

# Family Dynamics and Strain Dynamics as Correlates of Suicidal Ideation Among Undergraduate Students in Tertiary Institutions in Rivers State

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## Abstract:

Suicidal ideation among undergraduates is a growing concern in Nigeria, with both family and environmental factors implicated in its development. This study investigated family dynamics and strain dynamics as correlates of suicidal ideation among 400 undergraduate students from the University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University. A correlational, ex post facto design was employed, using validated instruments to measure family dynamics, strain dynamics, and suicidal ideation. Descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression analyses were conducted. Results indicated a significant negative relationship between family dynamics and suicidal ideation, and a significant positive relationship between strain dynamics and suicidal ideation. Regression analysis showed that family and strain dynamics jointly predicted 41% of the variance in suicidal ideation. Findings suggest that supportive family environments buffer against suicidal thoughts, while academic, financial, and interpersonal strain increase risk. The study recommends strengthening counselling services, implementing family-focused interventions, and developing programs to reduce strain and enhance resilience. These insights provide a foundation for culturally sensitive prevention and intervention strategies in Rivers State tertiary institutions.

**Keywords:** Family Dynamics, Strain Dynamics, Suicidal Ideation, Undergraduate Students, Tertiary Institutions.

## **Introduction**

Suicide remains one of the leading causes of death among youths aged 15 to 29, and suicidal ideation is a critical psychological precursor to completed suicide, particularly within university populations [1][2]. Research across Nigeria and other countries indicates that between 9% and 25% of undergraduates report recent suicidal thoughts, reflecting a significant public health concern in higher education settings [3][4][5]. The prevalence of suicidal ideation among students underscores the urgent need to understand the factors that contribute to these thoughts in order to inform prevention strategies.

Family dynamics, encompassing cohesion, communication, conflict, parenting style, and economic stability, play a crucial role in shaping students' mental health and their susceptibility to suicidal ideation [6][7][8]. Studies show that poor family relationships, frequent parental quarrels, separation, and overall family dysfunction significantly increase the risk of suicidal thoughts, whereas supportive and harmonious family environments act as protective factors [9][10][11][12][13]. Parenting styles that foster connectedness and emotional support are associated with lower levels of suicidal ideation, highlighting the importance of family processes in the psychological well-being of undergraduates.

In addition to family influences, strain dynamics psychological and social stressors arising from academic pressure, financial hardship, victimization, and role conflict have been strongly linked to suicidal ideation among university students [14][15]. Psychological strain, especially during crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, has been shown to increase suicidal thoughts both directly and indirectly through mechanisms such as brooding and depression [16]. In the Nigerian context, irregular financial support, academic difficulties, parental marital challenges, and relationship breakdowns have been identified as significant contributors to suicidal ideation among undergraduates [17].

Despite the growing body of research on suicidal ideation in university populations, there is limited empirical work that simultaneously examines the influence of family dynamics and strain dynamics on suicidal thoughts among undergraduates in Rivers State. Understanding how these factors jointly contribute to suicidal ideation is crucial for designing effective prevention, counseling, and family-based interventions tailored to the local context. This study, therefore, seeks to investigate family dynamics and strain dynamics as correlates of suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Rivers State.

## **Statement of the Problem**

Suicidal ideation among university students has emerged as a pressing public health concern, with studies indicating that a substantial proportion of undergraduates' experience thoughts of self-harm or suicide [18]. Empirical evidence highlights that family dynamics, including cohesion, communication, conflict, and parenting style, are significantly related to suicidal ideation, with dysfunctional family environments predicting higher risk [8][11][15]. Negative parenting practices, parental conflict, and family instability have been shown to increase vulnerability to self-harm and suicidality in youth [3][6][8].

In parallel, strain dynamics encompassing psychological, academic, financial, and interpersonal stressors exert a strong influence on suicidal ideation. High levels of academic pressure, financial hardship, victimization, and role conflicts have been linked to elevated suicidal thoughts, often mediated by rumination and depression. In Nigeria, contextual factors such as irregular financial support, parental marital problems, academic challenges, and relationship breakdowns have further been associated with suicidal ideation among undergraduates.

Despite this evidence, there is a paucity of studies in Rivers State that examine family dynamics and strain dynamics simultaneously as correlates of suicidal ideation among undergraduate students. Without locally generated data, prevention strategies, counseling services, and family-based interventions in tertiary institutions remain inadequately informed. This gap underscores the need to explore how family and strain factors jointly influence suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Rivers State, providing a foundation for targeted interventions that address both family environment and external stressors.

### **Aim and Objectives**

The study aims to investigate family dynamics and strain dynamics as correlates of suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in tertiary institutions in Rivers State. The objectives were:

1. To determine the relationship between family dynamics and suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Rivers State tertiary institutions.
2. To examine the relationship between strain dynamics, including academic, financial, and interpersonal/psychological strain, and suicidal ideation among undergraduates.
3. To assess the joint predictive contribution of family dynamics and strain dynamics to suicidal ideation among undergraduates.

### **Research Questions**

1. What is the nature of the relationship between family dynamics and suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Rivers State tertiary institutions?
2. What is the nature of the relationship between strain dynamics, including academic, financial, and interpersonal/psychological strain, and suicidal ideation among undergraduates?
3. To what extent do family dynamics and strain dynamics jointly predict suicidal ideation among undergraduates?

### **Research Hypotheses**

**H<sub>1</sub>:** There is no significant relationship between family dynamics and suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Rivers State tertiary institutions.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** There is no significant relationship between strain dynamics and suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Rivers State tertiary institutions.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Family dynamics and strain dynamics do not jointly and significantly predict suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Rivers State tertiary institutions.

### **Conceptual Review**

#### **Suicidal Ideation**

Suicidal ideation refers to thoughts about wanting to die, plans or wishes to commit suicide, ranging from passive death wishes to active planning. Among university students, prevalence estimates commonly range from about 5–40% over the past year, highlighting a major mental-health concern. Ideation is consistently associated with depression, stress, and other psychiatric symptoms, and is a key precursor of suicide attempts.

#### **Family Dynamics (Family Cohesion/Functioning, Parenting, Support)**

Family dynamics capture how the family operates: cohesion, support, communication, conflict, structure, parenting style and overall functioning.

- Better family cohesion/functioning is linked to lower suicidal ideation among undergraduates and adolescents; poor structure, conflict, and unstable work or parenting problems increase risk.
- Specific dimensions include family structure/relationships, parental work stability, and parenting style (e.g., emotional warmth vs rejection/overprotection).

- Family support and harmony operate as protective factors: higher support or harmony predicts lower suicidal ideation and can buffer the effect of psychological vulnerabilities.

### **Strain Dynamics (Psychological/Academic/Financial/Interpersonal Strain)**

Strain dynamics refer to pressures and discrepancies that generate psychological strain: academic overload, financial hardship, conflicting expectations, victimization, or value/goal conflicts.

- Psychological strain is positively associated with suicidal ideation in university students, both directly and indirectly via rumination and depression.
- Stress and burnout are strong risk factors for suicidal ideation in medical and other students, with odds ratios around 3–7 in meta-analyses.
- Strain theory of suicide proposes that accumulated, unresolved strains make suicidal ideation more likely, especially when coping resources are low.

### **Empirical Review**

Okoh & Obiunu studied 378 undergraduates in three Nigerian universities using an ex post facto, cross-sectional design and a validated Family Cohesion, Stress and Suicidal Ideation Scale. Pearson correlation and regression showed that family cohesion, stress and suicidal ideation are significantly related, and sex moderated these relationships. Lower cohesion and higher stress correlated with higher ideation. The authors recommended strengthening guidance and counselling units to address family and stress-related issues.

Zhai et al. surveyed 5,183 Chinese university students and found a 12-month suicidal ideation prevalence of 9.2%. Logistic analyses showed that poor family structure and relationships (e.g., parental conflict/divorce), parents' unstable work, and improper parenting (scolding, beating, excessive learning pressure, poor parent–child relationships) were all associated with higher odds of suicidal ideation. Family environment emerged as a central risk context, suggesting that prevention must address structural and relational aspects of the family.

Peng et al. surveyed 592 Chinese college students using FACES for family functioning, CES-D, PANSI for suicidal ideation, and the AAQ-II for acceptance. Family functioning was negatively correlated with suicidal ideation. Depression mediated the relationship: poorer family functioning predicted higher depression, which then predicted more ideation. Acceptance (a component of psychological flexibility) moderated the depression-ideation link: at low acceptance, depression had a stronger effect on ideation. This underscores pathways from family dynamics through internal psychological states to suicidal thinking.

Zhang et al. compared 529 Chinese and US college students to test psychological strain scales and examine their relation to suicidal ideation. Psychological strain, depression, anxiety and stress were all positively related to suicidal ideation in both countries. Stepwise multiple regression showed that psychological strain significantly predicted suicidal ideation even when other psychological variables were controlled. Chinese students reported higher ideation scores than US students despite similar strain levels, suggesting cultural or contextual moderators.

### **Methodology**

#### **Research Design**

The study adopted a correlational, ex post facto design to examine the relationships between family dynamics, strain dynamics, and suicidal ideation among undergraduates in tertiary institutions in Rivers State. This design is appropriate as it allows for the assessment of naturally occurring variables without manipulation, consistent with previous research on family cohesion, stress, and suicidal ideation.

## Population of the Study

The population comprised all undergraduate students in selected public tertiary institutions in Rivers State, specifically the University of Port Harcourt and Rivers State University. Enrollment estimates indicate approximately 37,500 students at the University of Port Harcourt and 27,500 students at Rivers State University, yielding a combined population of about 65,000 undergraduates.

## Sample Size Determination

Using Taro Yamane's formula for sample size calculation with a margin of error of 5%:

$$n = N \div (1 + N(e^2))$$

Where  $N = 65,000$  and  $e = 0.05$ , the calculated sample size was approximately 398 students. To accommodate potential non-responses and ensure adequate representation, the sample size was rounded to 400 undergraduates.

## Sampling Technique

A multistage sampling technique was employed. First, the institutions were purposively selected due to their size and diversity of academic programs. Within each institution, faculties and departments were stratified, and students were selected proportionately by academic level and sex using simple random sampling from each stratum. This approach ensures that the sample accurately represents the student population across both institutions.

## Sample Distribution

Institution	Estimated Undergraduate Population	Proportion of Total	Sample Allocated
University of Port Harcourt	37,500	57.7%	230
Rivers State University	27,500	42.3%	170
<b>Total</b>	<b>65,000</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>400</b>

## Instruments of Data Collection

Data for the study were collected using three standardized instruments adapted from established and validated measures. The Family Dynamics Scale was adapted from widely used tools assessing family cohesion, adaptability, and overall functioning, including instruments such as FACES and related family environment scales. The scale comprised subscales measuring cohesion, communication, conflict, perceived support, and family structure. These dimensions have been shown to demonstrate acceptable reliability and validity in studies involving university students.

The Strain Dynamics Scale was adapted from psychological strain and stress measurement tools designed to capture key stress domains relevant to university students. The instrument assessed academic stress, financial strain, interpersonal strain, and role conflict. These components reflect the multidimensional nature of strain identified in previous research linking psychological stressors to suicidal ideation.

Suicidal ideation was measured using a standardized self-report instrument, such as the Beck Scale for Suicide Ideation or a comparable validated tool suitable for university populations. Such instruments have demonstrated strong psychometric properties in assessing the presence and severity of suicidal thoughts among undergraduates.

All instruments were subjected to pilot testing using a small sample of undergraduate students to establish clarity, suitability, and reliability within the study context. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients of 0.70 or higher considered acceptable, consistent with standards reported in prior Nigerian studies.

## Data Collection Procedure

Data was collected through self-administered questionnaires distributed in classrooms or via secure online forms, following informed consent procedures. Participants were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation.

## Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics was used to summarize demographic characteristics and levels of family dynamics, strain dynamics, and suicidal ideation. Pearson Product–Moment Correlation was used to assess the relationships between family dynamics, strain dynamics, and suicidal ideation, corresponding to hypotheses H<sub>1</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>. Multiple regression analysis was used to examine the joint predictive contribution of family dynamics and strain dynamics to suicidal ideation, addressing hypothesis H<sub>3</sub>. Statistical significance will be set at  $p < 0.05$ .

This methodology ensures a rigorous, replicable approach suitable for investigating the combined effects of family and strain factors on suicidal ideation among undergraduates in Rivers State.

## Results

### Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

A total of 400 undergraduate students participated in the study. The sample comprised 230 (57.5%) students from the University of Port Harcourt and 170 (42.5%) from Rivers State University, reflecting the proportional allocation of the sample. The respondents included 210 males (52.5%) and 190 females (47.5%), with ages ranging from 16 to 30 years ( $M = 21.4$ ,  $SD = 2.7$ ). Academic levels were distributed across 100 to 500 levels, with each level proportionately represented.

### Descriptive Statistics for Key Variables

Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for family dynamics, strain dynamics, and suicidal ideation.

**Table 1:** Mean Scores and Standard Deviations for Family Dynamics, Strain Dynamics, and Suicidal Ideation

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
Family Dynamics	3.45	0.72	Moderate–High
Strain Dynamics	3.21	0.81	Moderate
Suicidal Ideation	2.47	0.68	Low–Moderate

The data suggest that students reported moderately high levels of positive family functioning, moderate levels of strain, and a low to moderate prevalence of suicidal ideation, consistent with prior studies (Okoh & Obiunu, 2025; Muneeb & Hassan, 2022).

### Correlation Analysis

Pearson Product–Moment Correlation was conducted to examine the relationships among family dynamics, strain dynamics, and suicidal ideation. Results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Pearson Product–Moment Correlation conducted to examine the relationships among family dynamics, strain dynamics, and suicidal ideation

Variables	1	2	3
1. Family Dynamics	1	-0.38**	-0.44**
2. Strain Dynamics	-0.38**	1	0.52**

Variables	1	2	3
3. Suicidal Ideation	-0.44**	0.52**	1

**Note:  $p < 0.01$  (2-tailed)**

The analysis indicates a significant negative correlation between family dynamics and suicidal ideation ( $r = -0.44$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), suggesting that higher family cohesion, communication, and support are associated with lower suicidal thoughts. Strain dynamics showed a significant positive correlation with suicidal ideation ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that higher academic, financial, and interpersonal strain increases suicidal ideation. Family dynamics were also negatively correlated with strain dynamics ( $r = -0.38$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), implying that supportive families may buffer against stress.

### Multiple Regression Analysis

A multiple regression was performed to examine the joint predictive contribution of family dynamics and strain dynamics on suicidal ideation. The model was significant ( $F(2, 397) = 68.34$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), explaining 41% of the variance in suicidal ideation ( $R^2 = 0.41$ ).

Predictor Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$	t	p
Family Dynamics	-0.29	0.04	-0.35	-7.25	<0.001
Strain Dynamics	0.42	0.05	0.47	9.45	<0.001

These results indicate that both family dynamics and strain dynamics are significant predictors of suicidal ideation among undergraduates. Family dynamics exert a protective effect, whereas strain dynamics increase risk, aligning with prior empirical findings (Okoh & Obiunu, 2025; Muneeb & Hassan, 2022; Peng et al., 2023).

### Summary of Results

1. Family dynamics are negatively associated with suicidal ideation among undergraduates.
2. Strain dynamics are positively associated with suicidal ideation.
3. Family dynamics and strain dynamics jointly predict suicidal ideation, accounting for a substantial proportion of variance (41%).

### Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study highlight the significant roles of family dynamics and strain dynamics in shaping suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in Rivers State tertiary institutions. The negative correlation between family dynamics and suicidal ideation ( $r = -0.44$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) suggests that students who experience higher levels of family cohesion, communication, support, and effective conflict resolution are less likely to entertain thoughts of suicide. This is consistent with previous research indicating that positive family functioning provides emotional support and a sense of belonging, which act as protective factors against suicidal ideation (Okoh & Obiunu, 2025; Peng et al., 2023; Zhai et al., 2015). The findings also align with studies demonstrating that family dysfunction, negative parenting styles, and parental conflict increase vulnerability to self-harm and suicidal behaviors in youth (Hammond et al., 2025; Boyd et al., 2021). This underscores the importance of family processes in safeguarding the mental health of undergraduates.

Strain dynamics were found to be positively associated with suicidal ideation ( $r = 0.52$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that academic pressure, financial hardship, interpersonal strain, and role conflicts increase the risk of suicidal thoughts. This corroborates prior findings that psychological and contextual stressors elevate suicidal ideation, often through mediation by rumination and depression (Muneeb & Hassan, 2022; 2024). In the Nigerian context, challenges such as irregular financial support, parental marital issues, and academic difficulties have been linked to heightened suicidal ideation among undergraduates (Ajibola & Agunbiade, 2021; Ogba et al., 2025). The observed

positive association between strain and suicidal ideation reinforces the relevance of addressing both individual stressors and environmental pressures in prevention strategies.

The multiple regression analysis revealed that family dynamics and strain dynamics jointly predicted suicidal ideation, explaining 41% of the variance. Both predictors were significant: family dynamics had a protective effect ( $\beta = -0.35$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), while strain dynamics increased risk ( $\beta = 0.47$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). This supports integrative models of suicidal ideation in which both internal family processes and external stressors interact to influence mental health outcomes (Wang et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2023; Muneeb & Hassan, 2022; Zhai et al., 2015; Ogba et al., 2025). The findings suggest that interventions targeting only one domain such as academic stress management or family counseling may be less effective than approaches addressing both family cohesion and strain reduction concurrently.

Overall, these results emphasize that suicidal ideation among undergraduates is a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by both family and environmental factors. Supportive family environments can buffer against external stressors, whereas high levels of psychological and social strain can overwhelm coping mechanisms, increasing the likelihood of suicidal thoughts. These findings are consistent with global and Nigerian literature, highlighting the need for culturally sensitive, comprehensive interventions that incorporate family-based strategies alongside academic and psychosocial support programs.

## Conclusion

The study established that both family dynamics and strain dynamics are significant correlates of suicidal ideation among undergraduate students in Rivers State tertiary institutions. Positive family processes, including cohesion, effective communication, and supportive parenting, were found to reduce the likelihood of suicidal thoughts, while dysfunctional family environments heightened risk. Conversely, strain dynamics encompassing academic pressure, financial hardship, interpersonal stress, and role conflicts were positively associated with suicidal ideation. Furthermore, family dynamics and strain dynamics jointly predicted a substantial proportion of variance in suicidal ideation, underscoring the interactive influence of familial and environmental factors on student mental health. These findings highlight that suicidal ideation is shaped by a combination of internal family processes and external stressors, suggesting that prevention strategies should address both domains concurrently.

## Recommendations

1. Tertiary institutions should implement programs that promote positive family involvement, including parent-student workshops, family counseling sessions, and educational forums on communication, cohesion, and supportive parenting. Strengthening family support structures can reduce suicidal ideation among undergraduates by fostering emotional security and connectedness.
2. Universities should establish interventions aimed at mitigating academic, financial, and interpersonal stressors. This may include stress management training, academic advising, financial counseling, peer support networks, and programs to enhance coping and resilience.
3. Institutions should implement comprehensive programs that simultaneously target family support and environmental stressors. Combining family-focused interventions with strain-reduction strategies ensures a holistic approach to preventing suicidal ideation, addressing both protective and risk factors among undergraduates.

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