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Contrast in Coping Styles and Suicidality by Gender among Homeless Youths

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► **To cite this version:**

Geoffrey Gauvin, Réal Labelle, Claude Berthiaume, Sophie Trudel, Marc Daigle, et al.. Contrast in Coping Styles and Suicidality by Gender among Homeless Youths. 20th World Congress of the International Association for Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Allied Professions, Jul 2012, Paris, France. hal-04007160

HAL Id: hal-04007160

<https://hal.science/hal-04007160>

Submitted on 27 Feb 2023

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1. Abstract

Objective: The goal of this study is to determine the difference in gender for coping and suicidal behavior among homeless youths. **Method:** 76 homeless youths (33 males and 43 females) from 8 different shelters in Quebec responded to questions about their suicidal behavior and to the Adolescent Coping Scale of Frydenberg. **Results:** Analysis indicate that females had more suicidal behavior than males ($\chi^2(1) = 9.05, p = .003$). Furthermore, females seems to use more non-productive coping: tension reduction ($t(74) = 2.6, p = .010$), somatization ($t(74) = 2.4, p = .019$) and self-blame ($t(74) = 3.0, p = .003$); and males seems more likely to use productive coping: focus on positive ($t(74) = 2.4, p = .018$), seek spiritual help ($t(74) = 2.1, p = .036$) and physical recreation ($t(74) = 3.1, p = .003$). **Discussion:** These results suggest a significant difference between males and females regarding coping and suicidality, indicating more suicidal behavior and non-productive coping for women. However, most of these youths were not homeless for a long time.

Key Words: Coping, Suicide, Gender, Homeless, Youth, Quantitative.

2. Research Problem

Homeless youths are considered particularly at risk to show suicidal behavior with a rate between 20 and 40% (Kidd & Carroll, 2007). There is also strong evidence that adolescent girls were particularly at risk of suicidal behavior (Lewinsohn, Rohde, Seeley & Baldwin, 2001; Evans, Hawton, Rodham, 2005). Despite the growing knowledge about risk factors, there is still a lack of comprehension in the protective factors against suicidal behavior for these youths. Only one quantitative study from Kidd & Carroll (2007) studied coping and suicide in this population. They showed a significant relation between coping and suicidal attempt in a homeless youth population, even after controlling for abusive past (physical, sexual and neglect). In this article, the authors emphasized the importance to consider gender differences in the relation between coping and suicidality.

3. Objectives

This research is aimed to determine the difference in gender for coping and suicidal behavior among homeless youths and to determine a model:

- **Question 1:** To determine if there is a significant difference in the level of suicidal behavior between males and females in this population
- **Question 2:** To determine if there is a significant difference in coping strategies between males and females
- **Question 3:** To determine if there is a significant difference in coping strategies between suicidal and non-suicidal youths

4. Method

Participants

The 76 youths (33 males and 43 females) were recruited from 8 different shelters in Quebec where they spent at least one night. Half of the sample were youth with suicidal behavior and half were not. They were aged from 12 to 19 years old ($M = 15.26$). All of them were born in Quebec.

Instruments

Index of suicidal behavior: Questions about suicidal thoughts, suicidal plans and suicide attempts for the past 12 months

Adolescent Coping Scale (Frydenberg & Lewis, 1993): The ACS is composed of 79 items measuring 18 different subscales of coping strategies. Each item is answered on a 5 point scale (1 = do not apply; 5 = used very frequently). A 14 days test-retest reliability indicates that coefficients for the subscales ranged from 0.44 to 0.84 ($M = 0.68$). The internal consistency for the factors ranged from 0.54 to 0.84 ($M = 0.71$)

Procedure

The collect of data took place between 2002 and 2004 and was spread on 18 months. Some caregivers were mandated to talk about this project to new arriving adolescents. If they were interested, a research assistant made an appointment with the youth in the shelter. Each participant had to fill different self-reported questionnaires.

Statistical analysis

Analysis were conducted with SPSS 16.0. Descriptive statistics were used for the demographics characteristics. Bivariate analysis were used to investigate the link between gender, coping style and suicidal behavior. All the statistical analysis of the study were done from the whole sample of 76 participants.

5. Results

Objective 1

The distribution of suicidal behavior is significantly different between males and females ($\chi^2(1) = 9.05, p = .003$). The residuals analysis indicates that females were more likely to exhibit suicidal behavior (73.7%) than males (26.3%).

Objective 2

Females seems to use more non-productive coping than males, as it is shown in table 1. However, there were no significant difference between males and females for the overall subscales “productive style” ($t(74) = 1.3, p = .194$) or “non-productive style” ($t(74) = 2.0, p = .055$) of coping.

5. Results

Table 1

Difference in coping strategies by gender

Variables	Male M (SD)	Female M (SD)	T-test	P value
Focus on positive	13.6 (3.8)	11.8 (2.8)	2.4	.018
Seek spiritual help	7.4 (5.2)	5.4 (2.7)	2.1	.036
Physical recreation	11.1 (3.3)	8.7 (3.5)	3.1	.003
Tension reduction	12.7 (4.5)	15.3 (4.1)	2.6	.010
Somatization	3.5 (1.9)	4.6 (2.0)	2.4	.019
Self-blame	6.5 (3.2)	8.8 (3.2)	3.0	.003

*The results in bold indicate the most used strategy for each group; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation

Objective 3

Youths with suicidal behavior seems to use more non-productive coping than youths without suicidal behavior, as it is shown in table 2. Furthermore, there is a significant difference between youth with and without suicidal behavior for the overall subscale “non-productive style” of coping ($t(74) = 2.3, p = .022$). This difference is however not significant for the overall subscale “productive style” of coping ($t(74) = .20, p = .841$).

Table 2

Difference in coping strategies by suicidality

Variables	Suicidal M (SD)	Non-suicidal M (SD)	T-test	P value
Focus on positive	11.8 (2.9)	13.35 (3.6)	2.1	.039
Worry	12.7 (3.7)	10.8 (3.9)	2.2	.031
Somatization	4.6 (1.9)	3.6 (2.0)	2.2	.032
Tension reduction	15.5 (3.7)	12.9 (4.7)	2.7	.009
Self-blame	8.6 (3.3)	7.0 (3.3)	1.3	.035

*The results in bold indicate the most used strategy for each group; M = Mean; SD = Standard deviation

6. Discussion

The hypothesis that girls living residential instability exhibit more suicidal behaviors than boys is confirmed by the analysis. In addition, when there is a difference by gender for the coping style, girls seems to use more non-productive strategies than male and inversely. On the other hand, in accordance with the literature, it appears that youths with suicidal behavior were more likely to use a non productive coping style than non-suicidal youths (Kidd & Carroll, 2007).

Limits: It should be noticed the results of this study is only based on bivariate analysis. Also, some of the participants of these shelters were not homeless for a long time. In addition, the group of suicidal youth comprised not only suicidal attempters but also suicidal ideators, it could be a source of variation in our results.