

# Suicidal Behaviors among Chinese Primary and Secondary School Students

## A Causal Analysis

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**Suicide has emerged as a severe global public health issue, ranking as the fourth most common cause of death for young people aged 15 to 19 years, according to the World Health Organization. Suicidal incidents among Chinese elementary and secondary school kids have increased recently, causing irreparable harm to families, schools, and society as a whole. To contribute to continuing efforts to strengthen suicide prevention strategies for Chinese adolescents, this paper focuses on studying the causes of teenage suicide in China from personal, familial, educational, and social viewpoints.**

**Keywords:** Suicide; Adolescent Suicide; Mental Health; Suicide Prevention

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### Introduction

ACCORDING to the report entitled "Suicide Worldwide in 2019: Global Health Estimates," published by the World Health Organization, the global suicide rate is alarmingly high, with over 700,000 individuals succumbing to it annually. The report further highlights that suicide accounted for more than 1.3% of all deaths in 2019, indicating a significant public health concern. The phenomenon of suicide has emerged as a significant public health concern on a global scale. Of greater concern is the escalating annual incidence of suicide fatalities among adolescents, coupled with a decreasing average age of suicide victims (2). Empirical evidence indicates that in approximately 33% of nations globally, adolescents are at the greatest peril for suicide when compared to other age cohorts (3). According to recent statistics, suicide ranks as the third most common cause of death

among adolescent females aged 15–19 and the fourth most common cause of death among males in the same age group, with tuberculosis being the only cause of death ranking higher. According to the recently released report, "The State of the World's Children 2021," published by UNICEF, suicide ranks as the fifth most common cause of mortality among adolescents aged 10–19, regardless of gender. Annually, approximately 46,000 youths aged 10 to 19 terminate their lives (4).

The suicide rate in China has been trending downward over the past ten years or more, but it has been increasing among primary and secondary school students (5). A total of 73 occurrences of youth suicide were documented in 2010 (6), and that number rose to 79 in 2013 (7). For the time frame of October 2016 to September 2017, it was formally published as 267 (8). The suicide incidence among teens has been steadily increasing

in recent years, according to China's Health Statistical Yearbook (2020), and it is now the second biggest cause of death in this age group (after traffic accidents) (9).

As per research, the incidence of suicide behavior among Chinese youth increases steadily from the age of 10 to the age of 20 to 24, at which point it peaks (10). Additionally, suicides among younger people are increasing (11). The results of the study by Zhang et al. (12) show that junior secondary students exhibit more suicidal-related behaviors than do their senior secondary counterparts.

Moreover, there has been an increase in the occurrence of suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts among students in primary and secondary schools. According to a meta-analysis conducted on a sample of 288,354 secondary school students, a significant proportion of them, up to 16.3%, reported having seriously contemplated suicide during a particular year between 2010 and 2020 (13). *The Blue Book of Education: Annual Report on China's Education* (2019), a collaborative effort between the 21st Century Education Research Institute and Social Sciences Academic Press (China), presents compelling data indicating that a significant proportion of secondary school students in China have contemplated suicide. Specifically, 17.7% of students have reported having suicidal thoughts, 7.3% have made plans to commit suicide, and 2.7% have attempted suicide unsuccessfully. To clarify, the statistics indicate that approximately 16.7% of secondary students have experienced ideation of suicide, while approximately 7.1% have formulated a plan for suicide, and approximately 2.7% have made an attempt on their own lives (14).

### Reasons for Adolescent Suicide in China

Suicide is typically not a senseless, spontaneous behavior from a psychiatric perspective; instead, it involves a number of processes, such as suicidal propensity, ideation, planning, and attempt (15). This extreme human conduct is frequently motivated by complex social, cultural, and individualized factors. According to French sociologist Durkheim, external variables, including the living environment, ingrained social ideals, and moral standards, play a major role in determining attitudes toward suicide (16). He also stated that the reasons for suicide are more social than personal. Based on his findings, more in-depth research has been done to examine the biological, cognitive, psychological, and social risk factors for suicide (17, 18, 19).

### Social Conflicts

Durkheim posited that the incidence of suicide was heavily influenced by social structures. In times of significant social upheaval, where the established order is disrupted and new norms and regulations have not yet been solidified, individuals within society may experience a loss of direction and sense of purpose. According to research, individuals face the dilemma of either repressing or succumbing to their nascent desires, which can heighten the likelihood of suicidal ideation (16). The phenomenon of suicidal tendencies is influenced by both social integration and regulation. Achieving a suitable balance between these factors can effectively mitigate suicidal behaviors, as evidenced by prior research (20).

The growth and development of an individual are signifi-

cantly influenced by external environments. The escalation in the prevalence of suicide among adolescents in China is indicative of the inadequacies inherent in the present social frameworks (21). China, being a nation in the process of development, is currently undergoing significant changes in its political, cultural, and economic spheres. The mental well-being of Chinese primary and secondary school students is inevitably influenced by social integration and regulation within their relatively unstable milieu.

### Influences of Social Transformation

China is currently undergoing a reduction in its ability to achieve social integration as a result of its ongoing social transformation. The proliferation of diverse values and the shift from traditional moral norms to contemporary ones intensify social anomie, leading to heightened confusion among students. Simultaneously, the escalation of individualism and decentralization also serves as a contributing factor to the augmented susceptibility to suicide among adolescents (22).

Furthermore, as industrialization advances, a considerable number of young rural inhabitants migrate to urban areas in search of job opportunities, leaving their underage offspring behind in rural regions, resulting in a significant population of "left-behind children." The survey data from the Ministry of Civil Affairs of China indicates that in 2018, there were an estimated 6.97 million children who were left behind in China. Notably, the provinces of Sichuan, Anhui, and Hunan each had over 700,000 left-behind children, as reported in reference 23. Left-behind children exhibit elevated levels of loneliness, anxiety, and depression when contrasted with their non-left-behind counterparts. These conditions subsequently lead to diminished levels of self-esteem, life satisfaction, and social adaptation. According to research findings, a significant contributing factor to the rise in suicidal tendencies among individuals is attributed to their compromised mental health status (24).

### Influences of Popular Cultures

The ongoing societal transformation in China has resulted in corresponding changes in social cultures. The intersection of traditional and modern values, as well as the convergence of Eastern and Western cultures, exert significant influence on the psychological outlook of elementary and high school students (25).

The internet has become an integral aspect of adolescents' lives due to the swift advancement of information technology. According to the Annual Report on the Internet Use of Chinese Minors (2021) released by the China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the number of minor internet users in China in 2021 was 191 million. The report indicates that primary school students had a 95.0% penetration rate, while middle school students had a 99.4% penetration rate (26). The internet offers several advantages to young individuals; however, it is also inundated with superfluous, adverse, and inaccurate data that has the potential to significantly compromise the psychological well-being of elementary and high school students (27).

A significant proportion of adolescents have exhibited a reliance on the internet, commonly referred to as cyber dependence. Empirical evidence suggests that individuals who suffer

from internet addiction exhibit markedly elevated levels of suicidal ideation, planning, and attempts relative to non-addicted individuals. Furthermore, research indicates that child addicts are more likely to experience suicidal ideation than their adult counterparts, with a prevalence rate of 28%. The availability of “suicide websites” can potentially exacerbate the issue of suicidal ideation among adolescent populations by providing explicit guidance on various methods of suicide, thereby potentially facilitating the transition from ideation to action.

The growing popularity of mobile technologies has considerably broadened the scope of bullying victimization, extending it from physical locations to the virtual realm. According to the Annual Report on the Internet Use of Chinese Minors (2021), a significant proportion of minor internet users in China, specifically 16.6%, reported instances of online ridicule or abuse (26). According to research, minors who experience cyberbullying are more susceptible to experiencing heightened levels of fear and depression compared to adults. This can result in negative academic outcomes such as decreased performance, absenteeism, dropping out, and, in severe cases, suicide (29).

### ***Misleading Information from Mass Media***

One of the most important contributors to the rise in suicidal events is media coverage of suicides. Excessive exposure to suicide stories, especially inaccurate ones, may change audiences’ perceptions of suicidal behavior or inspire them to imitate the reported suicides. David Phillips developed the “suicide imitation” or “Werther effect” concept, a theory about the suicide imitation behavior caused by the indirect exposure to or influence of suicidal incidents, as a result of his research into the correlation between publicity and suicide incidence in 1974, which revealed that the suicide rate would significantly increase in the areas reached by the reports of sensational suicide events. His research revealed that the subsequent spike in suicides was positively correlated with the amount of media attention given to a suicide story (30). The link between the volume of media attention and the rise in suicides was validated in later research by other scientists. In order to provide a reference manual (containing dos and don’ts) for ethical reporting on suicide, WHO produced *Preventing Suicide: A Resource for Media Professionals Update 2017* in 2017 (31).

Both contemporary and conventional media provide diverse perspectives on societal occurrences to the general populace. The perception of society held by the general public is heavily influenced by the artificial social setting constructed by the news media (32). Adolescents occupy a distinctive developmental phase characterized by a tendency to challenge conventional societal conventions while concurrently exhibiting a proclivity to emulate the conduct of their peers. The proliferation of media coverage on adolescent suicide has the potential to heighten the susceptibility of teenagers to suicidal tendencies and elevate their risk of engaging in suicidal behaviors. Certain media outlets prioritized the sensational and often comical aspects of suicidal incidents while neglecting logical and empathetic assessments of their devastating outcomes. This approach had a significantly detrimental impact on the promotion of mental health and suicide prevention across society (33). Some reports have been deemed irresponsible due to their pathological

elaborations of suicide methods and glorification of suicide behavior. This has resulted in children developing the misconception that suicide is a viable solution to problems and a reasonable means of avoiding life’s challenges (34).

### ***Skewed School Education Evaluation***

The school is frequently the first social setting a youngster experiences during the socialization process. K–12 education is the most extensive and significant education students will ever receive in their entire lives. The rising suicide rate among students in basic education is a clear sign that there are significant issues with China’s current educational system.

### ***Overemphasis on Progression Rates***

At the moment, the only measure of a school’s teaching effectiveness is its progression rates, which demonstrate how many students in the school, are able to advance to and enroll in the next level of education (35). The school usually crams students’ schedules with countless tests and examinations, such as monthly exams, midterm exams, and terminal exams, to boost students’ test aptitude and their development rate. Students are under a great deal of mental pressure because of their class and grade rankings. Exams with high stakes, like admission exams for higher education and senior secondary, are seen as crucial turning points in their lives. The causes of the 267 reported cases of student suicides in primary and secondary schools in 2017 that the 21st Century Education Research Institute thoroughly examined can be divided into six categories: bullying on campus, parent-child conflicts, excessive workloads, teacher-student conflicts, psychological issues, and affective problems. Three of them had a direct connection to academic strain, showing that learning stress is the main cause of suicide among students in basic education (36).

### ***Discrimination in Student Evaluation***

Recognition and encouragement from teachers are crucial to the character development of students who spend the majority of their daytime at school. The prevailing practice among Chinese educators is to employ a unidimensional criterion for assessing their students, whereby individuals who demonstrate exceptional academic performance and compliance are deemed exemplary, whereas those who exhibit subpar grades and nonconformist conduct are regarded as underachievers. According to the evaluation criteria, educators tend to exhibit a bias towards students who possess exemplary academic records while disregarding or subjecting those who are perceived as “underperforming students” to verbal mistreatment (37). Prolonged neglect and insufficient acknowledgement from educators may potentially trigger emotional turmoil and heightened exasperation among economically disadvantaged students. These students are more susceptible to the development of psychological disorders. Simultaneously, students who are deemed “good” and receive preferential treatment may develop a reliance on biased treatment as a result of their consistent receipt of praise, accolades, and distinctions, ultimately cultivating a perception of superiority. Individuals may readily acquire unfavorable personality traits, including but not limited to obstinacy, self-centeredness, reliance, apathy, and conceit. Individuals with low psychological resilience are vul-

nerable to experiencing breakdowns when faced with academic or other forms of frustration, regardless of their severity (11).

### **Inappropriate Home Education**

The psychological development and character formation of a child are significantly impacted by the home environment and parental behaviors. The phenomenon of suicidal ideation among adolescents is significantly associated with family structures, parenting practices, and educational ideologies. The likelihood of suicide among adolescents is considerably heightened by negative parenting styles (38).

### **Authoritarian Parenting**

China has a long history of emphasizing rigid hierarchies. This legacy in family contexts is reflected in the unequal interaction between parents and children (39). A sizable percentage of parents view their kids as both their own property and the means by which they will accomplish their own objectives. The parent-child connection in these households is one of the controllers and the controlled, which raises the youngster to be obedient. The youngster may mature into an emotionally unstable, nihilistic, and low-self-esteem adult over time (40).

### **Indulgent Parenting**

The implementation of China's family planning policy in the late 1970s has brought about a significant transformation in the conventional structure of Chinese households. The nuclear family, consisting of three members, has emerged as the predominant familial arrangement, particularly in urban locales. It is noteworthy that the allowance of three children per family was not implemented until the year 2021. In the absence of siblings, the only child is often regarded as the favored offspring by their parents and grandparents. The sole focus of the family's attention is directed towards a single child. Excessive parental indulgence poses a hindrance to the social, emotional, and behavioral growth of children. If a child is raised in a home environment that is excessively permissive, they may exhibit tendencies towards self-centeredness, emotional impulsivity, and dependence on others. Consequently, individuals with these characteristics exhibit reduced resilience, restricted social adaptability, and a diminished sense of accountability, rendering them more susceptible to adversities and setbacks (41).

### **Academic Success-focused Parental Expectation**

Chinese parents frequently stress to their children the importance of achieving victory in the initial stages of the competitive "rat race" of life, specifically in the pursuit of academic excellence. It is common for children to adhere to predetermined trajectories towards achievement that are influenced by parental aspirations and societal norms rather than their own individual desires and inclinations. To enhance their academic performance and increase their likelihood of gaining acceptance into prestigious educational institutions, it is necessary for individuals to engage in supplementary education from an early stage in their development (37). These parents, who are described as "ambitious," tend to prioritize their children's academic achievements over their overall development and welfare. When children at-

tain academic success, they are often bestowed with numerous compliments and rewards as a form of generosity. If not met, individuals may experience significant disappointment, and their children may be subjected to verbal or physical abuse. The arbitrary and unpredictable behavior of parents can have a significant negative impact on the psychological well-being of their children. Individuals in the latter category may consider suicide as a result of losing hope in their ability to receive genuine affection from their parents (42).

### **Personal Factors**

Apart from environmental factors such as family, school, and social surroundings, distinct individual mental and psychological traits can also serve as predictors of suicidal tendencies among adolescent students. According to UNICEF's report, *The State of the World's Children 2021*, a significant proportion of adolescents between the ages of 10 and 19 worldwide experienced mental illnesses as defined by the World Health Organization. Additionally, in high- and middle-income countries, approximately 20% of individuals aged 15 to 24 reported experiencing frequent feelings of low mood or depression (4).

### **Personality Traits**

The tendency to commit suicide is based on an individual's personality. The most significant correlations between personality traits and suicide behaviors are impulsiveness, paranoia, and introversion.

Research has shown that students with a high impulsive disposition have a diminished capacity for executive control. When faced with sudden external stimuli, they are usually unable to control their emotions and behaviors, which can raise their risk of suicide (43). Moreover, adolescents with high levels of impulsivity are typically more aggressive and, as a result, are more likely to be shunned by others. Over time, the accumulation of experiences of rejection or distress can increase their likelihood of having suicidal thoughts (44).

Students with paranoid tendencies frequently have inadequate emotional tolerance and emotion-regulation skills. The Classification and Diagnostic Criteria for Mental Disorders in China (CCMD-2-R) provides the following description of the paranoid personality: (i) irrationally suspicious, frequently misinterpreting the unintentional, non-malicious, or even friendly actions of others as hostile or discriminatory; (ii) accommodating of conspiracy hypotheses; (iii) pathologically possessive; (iv) self-conceit—attributing one's own errors or failures to others; (v) prone to offense; (vi) persistently and irrationally pursuing one's own interests; (vii) dismissive of objective evidence that contradicts one's own opinions (45). Typical characteristics of paranoid students are bigotry, narrow-mindedness, and fussiness, and they are easily provoked to go to extremes.

Individuals with introverted tendencies may possess limited abilities to disentangle themselves from adverse emotions, thereby increasing their susceptibility to experiencing feelings of hopelessness. Based on pertinent survey data, it can be inferred that 53.8% of suicides among adolescents were committed by individuals belonging to the extreme introvert category (46). The individuals in question experienced a sense of hopelessness and inadequacy, perceiving themselves as lacking in ability and

social acceptance and leading a monotonous existence. Furthermore, the individual experienced feelings of despair towards their parents, perceiving them as demanding and lacking consideration, ultimately viewing their own existence as a source of burden for their parents. Additionally, the individual expressed dissatisfaction with both the educational institution and the local populace, citing a lack of perceived regard for their personhood. Persistent exposure to adverse emotional states can ultimately lead to suicidal behaviors (47).

### **Mental Disorders**

It is generally considered that the early stage of adolescence lasts from the ages of 10 to 13 and that the middle stage lasts from the ages of 14 to 17. Adolescents go through changes in their brain-neuroendocrine functions, hormone levels, and bodily morphological traits in both stages. While fostering physical and psychological development, these changes also significantly raise teenage risk for mental health issues, contributing to the high prevalence of mental disorders (48).

The psychological tolerance of adolescents to stimuli from the outside environment is typically lower in those who are in a critical stage of physical and mental development. Due to a lack of coping mechanisms and abilities, it is easy for individuals to generate negative feelings, including disappointment, depression, regret, wrath, and envy, when confronted with difficulties in their academic pursuits, interpersonal interactions, and personal growth (49). The 2022 *Blue Book on National Depression* estimates that 95 million individuals in China suffer from depression, with 50% of those persons being students and 30% being under the age of 18 (50). The detection rates of anxiety and depression among 24,758 primary and secondary school children nationwide were found to be 31.3% and 17.9%, respectively, in a survey by the China Youth and Children Research Center in 2022. It was shown that 2.8% of fourth graders had serious depression, which is an increase of over 50% from 2020 (51). In their study, Xie et al. underlined that teenagers with depression are emotionally sensitive and vulnerable, and they frequently feel ashamed to share their inner sentiments and emotional experiences. Suicidal ideation is more likely to arise when unfavorable events take place (52).

### **Low Psychological Resilience**

Psychological resilience refers to an individual's capacity to effectively manage and navigate through challenging circumstances and unexpected events, ultimately rebounding to their prior state of functioning in a timely manner. According to the source (53), utilizing this mechanism can aid in the resolution of adverse situations without incurring lasting negative effects. Additionally, it can function as an internal tool for managing depression and suicidal ideation. Adversities and failures are ubiquitous in reality and can elicit negative affective responses such as disappointment, frustration, and despair, which can have deleterious consequences for the affected individual. Therefore, possessing a sufficient level of resilience is imperative for both survival and achievement. Insufficient development of psychological resilience in young students can lead to the emergence of suicidal ideation even in response to minor challenges (54).

### **Conclusion**

Children's suicide rates of Chinese elementary and secondary schools are on the rise, and this important social issue calls for prompt public action. The earliest study was carried out in the late 1990s, marking a very early beginning for suicide prevention and intervention research in China. Since then, efforts over the course of more than 20 years have improved psychological crisis intervention research and led to the development and use of suicide prevention and intervention techniques. The methods and processes used in China to prevent suicide, however, are still far behind those used in other countries. This study is intended to have some practical applications for teenage suicidal behavior intervention.

Contemporary Chinese adolescents are confronted with intricate social surroundings, which encompass a decelerating domestic economy, an unpredictable international climate, and the emergence of the AI era. Adolescents' survival, social adaptation, and challenge coping are contingent upon a foundation of robust psychological principles in this particular milieu. The implementation and investigation of adolescent suicide intervention strategies are complex and enduring endeavors. The establishment of a robust framework for addressing psychological crises among adolescents requires collaborative efforts from various stakeholders, including the government, institutions, families, and individuals. ■

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