Background and Objectives: This study assessed between-school variance in suicide ideation and estimated the contribution of school-level attributes, student-level characteristics, and cross-level interactions (school by student) to student SI.

Methods: A secondary analysis of the California Healthy Kids Survey in two large and representative samples of California high schools and students: 2009–2011 and 2011–2013. This is a census-based survey of all public high school students (grades 9 and 11) in California. Analyses were conducted on surveys administered in the 2011–2013 academic years to 790,000 high school students in grades 9 and 11, employed a multilevel conceptualization and analytical approach including three factors to explain variance in school-level SI: African American or black, Asian, Hispanic, or other. SI may serve as an indicator of mental health difficulties such as depressive symptoms, and providing protections against these symptoms is of high concern.

Results: School-SI level rates ranged between 4% and 67% (upper quartile = 22%, upper decile = 27%), with a median of 19.3% and mean of 20.0% (SE = 0.01). Male gender was a significant predictor of SI (β = .03, p < .01) and the effect size of this predictor was larger in schools with a larger number of girls and higher levels of victimization had higher rates of SI in both samples. No consistent cross-level interactions were found.

Conclusions: Little and associates identified several gaps in practice, theory, and research. The current study suggests ways to address some of these challenges. First, to overcome some of the difficulties they noted regarding linking individual-level information on suicide attempts, the present study suggests that anonymous student surveys focusing on the proxy of self-reports can identify schools that have more vulnerable students and help prioritize prevention efforts among schools.

The study also exemplifies how such school-based surveys and multilevel analyses can contribute to research and theory building. An important issue for future studies is to identify whether certain proportions of students have a particular characteristic (e.g., a traumatic background) that may become a tipping point that influences levels of SI in the school. Future studies should examine whether the availability of staff expertise, counseling services, and other school-level resources may independently contribute to reducing rates of student SI in the school. Future studies should also search for school-level factors that could help lower the risk of SI of the most vulnerable students, including school resources, such as an experienced support staff, may be more successful in moderating the risks of highly vulnerable students.

SELECTED REFERENCES


