

# Mental Health and Suicide Risk Across Specific College and University Student Populations:

**Unique Challenges, Help-Seeking Preferences, and Access to and Utilization of Services and Resources**

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Now is the time to prioritize mental health for college students.

### Since the pandemic...

- Young people 18-24 struggling the most of all age groups<sup>1</sup>
  - 26% reported past-30-day suicidal ideation (11% total survey sample)
- Negative effects on mood and behavioral and emotional functioning<sup>2</sup>
  - Pre/post survey of college students
- Mandated relocation from campus led to greater loneliness, grief, and generalized anxiety<sup>3</sup>

### Mental health a significant issue prior to the pandemic

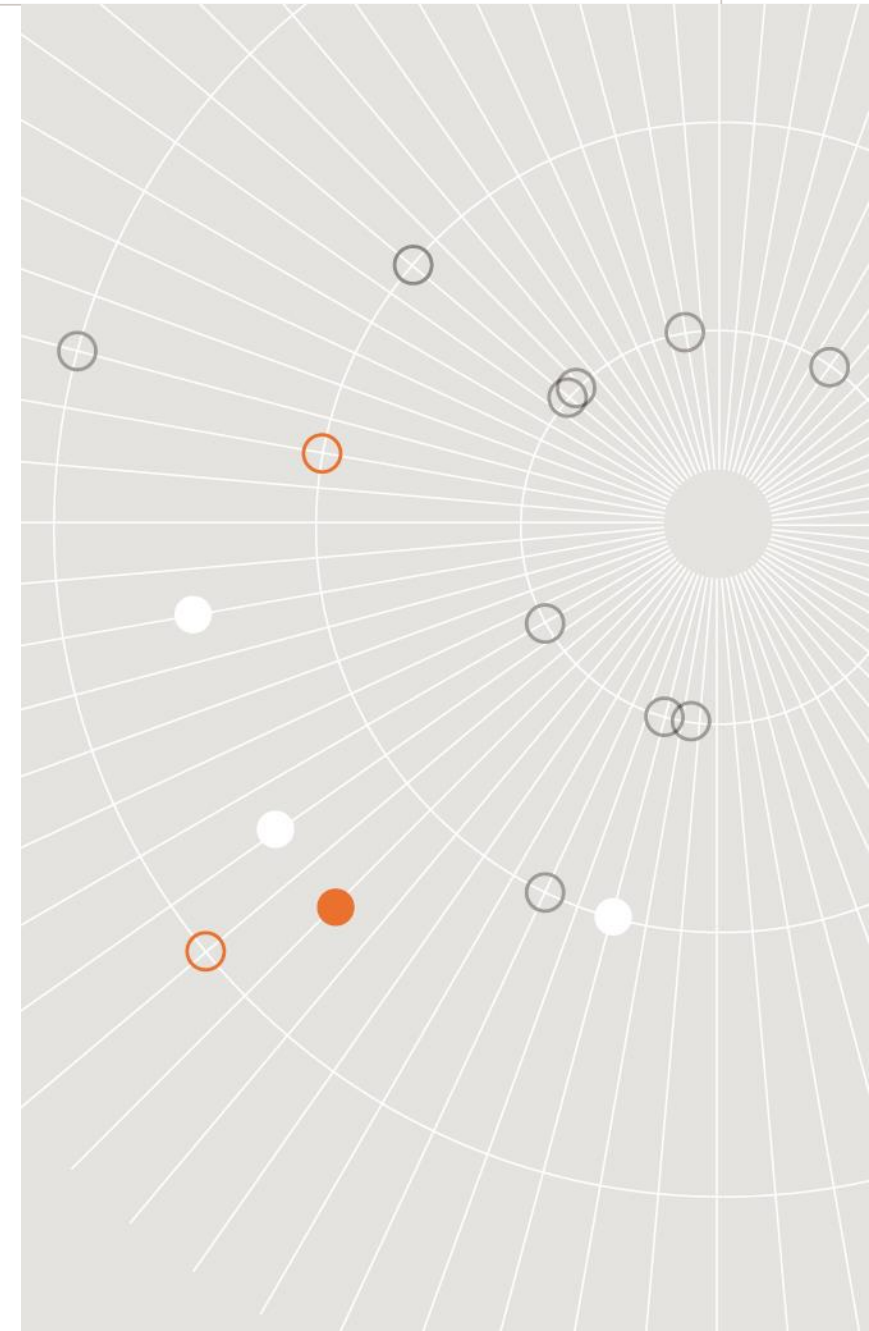
- 36% reported depression, 31% anxiety, and 21% past-2-week suicidal ideation in 2019<sup>4</sup>

1. Czeisler MÉ, Lane RI, Petrosky E, et al. Mental health, substance use, and suicidal ideation during the COVID-19 pandemic — United States, June 24–30, 2020. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep.* 2020;69:1049–1057. DOI: 10.15585/mmwr.mm6932a1.

2. Copeland WE, McGinnis E, Bai Y, et al. Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on college student mental health and wellness. *J Am Acad Child Adolesc Psychiatry.* 2021;60(1):134-141. DOI: 10.1016/j.jaac.2020.08.466.

3. Conrad RC, Hahn HC, Koire A, Pinder-Amaker S, Liu CH. College student mental health risks during the COVID-19 pandemic: Implications of campus relocation. *J Psychiatr Res.* 2021;136:117-126. DOI: 10.1016/j.jpsychires.2021.01.054.

4. Healthy Minds Network and the American College Health Association. The impact of COVID-19 on college student well-being. 2020. [https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/Healthy\\_Minds\\_NCHA\\_COVID\\_Survey\\_Report\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/Healthy_Minds_NCHA_COVID_Survey_Report_FINAL.pdf). Accessed April 23, 2021.



Colleges and universities have worked to support the mental health of their students, yet students continue to face challenges.

### **Study Objectives:**

- Explore stressors unique to specific populations of college students and explore the coping and help-seeking behaviors they use to combat these stressors
- Identify factors that make students more or less likely to utilize both on- and off-campus mental health services and supports
- Provide recommendations to campuses for strengthening mental health services, resources, and supports

We conducted our study April 2019-October 2020.

14

### **Focus groups**

7 in-person and 7 via webex

3

### **Institutions of higher education**

1 large public university and 2 smaller private institutions

95

### **College students**

Undergraduate, graduate, LGBTQ+, student athletes, and international students

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# Results

Here are some unique themes we heard from *graduate students*.

1.

### Unique stressors

Juggling school with other responsibilities

More academic pressure

Greater expectations

Less time for yourself

2.

### Financial burden and uncertainty

Losing job income and having to pay tuition

Will the commitment pay off?

3.

### Guilt over self-care

Always something you have to do

Importance of mental health

4.

### Accessing services/supports

Marketing of programs

Distance from counseling center

Anonymity

Continuity

5.

### Mental health education

No required courses



I've been working full time as a professional for many years. But in order to go back to grad school, which will help me, I had to quit my full time job and now pay tuition and live on half of what I lived on before...So it's that constant struggle...[I have] this part time job and then with the Master's Program, also having to do an internship. So those are hours that I could be at a paid job, so it can be a lot sometimes.

The students provided a number of recommendations.

- Specific marketing of services to grad students
- Drop-in hours on satellite campuses
- Mental health into class time or designated course
- Greater leniency by professors
- Mental health promotion posters on campus
- Peer support groups
- Advisors checking in on mental health
- Increase awareness of services and supports



**“It’s important to make sure there’s a list of available resources and that all students know where to get the list. Like a benefits package at any job. This is like a full-time job, and we need to make sure we know what’s available.”**



Stressors related to being *LGBTQ+* can impact mental health and help seeking.

### **General sense of homophobia**

- Difficult to come out to or be themselves within the campus community
- Not easy to connect with others in LGBTQ community unless actively seek out

### **Lack of understanding among others**

- Hard to talk to non-LGBTQ friends
- Often have to educate professors and others on LGBTQ topics

### **Undergoing years of discrimination and stigma**

- Not being taken seriously or made to feel wrong about sexual orientation or gender identity

"I hear [hate speech] often, you hear it from the frats, you hear it from just regular everyday people you think would be just normal students and you just hear it a lot."

-- *Quote from participant*

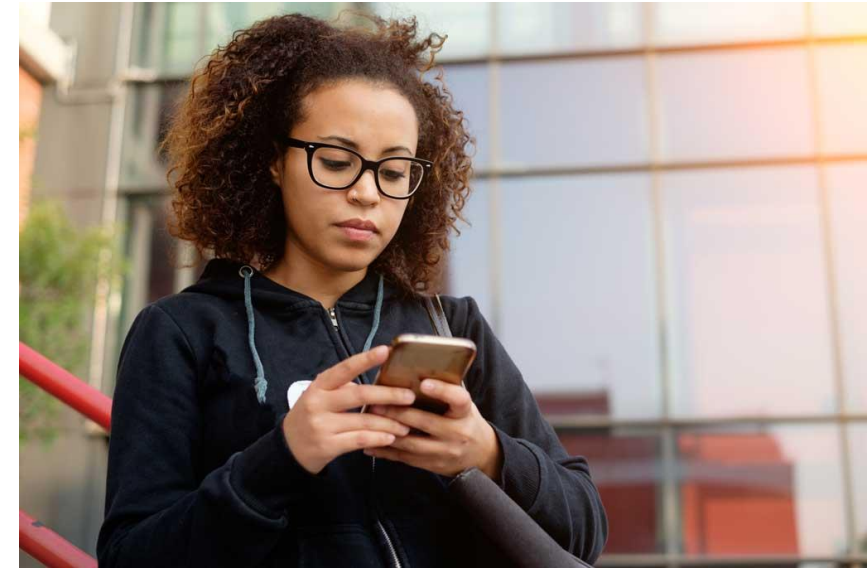
Preferences around LGBTQ-specific services and hotlines vary.

### Reasons for using:

- To avoid judgmental or ignorant conversations
- Speak with someone who understands LGBTQ+ experiences
- Explore identity and express feelings to other LGBTQ+ people

### Reasons *against* using:

- Feeling like they're not "queer enough"
- To avoid assumptions that all their issues are rooted in LGBTQ+ identity
  - Hinders exploration of the root cause for certain issues



"With all of the therapists I have seen there always has to be a distinction where I have to say, 'Yes I'm gay, but that has nothing to do with any of this other stuff'."

-- Quote from participant

LGBTQ+ students' recommendations focused around faculty and staff and opportunities for informal support.

- Encourage professors to be proactive with LGBTQ and MH issues
- Professional development on LGBTQ topics for faculty and staff
- Promotion of policies and training requirements regarding LGBTQ inclusivity
  - Particularly for campus police and health/mental health centers
- Short-term safe spaces for people who are feeling overwhelmed, depressed or suicidal where they can talk to people trained in suicide prevention

Some sources of stress expressed by *student athletes*.

### Pressure to Perform

#### **Self-blame**

Athletic and academic performance;  
Transition-HS to college, being one of many

#### **Injury**

One of the greatest impacts on mental health

#### **Eating disorders**

Rewarded in some sports

### Time Commitment and False Beliefs

#### **Juggling demands**

Training, social, and academics

#### **Friends**

Don't understand the commitment

#### **Beliefs about athletes**

Easy classes, no stress, outgoing

#### **Stress**

Finding time and energy to be social

### Coaches and Trainers

#### **Lack of support/ recognition of mental health**

Lose love of sport

#### **Body shaming**

Unhealthy mindset and stress

#### **Influence**

Want attention and praise from coaches

### After College

#### **All eggs in 1 basket**

Future plans;  
Loss of sport = loss of identity

#### **Continuing with sport**

Running/club sports not the same



With long distance running, weight and body image is the culture of our sport...You're rewarded for disordered eating. You're rewarded for being unhealthfully underweight. The thinner you are, the less you eat, the faster you run, the more scholarships you get, the better school you get into. It's all good until your body breaks down. You're injured. You get sick all of the time. You get stress fractures. And then like what do you do.

"I come into lift exhausted and the coach says, 'Champions don't get tired.' I was up all night, I had homework to do. I had a midterm right after that."

"We have one meeting a year to talk about counseling and mental health but our coaches just brush it off and we don't bring it up again."

"I'm going to come back from break, and they'll be like, 'it looks like you didn't run over break, were you too busy eating?' It's like no, I was spending time with my family."

## Some recommendations provided by athletes.

- **Normalize use of mental health services**
  - Leaders of team and those recognizable and social
- Drop-in hours for athletes well advertised and done in private spot in general athletic areas
- Coaches should add mental health services/resources to team structure – like study hall
- **Coaches can help change mentality**
  - Education and training
  - Emphasize importance of mental health
  - Positive feedback goes a long way
- Sports psychologists should be a former college student athlete
- Student athlete support groups
- Make outside resources known to athletic department – face to name



**“Look at me, coach!...When coach is there, mentality changes and people want more of his focus.”**

## Students' voices must be heard in the development of programs and

- Specific populations of college students have unique needs and face unique stressors
- It is critical to listen to students and include their voices and perspectives
  - “This shows that people are listening and there is hope.”



**“Thank you for undertaking such a study. We just talk about feeling like a part of something, and even having someone believe that someone really cares about us— that goes a long way.”**




# Thank you.

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