

One in three teenage boys experiencing sexual assault tries to take his own life, study finds

3 April 2015, by Marcene Robinson



A psychologist studying the symbiotic role that sexual assault and obesity play in attempted suicide among teens has found that while there is no connection between the two, one of three male teens who experienced sexual assault had attempted suicide in the previous year.

The researcher, Laura Anderson, PhD, a licensed psychologist and assistant professor in the University at Buffalo School of Nursing, also found that a history of [sexual assault](#) and unhealthy weight placed girls at higher risk of attempted [suicide](#).

"The stigma is often not addressed; it's a silent issue in society," says Anderson. "Very rarely does programming address boys. It's often presumed to be an issue for girls. The results highlight the need to educate the public and develop preventive programming and support for male and female sexual assault survivors."

The study, "Sexual Assault, Overweight, and Suicide Attempts in U.S. Adolescents," was published in *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, a journal of the American Association of Suicidology.

Anderson's study resulted from an observation in her clinical practice over the years with children and teens. She noticed that those who attempted suicide tended to share the same histories of sexual assault and struggles with weight.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents, and the greatest indicator of whether an attempt will be successful is the number of times someone tries to take his or her life, says Anderson.

The results coincide with Sexual Assault Awareness Month and increasing efforts among national organizations and UB to increase educational and training initiatives.

The study analyzed data from a Youth and Risk Behavior Survey that sampled more than 31,000 teenagers in 2009 and 2011. The research continued a preliminary study from 2011 that found similar results using a smaller sample of teens.

The poll surveyed students ages 14 to 18 and examined whether the two variables influenced [suicide attempts](#) within a year of the survey.

For boys, the study found:

- 3.5 percent of healthy-weight males with no sexual assault history attempted suicide;
- That percentage climbed to 33.2 percent for healthy-weight males with sexual assault history, which Anderson attributes to stigma, shame, possible gender role conflict

if the attacker was male and the lack of an open support system;

- Weight alone was not a significant factor in suicide attempts for males. Only 3.9 percent of overweight males with no sexual assault history attempted suicide;
- For males who were both overweight and had a history of sexual assault, the percentage who attempted suicide was 33 percent.
- For girls, the results were:
 - 5.8 percent of healthy-weight females with no sexual assault history attempted suicide;
 - The percentage rose to 27.1 percent for healthy-weight girls with a history of sexual assault;
 - Weight influenced the suicide rate among women: 8.2 percent of [overweight girls](#) with no sexual assault history attempt suicide;
 - However, both factors did not increase suicide rate: 26.6 percent of overweight girls with sexual assault histories attempted suicide.

Despite the large sample, the results are culturally loaded, as nearly 20 percent of students of color left questions surrounding suicide unanswered. Underreporting is common, especially among males and African American students, says Anderson.

Future studies will gather more detailed responses on sexual assault and suicide attempts, and examine additional variables, such as [body mass index](#) and perceived self-image.

Anderson also notes the relationship between weight, sexual assault and suicide – especially in girls – is complicated and needs additional study.

More information: "Sexual Assault, Overweight, and Suicide Attempts in U.S. Adolescents." *Suicide Life Threat Behav.* 2014 Dec 19. [DOI: 10.1111/sltb.12148](#)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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