

Experiences of suicide ideation and attempts among Filipino students: Prevalence, reasons, and help-seeking behavior

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to determine the prevalence of suicide ideation and attempts among Filipino undergraduate students before and during the pandemic. It also sought to determine the reasons as well as the help-seeking behavior of the aforesaid students and find out if there are significant relationships between their socio-economic characteristics and their suicide-related behaviors. Data were obtained through a survey questionnaire (n=308) and were analyzed through descriptive statistics and Spearman Rho correlational tests. Findings showed that majority of the respondents have thought or made plans about suicide at least once. Meanwhile, 2 out of every 10 respondents coming from a predominantly richer university has attempted suicide while 4 out of every 10 from a predominantly poorer university did the same. Most of the suicide ideators thought of suicide before and during the pandemic while suicide attempts were more common before the pandemic. Most of those who experienced suicide ideation and/or attempts did not seek any form of help during the ordeal and, for those who did, the help was sought from friends instead of mental health professionals and suicide hotlines. The study also found that family problems were the most common reason for suicide before the pandemic and academic problems were the most common during the pandemic, albeit there was an observed rise in suicide ideations and/or attempts due to financial problems as well. Finally, correlational tests found that males, the religious, and the rich tend to engage in less suicide-related behaviors while the opposite was observed among LGBT students.

Keywords: *suicide, suicide ideation, suicide attempts, help-seeking, Filipino youth*

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, longitudinal reports already pointed to the increasing prevalence of suicide among the Filipino youth (Redaniel et al., 2011; Quintos, 2019a). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and its resultant quarantine, it was feared that the social problem of suicide would be even more serious

– to the point that people started talking of mental health as the next potential global pandemic (Parrish, 2020; Gutierrez, 2020; Mari & Oquendo, 2020). Indeed, reports of the succeeding years pointed to drastic increases in suicide rates in the Philippines (Dela Pena, 2021; Domingo, 2021; Gregorio, 2021; Rivas, 2021; Velado-Ramirez, 2021).

These developments point to an increasing need to look into the mental health of students in the Philippines. This is because beyond the need to survive, the pandemic and the quarantine also brought along other challenges that the students have to face. This includes the online learning format that thrusts the students into a relatively alien learning experience burdened with unequal access to IT-related resources and anomic standards of online classroom management, a sense of isolation from peer groups with whom they unknowingly had to part with after the quarantine was suddenly implemented starting in March 2020, a potentially simultaneous feeling of isolation and suffocation at home for those with dysfunctional families, experiences of disease and potential losses of life of loved ones, socio-economic collapse, and weakening hopes for the future. From a sociological perspective, the Covid-19 pandemic and its resultant quarantine as well as the socio-economic downturn that it has produced are social forces that may push people into higher rates of suicidality. While there are ways to be protected from the risks of suicide, access to such protections are hampered by socio-economic inequalities and socio-cultural barriers. Given the rise of suicide rates in the country, it is important to determine how students from various socio-economic backgrounds fare in terms of their engagement in suicide, their professed reasons for engagement, and their help-seeking behaviors – if there are any.

This study sought to check on the status of the Filipino undergraduate students after having to live with the difficulties of the pandemic for more than a year. The inquiry was guided by the following research questions:

1. How prevalent was self-reported suicide ideation and suicide attempts among the undergraduate students from the two universities before and during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What are the reported reasons behind the suicide ideation of undergraduate students from the two universities before and during the COVID-19 pandemic and are there notable differences between the reasons given during the two timeframes?
3. How prevalent was suicide-related help-seeking behavior among the undergraduate students from the two universities and with whom did they predominantly seek help from?
4. Are there significant correlations between the socio-economic characteristics of students and their suicide ideation, suicide attempt, and help-seeking behaviors?

RESEARCH METHODS

A total of 308 undergraduate students volunteered to participate in the study. These students were recruited through a call for respondents posted in social science courses that the students were enrolled in. These students were from two universities located in Metro Manila. The first university – University A – is characterized as a private sectarian higher education institution typically populated by middle and upper-middle socio-economic class students. A total of 139 students participated from this university. The second university – University B – is a state-owned non-sectarian higher education institution. It is typically populated by lower socio-economic class students. A total of 169 students participated from this university.

Due to the limitations on personal interaction posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and its resultant quarantine, the data for the study were gathered through the use of a Google Form Survey. Respondents were asked about their socio-economic characteristics and their engagement, or lack thereof, in suicide ideation, suicide attempts, and help-seeking behavior. All respondents were informed of the potentially sensitive nature of the research topic prior to being given a copy of the questionnaire. They were given the opportunity to withdraw should they see fit. It was made clear to them that there will be no reward for participating nor will there be negative repercussions for refusing to participate. Participants were also briefed that their anonymity will be secured.

Analyses were facilitated by cross-tabulations that compared the frequency counts and percent distributions of data from the two universities regarding suicide experiences, reasons for suicide, and help-seeking behavior. Spearman Rho correlation coefficients were also obtained ($\alpha=0.05$) between socio-economic variables – age, gender identity, religion, and socio-economic class – and the suicide experience and help-seeking indicators. Given that a number of the variables of the study were measured at the nominal level, dummy values (1 indicative of presence, 0 indicative of absence of characteristic) were utilized during the encoding and analyses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The information about the experiences related to suicide among the undergraduate students from the two universities are provided in Tables 1 to 4. Table 5, meanwhile, presents that correlation coefficients between the students' socio-economic characteristics and the study's suicide and help-seeking variables.

Table 1*Suicide-related experiences of student respondents*

	UNIVERSITY A (n=139)		UNIVERSITY B (n=169)	
	f	%	f	%
Has no suicide-related experiences	27	19.4	15	8.9
Indirect experiences of suicide				
<i>Has a friend who has expressed suicidal thoughts, plans, or threats.</i>	112	80.6	154	91.1
<i>Has a friend who has made a suicide attempt.</i>	81	58.3	121	71.6
<i>Has a family member who has expressed suicidal thoughts, plans, or threats.</i>	57	41	92	54.4
<i>Has a family member who has made a suicide attempt.</i>	32	23	44	26
Direct experiences of suicide				
Has expressed suicidal thoughts, plans, or threats	74	53	124	73.4
<i>Before the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	28	37.8	28	22.6
<i>During the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	7	9.5	17	13.7
<i>Both timeframes</i>	39	52.7	79	63.7
<i>If both timeframes, when was/were the suicide ideation more frequent?</i>				
<i>Before the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	24	61.5	24	30.4
<i>During the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	15	38.5	50	69.6
Has made a suicide attempt	29	20.9	68	40.2
<i>Before the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	22	75.9	35	51.5
<i>During the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	1	3.4	11	16.2
<i>Both timeframes</i>	6	20.7	22	32.4
<i>If both timeframes, when was/were the suicide attempts more frequent?</i>				
<i>Before the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	5	83	13	59.1
<i>During the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	1	17	9	40.9

Table 1 recognizes two kinds of suicide experience: indirect experiences and direct experiences. Indirect experiences of suicide pertain to experiences of having

friends or family members who have thought of or attempted suicide. Direct experiences, meanwhile, pertain to personal experiences with suicide – be it in terms of suicidal thoughts or actual suicide attempts. Previous studies in suicide in the Philippines (Quintos, 2017a; Quintos, 2019b) as well as in other countries (Lopez-Castroman et al., 2017; Spiwak et al., 2011; Guerreiro et al., 2017; Sarchiapone et al., 2009) indicate that individuals who know others who have attempted suicide before (or what is considered indirect experience in this study) have higher odds of actual engagements in suicide ideation and suicide attempts (or what is considered direct experience in this study). The data show that students who have no direct or indirect experiences of suicide are actually the minority in both universities: Only 2 out of every 10 respondents in University A have none, and only 1 out of every 10 respondents in University B are the same. Instead, what the data showed is a clear prevalence of suicide:

In terms of indirect experiences of suicide, majority of the respondents have at least one friend who has expressed suicidal thoughts – 8 out of every 10 respondents for University A; 9 out of every 10 for University B. While not a majority, there is still a high prevalence rate of students with friends who have attempted suicide: 5 out of every 10 respondents for University A and 7 out of every 10 for University B.

In terms of direct experiences of suicide, it is surprising that majority of the respondents from both universities reported having suicidal thoughts before – 5 out of every 10 respondents from University A and 7 out of every 10 in University B. These prevalence rates of suicide ideation are substantially higher than what were observed in pre-pandemic studies in the Philippines (Quintos, 2017b; Quintos, 2019a). The logical presumption, therefore, is that the increase happened only lately – possibly due to the COVID-19 pandemic and its difficulties. When these self-reported suicide ideations were further analyzed, it became clear that majority of suicide ideators reportedly had those experiences both before and during the pandemic. When these suicide ideators were asked when between the two timeframes were the suicidal thoughts more prevalent, the two universities differed in their dominant response: University A's students generally reported suicide ideation before the pandemic as more frequent whereas University B's students generally reported the opposite. Furthermore, among those who did not have suicide ideations during both timeframes, it was found that there were more suicide ideators before the pandemic than during the pandemic.

Suicide attempts were, as to be expected, less prevalent than suicide ideation. Only 2 out of every 10 respondents reported having attempted suicide before in University A, and 4 out of every 10 from University B reported the same. While these rates are not as high as those related to suicide ideation, these rates for suicide attempts among the students are still substantially higher than the rates reported in previous

studies in the country (Quintos, 2017b; Quintos, 2019a). All of those who reported to have attempted suicide before also reported cases of suicide ideation. This suggests the absence of impulsive suicides – a phenomenon reported to be possibly present among some youth cohorts by Quintos (2019a). For both universities, the suicide attempts were more common before the pandemic. Even among those who reported to have made suicide attempts both before and during the pandemic, the attempts were reportedly more frequent before the pandemic.

Table 2

Primary reason for suicide ideation of student respondents before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

Primary reason for your suicidal thoughts	UNIVERSITY A				UNIVERSITY B			
	Before the Pandemic (n=28)		During the Pandemic (n=7)		Before the Pandemic (n=28)		During the Pandemic (n=17)	
	F	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
Academic problems	3	10.7	3	42.9	4	14.3	4	23.5
Depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses	3	10.7	1	14.3	3	10.7	1	5.9
Family problems	8	28.6	1	14.3	7	25	3	17.6
Lack of purpose/motivation	7	25	2	28.6	4	14.3	2	11.8
Financial problems	0	0	1	14.3	0	0	2	11.8
Identity problems	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	5.9
Past traumatic experiences	1	3.6	0	0	1	3.6	0	0
Peer and relationship problems	3	10.7	0	0	4	14.3	1	5.9
Personal problems	0	0	0	0	1	3.6	1	5.9
Random thoughts	2	7.1	0	0	0	0	0	0

Table 2 shows that students from both universities who reportedly had suicidal thoughts before the pandemic identified family problems as the most common primary reason for their suicidal thoughts, albeit the feeling of a lack of purpose/motivation was a close second for University A. This is corroborated by previous Philippine-based studies that looked into the prevalent reason for suicide which found family problems as the most common reason (Quintos, 2017b) or identified family factors as significant correlates

or predictors of suicide (Quintos, 2017a; Quintos, 2019b; Quintos, 2020a). Meanwhile, among those who had suicidal thoughts only during the pandemic, the most common primary reason for their suicide ideation were academic problems. Further analysis shows that financial problems became part of the reasons for suicidal thoughts of both universities during the pandemic but not before.

The observed shift from family problems to academic problems may be because of the Philippine educational experience during the pandemic. The online and modular learning formats wherewith students and teachers were suddenly left with little choice but to adapt left both academic stakeholders, especially the former, scrambling for ways on how to cope financially, technically, culturally, and psychologically. The inclusion of financial problems as a reason for suicide ideation during the pandemic is also an expected development given the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. All of these challenges had to be faced while being bereft by the quarantine of the psycho-social support and leisurely distractions typically available to the students during face-to-face classes.

Table 3

Primary reason for suicide ideation of student respondents who thought of committing suicide before and during the COVID-19 pandemic

	UNIVERSITY A (n=39)		UNIVERSITY B (n=79)	
	F	%	f	%
Same reasons pre- and during the pandemic				
<i>Academic problems</i>	7	17.9	11	13.9
<i>Depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses</i>	1	2.6	9	11.4
<i>Family problems</i>	7	17.9	17	21.5
<i>Lack of purpose/motivation</i>	7	17.9	9	11.4
<i>Financial problems</i>	1	2.6	5	6.3
<i>Identity problems</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>Past traumatic experiences</i>	2	5.1	0	0
<i>Peer and relationship problems</i>	1	2.6	1	1.3
<i>Personal problems</i>	1	2.6	2	2.6
SUB-TOTAL	27	69.2	54	68.4

	UNIVERSITY A (n=39)		UNIVERSITY B (n=79)	
	F	%	f	%
Different reasons between pre- and during the pandemic				
<i>Academic problems -> Family problems</i>	0	0	2	2.6
<i>Academic problems -> Personal problems</i>	1	2.6	0	0
<i>Academic problems -> Financial problems</i>	0	0	1	1.3
<i>Academic problems -> Lack of purpose/motivation</i>	1	2.6	0	0
<i>Peer and relationship problems -> Family problems</i>	0	0	1	1.3
<i>Peer and relationship problems -> Academic problems</i>	4	10.3	0	0
<i>Family problems -> Lack of purpose/motivation</i>	0	0	1	1.3
<i>Family problems -> Academic problems</i>	0	0	1	1.3
<i>Family problems -> Financial problems</i>	0	0	1	1.3
<i>Family problems -> Personal problems</i>	1	2.6	1	1.3
<i>Identity problems -> Family problems</i>	0	0	1	1.3
<i>Lack of purpose/motivation -> Financial problems</i>	1	2.6	1	1.3
<i>Past traumatic experiences -> Depression, anxiety, and other mental illnesses</i>	1	2.6	1	1.3
<i>Personal problems -> Family problems</i>	0	0	2	2.6
SUB-TOTAL	9	23.1	13	16.5

Table 3 shows that there are two kinds of students who had suicidal thoughts during both timeframes: (a) those who had the same reason for their suicidal thoughts before and during the pandemic, and (b) those whose reasons for their suicidal thoughts changed from one timeframe to another. The former kind comprises the majority of the suicide ideators. In University A, three reasons emerged as the most common: (1) academic problems, (2) family problems, and (3) lack of purpose/motivation. In University B, the most common reason is also family problems. Among the latter, a total of 14 different varieties of changes in the reason for suicide ideation were observed. In University A, the most common change is from peer and relationship problems to academic problems. This kind of change is not observed in University B. Instead, the most common change, albeit not by a lot, is from academic problems to family problems.

What's notable in these findings is that the shift to academic problems as the reason for suicide is prevalent in University A – one of the universities in the Philippines who first had a taste of the online classroom format as a response to the pandemic. This is suggestive of the difficulties encountered by the students in different parts of the world as they had to continue their education amidst a global threat and its resultant quarantine (Mayoob, 2020; Barrot et al., 2021). The author's own conversations with undergraduate students outside of this study (in his capacity as a faculty member of three universities) capture some of the sentiments about online learning during the pandemic. According to the students, the shift to online learning is taxing for several reasons. Aside from the fact that they have to continue their studies as family and friends, and sometimes even themselves, become afflicted with the COVID-19 virus and deal with the fears and potentialities of loss of life, they have also noticed that classes became more demanding in the online format. They are expected to learn many lessons with less supervision and there is an observed increase in the number of requirements that need to be submitted. According to the students, while many weeks go by in class before the pandemic where there are no required outputs, every week in online class seem to always demand at least one output to be submitted. They have to grapple with these requirements while the boundary between their student and household member roles are blurred – and they are expected to help in the household even during weekdays which, before the pandemic, was dedicated solely to studies. Finally, the students lamented that all of these academic difficulties now have to be faced without the promise of leisure with friends at the end of the week. While academics-induced stress was tolerable before the pandemic because they have an option to blow off steam through a night of games, drinking, and/or other leisurely and cathartic engagements, such outlets are no longer available to them during the pandemic.

Further analysis of the data in Tables 2 and 3 point to an interesting difference between the two universities in terms of the variety of reasons for suicide that their students reported. In Table 2, University A had seven reasons for suicide before the pandemic while University B had the same number. During the pandemic, University A's number of reasons for suicide decreased to five whereas University B's increased to 8. If we combine the variety of reasons for suicide during the pandemic found in Table 2 with the variety of reasons in Table 3 for each university respectively, the following varieties of reason for suicide will be found: For University A, the problems that students face that were aversive enough to induce suicide ideation during the pandemic are (1) academic problems, (2) depression and other mental illnesses, (3) family problems, (4) lack of purpose/motivation, (5) financial problems, and (6) personal problems. For University B, the problems that induced suicide ideation during the pandemic are (1) academic problems, (2) depression and other mental illnesses, (3) family problems, (4)

lack of purpose/motivation, (5) financial problems, (6) identity problems, (7) peer and relationship problems, and (8) personal problems.

If reasons for suicide are indicators of the problems that students face which are serious enough to induce suicidal thoughts, then it can be said that while both universities have the same number of variety of problems before the pandemic, the variety of problems for University A became focused to just six issues during the pandemic while the variety of problems for University B increased to eight different issues during the pandemic. What University B have as issues beyond those found in University A are personal problems and problems pertaining to peer and romantic relationships. Unfortunately, it is beyond the capabilities of this study to inquire further as to why this is the case but it may be worth exploring in future studies.

Table 4

Experiences in suicide-related help-seeking behavior of student respondents

	UNIVERSITY A (n=74)		UNIVERSITY B (n=124)	
When you were thinking of suicide or tried to commit suicide, did you try to call someone for help?	F	%	f	%
Yes	26	35	55	44.4
No	40	54	67	54
Did not answer	8	11	2	1.6
If you answered yes, who did you call?				
<i>Friend (but not a classmate)</i>	16	61.5	41	74.5
<i>Family</i>	4	15.4	4	7.27
<i>Religious leader/priest/pastor</i>	0	0	1	1.8
<i>Guidance Counselor</i>	3	12.5	0	0
<i>Classmate</i>	2	8.3	4	7.27
<i>Teacher</i>	0	0	0	0
<i>Hotline</i>	1	4.1	5	9.1

Table 4 shows that among those with personal experiences of suicide (ideation and/or attempts), majority did not try to seek help from anyone. Even among those who did, majority chose to ask for help from a friend who was not their classmate. It is

unclear why the choice of friends who are not classmates is very prevalent relative to the other choices. Seeking help from professional providers is clearly unpopular among the students – a finding that is similar to what has been observed in other studies when it comes to young people’s help-seeking behavior for mental health issues (Essau, 2005; Zachrisson et al., 2006; Sawyer et al., 2001;). Informal sources of help are more preferred instead – a finding that is similar to other studies (Rickwood et al., 2005). It might be imprudent to assume that the lack of help-seeking from professional counselors is due to inaccessibility. Both universities have active guidance counselling offices, and the socio-economic status of students from University A would at least be capable of affording counselling if necessary. Instead, the issue might be more cultural:

In Pascual and Abaya’s study (2016) of Filipino perceptions of depression, being depressed is associated by the participants with suicide. However, the participants believe that the proper response to this crisis is *“seeking help from family and friends, praying or connecting to God or the Supreme Being, pursuing activities to draw attention away from the problem/s or participating in worthwhile endeavor, such as helping church activities, to make oneself busy (p.22)”*. Professional help, according their study, is only availed of when the condition is deemed to be very severe.

Batar and Vasquez’ study (2016) gave further insights on the Philippine situation. According to point of view of their participants, a suicidal person does not need to seek the help of a doctor, and that professional help is only needed if the suicide manifests together with other symptoms such as incoherence. According to a psychiatrist in their study, Filipinos tend to seek professional help only when they think that they can no longer cope alone. This, however, is also a rare occurrence. Usually, suicidal patients are referred to professionals for psychiatric consultation only after they have made an attempt and the decision to seek help has been made for them by family or friends while they are unable to resist due to their post-suicide attempt weakened state.

Suicide hotlines – which became oft-spoken in social media during the start of the pandemic – were hardly considered by the respondents. This is perhaps due to a lack of trust in the efficacy of the hotlines – an issue that caused the rise of informal support groups for those suffering from suicide ideation in social networking sites such as Twitter (Adsuara, 2017). Among the six respondents who decided to call a suicide hotline, two said that the hotline was not effective at all while the rest said it was merely “somewhat effective”. One respondent noted that the hotline was not working so the respondent had to make several calls.

Table 5

Spearman Rho Correlation Coefficients between socio-economic characteristics of student respondents and suicide experience

	Suicide Ideation before Pandemic	Suicide Ideation during Pandemic	Suicide Ideation on both timeframes	Suicide attempt before Pandemic	Suicide attempt during Pandemic	Suicide attempt on both timeframes	Suicide-related help-seeking
Age	.062	.003	.084	.002	.033	.044	.022
Gender							
Male	.049	-.080	-.135*	-.023	-.056	-.165*	.044
Female	-.068	.056	.042	-.079	.005	.089	-.021
LGBT	.043	-.028	.141*	.190*	.034	.081	-.010
Has religion	-.062	.106	-.186*	-.113*	-.036	-.014	-.017
Residence							
Urban	.038	-.028	.044	.029	.063	-.050	.027
Rural	-.038	.028	-.044	-.029	-.063	.050	-.027
Socio-economic Class	.092	-.089	-.210*	-.007	-.099	-.191*	-.074

*significant at $\alpha=0.05$

The correlational test results in Table 5 suggest that three groups tend to have less suicide-related behaviors. Male students tend to be less prone to suicide ideation and attempts for both timeframes. This is similar to previous studies wherein women tend to engage in suicide ideation and suicide attempts more than men (Quintos, 2017a) albeit men tend to die more from suicide than women (Redaniel et al., 2011) – possibly due to men’s preference for more fatal methods of self-harm (Quintos, 2017a).

Those with religion tend to have less suicide ideation during both timeframes and less suicide attempts before the pandemic. The integrative and regulatory functions of religion are well-documented in sociological suicidological research even as far back as Durkheim’s pioneering study on the subject matter (Pickering & Walford, 2000). While the protective capabilities of religion is enough to defend its faithful against suicide ideation, it is not sufficient in protecting against actual attempts – which is a more serious issue than suicide ideation – during the pandemic because the quarantine protocols prevent the religious from convening together, thereby weakening the integrative and regulative capabilities of the religious community. Indeed, in a previous study of the relationship between religion and suicide among the Filipino youth, it was found that attending religious services is correlated with lesser tendencies for suicide attempts (Quintos, 2018).

Richer students tend to have less suicide ideation and suicide attempts on both timeframes. It is possible that this is because their higher socio-economic status serves as buffer against many of the aversive strains that could lead to higher chances of suicide. However, it is worth noting that in times of economic downturns such as the one associated with the pandemic, Henry and Short posited that such a frustration would cause increased tendencies for aggression among people and that richer individuals tend to channel their aggression inward – leading to suicide (Quintos, 2017c). This premise is not supported by the findings of this study.

Meanwhile, LGBT students tend to engage in more suicide ideation on both timeframes and more suicide attempts before the pandemic. Given the disadvantaged position of LGBTs in society wherein they tend to be alienated from their families – especially their fathers – due to their gender orientation (Quintos, 2019b) and suffer more from suicide ideation and suicide attempts (Quintos, 2017a), this is not a very surprising finding. What is noticeable, however, is that the tendency for higher rates of suicide attempts was only significant before the pandemic but was absent during the pandemic. It would have been logical to presume that since these LGBT students are likely to be forced into quarantine with their families, then they might be more prone to suicide due to the possible ensuing family conflicts. However, this paper posits that the reason why suicide attempts during the pandemic did not prove to be a significant correlate for the LGBT students is due to the lack of opportunity for suicide attempts during quarantine – an idea that is expounded in the succeeding section of the paper.

Synthesis of findings

The findings obtained in this empirical research are relevant not only as far as mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic is concerned. Instead, the study is able to touch on several aspects of the current social reality of the Filipino youth and suicide. The following five points are particularly worth discussing:

1. A reported increase in the prevalence of suicide that exceeds previous reports.

The prevalence rates of suicide ideation and suicide attempts found in this study are higher than those reported in previous nationally-representative studies for the Philippines (Quintos, 2017a; Quintos, 2019a). Typical scholarly prudence, therefore, would dictate that we should take these reported prevalence rates with a grain of salt because the data only came from two Metro Manila-based universities. An argument can be made, however, that it is unwise to think that the old prevalence rates of suicide will not change substantially after a global pandemic that shook the social structures of many countries in the world including the Philippines. The widely-discussed mental health

global pandemic and its implications for suicide prevalence rates also support the findings of this study.

There are also minimal sources of nationally-representative data on suicide that we can rely on. The annual Philippine Health Statistics – used previously by Redaniel et al. (2011) – reports the number of cause-specific deaths per year based on data obtained from death certificates. It cannot provide many of the kinds of data that we needed in this study. Furthermore, suicide mortalities are often prone to underreporting (Cooper & Milroy, 1995; Sampson & Rutty, 1999; Palmer et al., 2015; Pritchard & Hansen, 2014; Tøllefsen et al., 2012; Snowdon & Choi, 2020) for several reasons such as the difficulty in discerning between homicides, suicides, and accidents and the cultural stigma that suicide deaths are associated with. The better sources of information would be large-scale surveys. In previous studies, these large-scale surveys that contain suicide-related information came in two forms: (1) the World Health Organization’s Global School-based Student Health Survey (GSHS) – used previously by Quintos (2019a; 2020a; 2020b); and (2) the UP Population Institute and Demographic Research and Development Foundation’s Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality (YAFS) Survey – used previously by Quintos (2017a; 2017b; 2018; 2019b) and Manalastas (2013; 2016). The former is only conducted every four years – the latest of which was in 2019 (the data are still unavailable for use as of the writing of this article). This means that GSHS cannot provide data that reflects the realities that may have drastically changed due to the pandemic. The latter, meanwhile, is only conducted every ten years. The latest, YAFS 5, started in 2021 and would have captured a pandemic reality that the current set of GSHS datasets cannot. Unfortunately, the data for YAFS 5 is still unavailable as of the writing of this article.

2. The COVID-19 pandemic and the prevalence of suicide

The study made notable findings about the prevalence of both suicide ideation and suicides before and during the pandemic. According to the results, there are more students who suffered from suicide ideation prior to the pandemic than during the pandemic. For students who suffered from suicide ideation during both timeframes, students of University A suffered more before the pandemic while those from University B suffered more during the pandemic. These results point to two important insights: first, while many of the suicide ideators experienced their suicide crises during both timeframes and that among those who did not, there were more suicide ideators prior to the pandemic, the pandemic’s timeframe has new individuals who have never thought or planned about suicide before start suffering from suicide ideation. Their addition to the proportion of students who now suffer from suicide ideation may help explain why there is a noted increase in the prevalence of suicide ideation among the students compared to those in previous studies. Second, the fact that, among those who suffered from suicide ideation during both timeframes, students from University B have a higher rate during the

pandemic may indicate that the difficulties associated with the pandemic are felt harder by the more socio-economically disadvantaged students of the state university.

Suicide attempts were also found to be more frequent before the pandemic than during the pandemic. It will be hasty, however, to assume that this means that life was more aversive prior to the pandemic than during – this will go against most of the first-hand experiences that people have in recent years. Instead, it is more likely that this is due to a lack of opportunity to make suicide attempts during the time of the quarantine wherein these would-be suicide attempters often find themselves in the company of siblings and parents who are forced to study and work from home. The lack of privacy is not conducive to attempts at suicide because the act can easily be detected by other residents of the households during quarantine and subsequently prevented. Indeed, this explanation is supported by a previous Filipino study wherein living at home and especially not having one's own bedroom are correlated with lesser suicide attempts among the Filipino youth (Quintos, 2017b). A Philippine report (Uy, 2012) can also help shed light on the matter: it was found that most suicides happen during weekdays between eight (8) in the morning up to noon. Meanwhile, the least number of suicides happen during the night. The proposed explanation as to why 8AM to 12NN is the timeframe for most suicides is because this is the time when most people are out and off to work, allowing the young Filipino the opportunity to attempt the act at home uninterrupted. During the typical setup of households during the pandemic, such temporal windows of opportunity are no longer available to a person thinking of attempting suicide. This is not to say that suicide mortalities no longer happen. It is evident that they do (Gregorio, 2021). It may be worth considering, however, that the quarantine – despite being one of the potential reasons for suicide – has also inadvertently made it more difficult to commit suicide.

3. *The prevailing suicide and family problems connection and the increasing salience of academic problems as reason for suicide.*

The prevalence of family problems as a reason for suicide is something that has been touched by previous studies (Quintos, 2017a). That it remained as the primary reason for suicide for many of the suicide ideators in this study is not surprising. This is because previous reports have already warned how the quarantine brought by the pandemic has, by forcing family members to stay together with little means of escape, exacerbated problems related to family relationships (Spinelli et al., 2020; Kluger, 2021; Pereda & Diaz-Faez, 2020; Taub, 2020; Evans et al., 2020; Sacco et al., 2020).

Another point worth discussing is the increase in suicide ideators attributing their crisis to academic problems. Indeed, the academics-suicide connection is very salient during the pandemic. This is because the sudden shift to online and modular

learning produced several strains to the learning process. Students were suddenly thrust in a format of learning that they are likely technically unprepared for. Teachers and school administrators themselves were caught unprepared on how to cope pedagogically and technically with the shift – with many trying to bring the cultural baggage of classroom face-to-face learning habits practiced for decades (such as requiring attendance, cameras to always be turned on, and even uniforms) to the new format and either failing in the process or producing adverse results.

The difficulties faced brought about several mobilizations famous in social media, generally the mode of communication for most Filipinos during the pandemic, demanding for “academic freeze” – or the halting of formal schooling, and its less drastic counterpart “academic ease” – or the easing of school requirements. These calls became especially viral online when other disasters such as typhoons struck the country (Mocon-Ciriaco, 2021; Icamen, 2020). Government officials tended to oppose the calls for academic freeze – citing the need to remain competitive with other countries and avoid being left behind (Ismael, 2021; Felipe, 2021; Roy, 2021) but accommodated some calls for academic ease (Montemayor, 2021). Academic problems have also been highlighted in news reports during the pandemic as the reason for suicide cases that garnered media attention (Cervantes, 2020; Saavedra, 2020; Bautista, 2021; Bernardo, 2021). These adverse effects due to education should be looked into if school administrators are planning to retain elements of the current online and modular formats in the post-pandemic educational framework.

4. *The lack of trust in professional counselors and hotlines amidst the preference for peers as “counselors”.*

It was quite noticeable in the study that majority of the respondents suffering from a suicide crisis did not bother to seek help from anyone. A systematic review of mental health help-seeking (Gulliver et al., 2010) identified three major barriers that young people often face that prevents them from seeking help. These are (1) their perception that seeking help for mental health issues is embarrassing and stigmatized, (2) their lack of knowledge of mental health professionals, services, and what to do when suffering from such mental health crises - or poor mental health literacy, and (3) their tendency to keep such problems to themselves – or preference for self-reliance. A separate systematic review by Aguirre Velasco et al. (2020) reported essentially the same barriers.

The aforesaid triad of barriers is supported by empirical data from the country. In Pascual and Abaya’s qualitative study (2016), participants connected suicide with depression. According to their participants, being depressed is “*a typical reaction to stressors in daily life that everyone goes through*” and that it is simply “*something one has to go through and endure or kayanin (overcome)*”. Those who cannot cope with this are considered as “*mahina ang loob (weak inner will or volition)*”. This parallels the three

aforementioned barriers: there is an emphasis on self-reliance because this is typical and something everyone goes through. Those who cannot cope are stigmatized as weak. And all of these are likely due to poor mental health literacy. This depression-suicide connection and the lack of trust in professional help is further explained by Bhugra (1989) who said that the general population typically does not regard such mental states as proper illnesses and people suffering from them are consequently stigmatized. Batar and Vasquez (2016) also saw many stigmatic beliefs that Filipinos associate with suicide. This includes Filipino phrases such as “*hindi na tuwid ang pag-iisip (cannot think straight)*”, “*hindi nakakapag-isip ng tama (cannot think properly)*”, and “*makitid ang utak (narrow-minded)*”. Suicide is further stigmatized as something unthinkable for Filipinos in their study because Filipinos are resilient: “*Pinoy... sanay tayo. Hindi tayo maggi-give up kung simple problems (Us Filipinos, we’re resilient. We don’t give up from simple problems)*”. Suicide, from this perspective, seems to be an affront to the Filipino social identity.

This stigma associated with suicide may explain not only why majority of the respondents who had a direct suicide experience did not seek help but also why, among those who did seek help, their choice of helper is a friend who is not a classmate. It is possible that this is a calculated choice: they chose someone who is likely in the same age group as them and, compared to others like religious leaders, family, and teachers, would understand and less likely judge them for their suicidal tendencies. This presumption that their fellow youth might be more understanding and less judgmental may be based on the fact that these young Filipinos tend to consider suicide as a very common experience among today’s youth (Quintos, 2022) and their fellow youth – possibly having gone through a similar ordeal – can likely empathize. They prefer that the source of the help is someone who is not their classmate, however, because the stigmatic nature of suicide is such that once you have had a suicide experience that is known to people, their perception of you might change. True to the premise of a calculated choice, these youth might prefer friends who are not their classmates as a means to secure their identity: it is easier to retain a social identity unblemished by the stigma of suicide if the only one who knows of one’s suicide experience is a friend that one hardly meets on a daily basis. It is harder to retain such an identity if the confidant of the suicide experience is a classmate that one meets almost every day. A related finding was obtained by Kearns et al. (2015). In their study, they found that students found to be at-risk of suicide tend to avoid seeking professional help if the professional help available is from their university. This pattern was found to be particularly salient for those who identify strongly with the university – possibly because they are afraid of no longer being regarded as a normative fit for the school. The same calculated choice may also apply for the family since the family might change their way of interacting with the person once the family knows of the suicide experience.

Whatever the reason for their choice of friends as their source of help after a suicide experience, there is a need to be cautious of this reality. This is because of

two reasons. First, previous studies (Quintos, 2017a; Quintos, 2019b; Lopez-Castroman et al., 2017; Spiwak et al., 2011; Guerreiro et al., 2017; Sarchiapone et al., 2009) have already warned of the tendency of people who have been exposed to suicide to have higher odds of suicide ideation and suicide attempts as well. Second, these friends of the respondents are unlikely to be properly equipped with the knowledge and training to safely and properly deal with suicide. Previous studies, for example, point to increased odds of suicide due to flawed attempts at intervention (Quintos, 2019b; Meyer et al., 2015). In their attempt to help the suicidal person, they may unknowingly create more, possibly fatal, danger for themselves and for the person they are trying to help.

5. *The salient divide between the groups with privileged positions in society and the disadvantaged.*

The findings also made salient in more than one occasion the socio-economic divide of suicide risk. In the comparisons made between Universities A and B, it is consistently University B – the state-owned university predominated by students from lower class households – that is at a more disadvantaged position: University B has a higher prevalence rate of indirect and direct experiences of suicide. During the pandemic, chronic suicide ideators from University B also experienced more frequent suicidal thoughts as compared to before the pandemic. Suicide ideators from University B also have a more varied array of problems aversive enough to trigger a suicide crisis (reasons for suicide). The correlational test results also showed a clear divide between the groups often given more power, privilege, and protection in society (males, religious, and the wealthier) and those who are often in a weaker social position (females, LGBTs, and the poor). This divide is observable both before and during the pandemic. All of these point to the necessity of approaching the problems of the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the supposed next global pandemic – the mental health crisis – from a multidisciplinary approach that goes beyond a focus on medications and the individual but is instead sensitive to the weight of the social structure and its inequalities. Until these inequalities are addressed, it is likely that no amount of mental health webinars – a trend that has become increasingly common since the pandemic began – will be of much help at the macro-level.

CONCLUSION

This study found that majority of its respondents have experienced suicide ideation, and the rate of self-reported engagement in suicide attempts among its respondents is also higher than those reported in previous Philippine studies. Majority of these respondents are also part of social networks whose members have also experienced suicide ideation and/or attempts. Most of the respondents who reported to be suicide ideators thought of suicide before and during the pandemic while suicide attempts

were reportedly more common before the pandemic. Most of those who experienced suicide ideation and/or attempts reportedly did not seek any form of help during the ordeal and, for those who did, the help was sought from friends instead of mental health professionals and suicide hotlines. The study also found that family problems were the most common reason for suicide before the pandemic and academic problems were the most common during the pandemic, albeit there was an observed rise in suicide ideations and/or attempts due to financial problems as well. Finally, correlational tests found that males, the religious, and the rich tend to engage in less suicide-related behaviors while the opposite was observed among LGBT students. These findings point to the possibility of suicide becoming an increasingly serious concern in the country, albeit more studies are recommended to ascertain if these trends will be echoed by those from non-Manila, non-Luzon, and non-university level Filipino subgroups.

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