

# The impact of child maltreatment on suicidality: Data from a large representative sample of Jamaican children and adolescents

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## Background

- **Suicide** is one of the most serious **public health concerns**.
- According to WHO statistics [1], suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-19-year olds
- Suicide risk is significantly increased in individuals with **childhood maltreatment histories** [2, 3].
- Most studies in the area have been conducted with WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic) samples.
- There is a paucity of data from more disadvantaged social and cultural backgrounds, such as **Jamaica**.



## Objective:

To examine the impact of child abuse (physical, emotional, and sexual) and neglect on suicidal ideation (SI) and suicide attempt (SA)

## Methods

### Participants and design

Cross-sectional data were collected among a large, representative sample of **girls ( $n = 4,367$ )** and **boys ( $n = 2,815$ )** from **Jamaica** aged between 9 and 17 years ( $M = 13.74$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ). Participants were recruited in 7 primary schools and 13 secondary schools. Response rate = 94%.

### Procedure and materials

Anonymous surveys were completed by participants in school settings. **Child maltreatment** was measured with the Child Victimization Experiences Questionnaire [4]. **Suicidal ideation (SI)** was measured by asking: "Have you ever felt so unhappy that you have thought about killing yourself?". **Suicide attempt (SA)** was measured by asking: "Have you ever tried to commit suicide or tried to do something that meant you could die?".

### Data analytic plan

- We performed two logistic regression analyses with SI and SA as outcome variables.
- Different subtypes of child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual abuse inside and outside the family) and neglect, gender, and place of residence (rural vs. urban areas) were entered as **predictor** variables in both analyses.



### Suicidal ideation (SI)

- SI was reported by 41% of youths.
- SI was significantly positively associated with physical and emotional abuse inside the family, neglect, emotional abuse outside the family, male gender, and living in an urban area.

### Suicide attempt (SA)

- SA was reported by 20% of youths.
- SA was significantly positively associated with physical and emotional abuse inside the family, neglect, sexual and emotional abuse outside the family, and male gender.

## Conclusions

- Rates of suicidal thoughts and behaviours are alarmingly high among Jamaican youths, requiring immediate action from authorities.
- There is a clear direct link between child abuse and neglect and suicidal phenomena.
- Emotional abuse inside the family was the strongest predictor of both outcomes.

## Limitations & directions for future research

- The results are based on retrospective data that may be subject of recall bias.
- Future research should pay greater attention to factors that may build resilience to suicide, to better inform prevention and intervention efforts.



## Practice recommendations

- Youths with histories of child abuse, and emotional abuse in particular, should be targeted for suicide prevention.
- Since emotional abuse is often misunderstood and under-reported, training for professionals working with youth to recognise signs of such abuse is needed.

## References

- [1] World Health Organization (WHO). (2019). *Adolescent mental health*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>
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- [4] Choo, W. Y., Dunne, M. P., Marret, M. J., Fleming, M., Wong, Y. L. (2011). Victimization experiences of adolescents in Malaysia. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 49(6), 627-634.