed using IBM SPSS software version 25, adopting a significance level of $p < 0.05$ to determine the relevance of the obtained results. This study, in conclusion, will contribute to understanding the problem of suicide among adolescents, serving as a basis for further in-depth investigations.

RESULTS

Regarding the characteristics of the participants in this study, 801 students from the first to the fifth year took part, all of whom were in regular academic standing, enrolled, and consistently attending their academic activities. The participants had an average age of 14.97 ± 1.92 years, with 423 identifying as female (52.8%) and 378 as male (47.2%). A significant majority of the students, specifically 49.9% (n = 400), were over 15 years old, suggesting a predominance of students in mid-adolescence.

Additionally, students' internet usage was nota-

ble: 39.3% (n = 315) reported using this service for 3 to 4 hours per day. Considering that they dedicate 5 hours to studying at their educational institution, this indicates that little time remains for other academic activities and leisure. Regarding self-perception of personal issues, 14.8% (n = 118) reported experiencing anxiety, 38.5% (n = 308) mentioned other problems—including general family issues, academic performance, addiction, and bullying—while 46.8% (n = 375) stated they had no problems (Table 1).

Table 1 - Characteristics of the participants in this study.

Sociodemographic Variables	$\chi \pm S.D.$	N	%
Age	14.97 \pm 1.92		
Under 14 years old		202	25.2
Between 14 and 15 years old		199	24.8
Over 15 years old		400	49.9
Gender			
Female		423	52.8
Male		378	47.2
School Year			
First		202	25.2
Second		137	17.1
Third		62	7.7
Fourth		183	22.8

Sociodemographic Variables	$\chi \pm S.D.$	N	%
Fifth		217	27.1
Hours of Internet Use			
Less than 3 hours/day		279	34.9
3 to 4 hours/day		315	39.3
More than 4 hours/day		207	25.8
Self-Defined Problem			
Anxiety		118	14.7
Others		308	38.5
None		375	46.8
Participants			
Students		801	100.00

Table 2 - Correlations.

Correlations				
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Anxiety (1)	-	.847**	.844**	.627**
Depression (2)	.847**	-	.853**	.607**
Stress (3)	.844**	.853**	-	.570**
Suicidal Ideation (4)	.627**	.607**	.570**	-

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The analysis revealed a direct and statistically significant analogy between factors associated with suicidal ideation. First, a moderate positive correlation was observed with anxiety, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.627$ ($p < 0.001$), meaning that the higher the anxiety, the greater the occurrence of suicidal ideation. Second, a similar association was found with depression, with a coefficient of $r = 0.607$ ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the higher the depression, the greater the incidence of suicidal thoughts. Third, an association was noted with stress, with a coefficient of $r = 0.570$ ($p < 0.001$), revealing that the higher the

stress, the greater the incidence of suicidal ideation. Similarly, a strong positive correlation was identified between stress and depression, with a coefficient of $r = 0.853$ ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the higher the stress, the greater the depression. Additionally, a correlation was found between depression and anxiety, with a coefficient of $r = 0.847$ ($p < 0.001$), suggesting that the higher the depression, the greater the anxiety. Finally, a high positive correlation was observed between stress and anxiety, with a coefficient of $r = 0.844$ ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the higher the stress, the greater the anxiety.

Table 3 - Linear regression model predicting suicidal ideation.

MODEL	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	p-value	95% Confidence Interval for B	
	B	SE				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Anxiety	.623	.090	.395	6.953	.000	.447	.799
Depression	.396	.089	.258	4.451	.000	.221	.570
Stress	.021	.097	.013	.222	.824	-.168	.211
Gender	.906	.443	.057	2.044	.041	.036	1.777
Age	-.420	.116	-.101	-3.624	.000	-.647	-.193
Family Coexistence	-.052	.200	-.007	-.262	.793	-.445	.340
Hours of Internet Use	.411	.298	.040	1.382	.167	-.173	.995

Dependent variable: Suicidal ideation.

The analysis presents the factors leading adolescents to exhibit suicidal ideation. This predictive model highlighted three key variables as significant determinants in this context: anxiety ($\beta = 0.395$; $p < 0.001$), depression ($\beta = 0.258$; $p < 0.01$), and the age of the adolescents ($\beta = -0.101$; $p < 0.001$). The results indicate that, in addition to the specific factors analyzed, stress, gender, family coexistence, and hours of internet use play a very impor-

tant role in the development of suicidal thoughts among students. On the other hand, variables such as stress ($\beta = -0.013$; $p > 0.05$), student gender ($\beta = 0.057$; $p > 0.05$), family coexistence ($\beta = -0.007$; $p > 0.05$), and the amount of time dedicated to internet use ($\beta = -0.040$; $p > 0.05$) did not show a statistically significant relationship in the analysis; consequently, they did not yield significant results in the study.

DISCUSSION

Anxiety and depression as risk factors can contribute to suicidal ideation, which may lead to suicide attempts or death¹. In this regard, there is a moderate positive correlation associated with anxiety, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.627$ ($p < 0.001$). Understanding how anxiety manifests is crucial for comprehending the thoughts or suici-

dal ideation of the subjects; undoubtedly, studying this factor allows for a better understanding of the issue at hand. According to Urban *et al.*, adolescents experiencing symptoms of social anxiety (SA) may face difficulties in interpersonal interactions in the school environment, including suicidal thoughts²⁰. It has been demonstrated that anxiety

acts as a partial mediator between suicidal ideation and insomnia, as noted by Baños-Chaparro *et al.*²¹. The incidence of suicidal behaviors varied among adolescents, but multiple studies have reported a high percentage of suicidal ideation and attempts, directly linked to certain risk factors, among which anxiety stands out, as highlighted by Hernández-Bello *et al.*²². Therefore, it is essential to detect individuals with a certain degree of vulnerability so they can receive timely attention if they develop depressive disorders, as suggested by Jiménez-López *et al.*²³. Thus, the association between suicide attempts and depression, couple conflicts, psychiatric history, and high anxiety, among other factors, is acknowledged, as noted by Fonseca-Pedrero *et al.*¹⁰.

Secondly, an equally significant association was found with depression, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.607$ ($p < 0.001$), indicating that the higher the depression, the greater the increase in suicidal ideation. Additionally, an indicative relationship was observed between depression and suicidal ideation problems, with a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.696$ ($p < 0.001$). This finding details a strong association between the two phenomena, suggesting that as depressive symptoms worsen, the likelihood of developing suicidal thoughts also increases. As expressed by Rodríguez-Escobar, suicidal ideation is described as thoughts and opinions related to ending one's own life²⁴. Such references underscore the importance of early identification of students' suicidal thoughts, as well as the main psychosocial risk factors, to intervene appropriately and prevent their realization²⁵. Mellado evaluated, in his research, post-traumatic stress, suicidal ideation, anxiety, depression, and tension in a sample of 292 students (51.6% female), aged between 11 and 19 years ($M = 14.47$; $SD = 2.05$)²⁶. Similarly, it was observed that 57.1% ($n = 149$) of the participants exhibited distressing signs; of these, 56.4% ($n = 84$) were diagnosed with mild depression, 36.9% ($n = 55$) with moderate depression, and 6.7% ($n = 10$) with severe depression¹¹. In

another study, depression was reported at a lower level, affecting 49%, with mild levels reported in 14%, moderate in 23%, and severe levels also in 14%²⁷. This finding corroborates previous studies identifying depression as one of the main risk factors for suicidal ideation.

The presented study demonstrates that anxiety is the most influential risk factor for suicidal ideation, with a considerable impact reflected in a coefficient $\beta = 0.395$ ($P < 0.001$). However, there are other important risk factors that also influence suicidal ideation in adolescents, such as depression, with a coefficient $\beta = 0.258$ ($P < 0.001$). This result can be compared to studies examining the relationship between suicidal behavior and symptoms of other mental health problems in Mexican adolescents, which conclude that among various health issues presented, there is an increased risk of suicidal behaviors²⁸. Furthermore, a study on the risk of depression, anxiety, stress, and suicide in patients isolated due to suspected COVID-19 cases reveals that this situation is closely linked to a higher risk of developing depression and exhibiting suicidal ideation²⁹.

Additionally, this study highlights that age is one of the influential variables in students' suicidal ideation, as demonstrated by the coefficient $\beta = 0.101$ ($P < 0.001$). These results indicate that age is significantly related to suicidal ideation among high school students. Other studies have found that approximately 4% of adolescents aged 14 to 19 have had a suicide attempt in their lifetime, and 6.9% of young people exhibit a level of suicidal ideation that can be considered high³⁰. Such findings could be highly useful for reorienting the actions of education professionals in high schools by developing socio-emotional skills to reduce the percentage of students with suicidal tendencies in educational institutions³¹.

Finally, there are factors that, although included in the study, were not significant in their relation to or influence on suicidal ideation, such as stress, gender, family coexistence, and hours of internet use.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been evidenced that suicidal ideation, as a public health problem for populations at different life stages, is present in adolescence—a phase often stigmatized as critical, though also considered the healthiest period of life from an organic perspective. In our case, students from a state secondary education institution in the city of Juliaca, Peru, are significantly

influenced by factors such as anxiety, depression, and age. The results indicate that anxiety is strongly associated with suicidal thoughts, as demonstrated by the correlation coefficient found ($r = 0.627$, $p < 0.001$). Studies suggest that an increase in depressive symptoms raises the likelihood of developing suicidal thoughts, underscoring the need for timely interventions.

Therefore, as suggested by Rodríguez-Escobar and González, it is crucial to identify and address suicidal ideation and psychosocial risk factors in students to prevent the risk of these ideas materializing.

Suicidal ideation is multifactorial, with risk factors such as depression, stress, and even age conditio-

ning its manifestation. Thus, educational institutions, as spaces where students socialize with peers and adults alike, should strengthen socio-emotional competencies that enable students to manage their emotions appropriately, thereby reducing the percentage of students with suicidal thoughts.

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Conceptualization: Castillo-Barriga, F.; Cartagena-Condori, A.; Ccallo, C. Methodology: Cartagena-Condori, A.; Chui, H. Validation: Cartagena-Condori, A. Statistical Analysis: Chui, H.; Castillo-Barriga, F. Formal Analysis: Castillo-Barriga, F.; Ccallo, C.; Cartagena-Condori, A. Investigation: Castillo-Barriga, F.; Cartagena-Condori, A.; Ccallo, C.; Chui, H. Resources: Castillo-Barriga, F.; Cartagena-Condori, A.; Ccallo, C.; Chui, H. Writing – Original Draft Preparation: Castillo-Barriga, F.; Cartagena-Condori, A.; Ccallo, C.; Chui, H. Writing – Review & Editing: Castillo-Barriga, F.; Cartagena-Condori, A.; Ccallo, C.; Chui, H. Visualization: Ccallo, C. Supervision: Chui, H. Project Administration: Castillo-Barriga, F.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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How to cite this article: Castillo-Barriga, F., Cartagena-Condori, A., Ccallo, C., Chui, H. (2025). Anxiety and depression as risk factors for suicidal ideation in adolescents. *O Mundo Da Saúde*, 49. <https://doi.org/10.15343/0104-7809.202549e16672024l.MundoSaúde.2025,49:e16672024>.