

# **Suicide Among College Students in Virginia:**

A Report from the Virginia Violent Death Reporting System

## **2003-2008**

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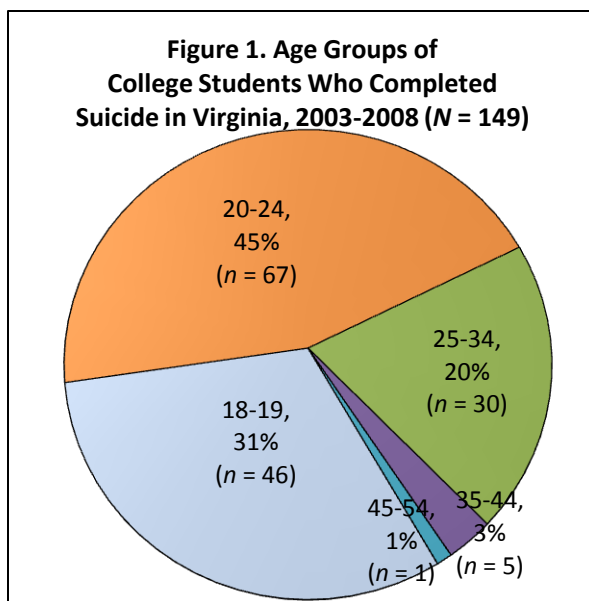
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College students are a primary focus of suicide prevention efforts in Virginia. This report examines suicide among the 149 known college students (106 males, 43 females) who completed suicide between the years 2003-2008 in Virginia. Most of these persons (94%) were Virginia residents.

Data come from the Virginia Violent Death Reporting System (VVDRS).<sup>1</sup> The VVDRS abstracts data from several sources, primarily the Virginia Office of the Chief Medical Examiner, law enforcement, the Virginia Division of Vital Records, and the Virginia Department of Forensic Science.

Overall, 3% of persons who died by suicide in Virginia were college students, including persons who were about to enter college and persons who had left college in the past week. College students who completed suicide were primarily male (71%) and White (80%). Their ages ranged from 18-46 with 76% between 18 and 24 years old. Figure 1 shows age groups. These suicides occurred most often at a house or apartment (61%), inside a motor vehicle (10%), at a natural area such as a field or river (7%), or in a hotel room (5%). Few of the suicides (7%) occurred on a college campus or in a college dormitory. Most injuries (60%) occurred at the person's home.



A firearm was the most common method of fatal injury (43%). Firearms are the primary method for males (50%) but not for females, whose primary method was poisoning (35%). Hanging or suffocation was used by 30% overall and more often by females (33%) than males (28%). Table 1 lists methods used by gender.

**Table 1. Suicide Methods Used by College Students in Virginia, 2003-2008<sup>1</sup>**

	Male (n = 106)		Female (n = 43)		Total (n = 149)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Firearm	53	50.0	11	25.6	64	43.0
Hanging/Suffocation	30	28.3	14	32.6	44	29.5
Poison	11	10.4	15	34.9	26	17.4
Fall	10	9.4	1	2.3	11	7.4
Drowning	0	0.0	4	9.3	4	2.7
Sharp Instrument	1	0.9	0	0.0	1	0.7
Other Transport Vehicle	1	0.9	0	0.0	1	0.7

<sup>1</sup> More than one method may be used per person.

<sup>1</sup> Virginia is one of eighteen states participating in the National Violent Death Reporting System (NVDRS). For more about the NVDRS, see <http://www.cdc.gov/ViolencePrevention/NVDRS/index.html>. For definitions of terms see the NVDRS coding manual: [http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NVDRS\\_Coding\\_Manual\\_Version\\_3-a.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/NVDRS_Coding_Manual_Version_3-a.pdf).

Table 2 presents common suicide circumstances by gender.

**Table 2. Selected Suicide Circumstances for College Students in Virginia, 2003-2008<sup>1,2</sup>**

	Male (n = 100)		Female (n = 41)		Total (n = 141)	
	#	%	#	%	#	%
Mental Health Problem	55	55.0	24	58.5	79	56.0
Current/Past Mental Health Treatment	50	50.0	24	58.5	74	52.5
Disclosed Intent and/or History of Attempts	35	35.0	22	53.7	57	40.4
Depressed Mood	38	38.0	16	39.0	54	38.3
Crisis in Past Two Weeks	32	32.0	18	43.9	50	35.5
Intimate Partner Problem	24	24.0	22	53.7	46	32.6
Disclosed Intent to Attempt Suicide	25	25.0	15	36.6	40	28.4
History of Attempts	21	21.0	17	41.5	38	27.0
Problem with Alcohol/Other Substances	16	16.0	3	7.3	19	13.5
Other Relationship Problem	8	8.0	7	17.1	15	10.6
Criminal Legal Problems	12	12.0	1	2.4	13	9.2
School Problems	7	7.0	5	12.2	12	8.5
Financial Problems	5	5.0	0	0.0	5	3.5
Job Problems	3	3.0	0	0.0	3	2.1

<sup>1</sup> More than one circumstance may be noted per person.

<sup>2</sup> Percentages are based upon the number of suicides where at least one circumstance is known.

Mental health problems were noted for 56% of college students who died by suicide, and in similar proportions for males (55%) and females (59%). Most of the persons with a mental health problem had been treated in the past or were receiving some form of mental health treatment within two months of their death (94%). For one-third (36%), their suicide was preceded by a life crisis in the past two weeks. This was more common for females (44%) than males (32%). Suicides related to recent life crises indicate more spontaneous suicides where there was less opportunity to notice warning signs and to develop a plan to intervene.

At the same time, greater than one-fourth of these students (28%) disclosed their intent to attempt suicide with time for intervention, and 27% had at least one prior non-fatal suicide attempt. Combined, 40% either disclosed intent and/or had prior attempts, providing both cues about their despair and opportunities for intervention. Additionally, 38% were noted to have a depressed mood prior to the suicide, providing a non-verbal indication of risk for suicide.

Since the population under review is college students, it might be assumed that problems with school would be noted for many persons. However, this factor was relatively minor (9%). For males, a school problem (7%) was less common than many other circumstances, including conflict with intimate partners (24%), criminal legal problems (12%) and non-intimate partner relationship conflict (8%). For females, school problems were more common (12%), but still less frequent than other issues like conflict with intimate partners (54%) and non-intimate partners (17%).

A problem controlling use of alcohol and/or other substances, including one's own prescribed medications, was noted for 16% of males and 7% of females. Alcohol consumption prior to the suicide was a factor for 30% of all males; 15% had a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) below .08<sup>2</sup> at the time of the suicide, and 15% had a BAC of .08 or greater. Fourteen percent of females had alcohol in their system at the time of the suicide; all of them had a BAC of .08 or greater.

This short study reveals that suicide by college students is a relatively rare event. Just the same, efforts to prevent suicide among college students and on college campuses should take into account the broader life stressors related to suicide among college students. While someone who is stressed about school certainly presents a risk factor, this is not a primary circumstance noted for college students. Mental health problems and problems in interpersonal relationships, particularly among intimate partners, are more critical cues to suicidal intent among the college population.

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<sup>2</sup> The BAC of .08 is the legal standard for intoxication (for adults) while driving in Virginia. This data excludes those who died by alcohol poisoning.