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# Exposure to websites that encourage self-harm and suicide: Prevalence rates and association with actual thoughts of self-harm and thoughts of suicide in the United States



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#### ABSTRACT

This article provides 12-month prevalence rates of youth exposure to websites which encourage self-harm or suicide and examines whether such exposure is related to thoughts of self-harm and thoughts of suicide in the past 30 days. Data were collected via telephone from a nationally representative survey of 1560 Internet-using youth, ages 10–17 residing in the United States. One percent (95% CI: 0.5%, 1.5%) of youth reported visiting a website that encouraged self-harm or suicide. Youth who visited such websites were seven times more likely to say they had thought about killing themselves; and 11 times more likely to think about hurting themselves, even after adjusting for several known risk factors for thoughts of self-harm and thoughts of suicide. Given that youth thinking about self-harm and suicide are more likely to visit these sites, they may represent an opportunity for identification of youth in need of crisis intervention.

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Self-directed violent behavior encompasses a variety of acts, ranging from fatal to non-fatal suicide behavior, as well as non-suicidal intentional self-harm (Crosby, Ortega, & Melanson, 2011). Thoughts of suicide are often also included in the same context (Crosby et al., 2011); defined as thoughts, consideration of, or actual plans for suicide, which can be considered as a risk marker for suicide (Kessler, Borges, & Walters, 1999). Suicide is the third leading cause of death among youth and young adults, ages 10 to 24 in the U.S. (Centers for Disease Control, 1999). In 2011, 16% of high school students had seriously thought about attempting suicide (13% of boys and 19% of girls), 8% attempted suicide (6% of boys and 10% of girls), and 2% (2% boys and 3% of girls) reported their suicide attempt required medical attention (Child Trends Data Bank, 2014). Although girls are more likely than boys to seriously consider and actually attempt suicide, boys are more likely to succeed in death by suicide.

The term "self-harm" and the corresponding thoughts of self-harm can encompass non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) as well as suicidal behavior. In the current study we did not measure degree of intent in the self-injurious behaviors; as such we utilize the term "self-harm" instead of NSSI in reference to our own findings. Further, we did not ask about actual self-harm but instead asked about *thoughts* of self-harm and *thoughts* of suicide.

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National rates of self-harm among adolescents in the United States are limited due to a lack of assessment of this behavior among large, epidemiological studies (Jacobson & Gould, 2007; Muehlenkamp, Claes, Havertape, & Plener, 2012). The largest epidemiological study conducted in the United States found a 12-month prevalence rate of 7.3% for NSSI (Taliaferro, Muehlenkamp, Borowsky, McMorris, & Kugler, 2012) while a 12-month prevalence rate of 11.5% for deliberate self-harm was found across seven European countries (Madge et al., 2008). In the United States, prevalence studies have also examined *thoughts* of suicide and have found 9.7% of adolescent heterosexual males and 15.2% of adolescent heterosexual females had thoughts of suicide in the past 12 months; these rates increased to 15.4% of same-sex sexual orientation males and 28.3% of same-sex sexual orientation females (Russell & Joyner, 2001). Across 17 countries in Europe, 7.4% (Range: 2.1%, 15.3%) of high school students ages 15–16 had frequent (at least five times) self-harm thoughts in their *lifetime* (Kokkevi, Rotsika, Arapaki, & Richardson, 2012).

Risk for self-harm and thoughts of suicide comprises a number of known factors including depression (Fergusson, Beautrais, & Horwood, 2003; Fergusson, Horwood, Ridder, & Beautrais, 2005; Fortune & Hawton, 2005; Hawton, Saunders, & O'Connor, 2012; McLean, Maxwell, Harris, Platt, & Jepson, 2008), alcohol and drug use (Hawton et al., 2012; Patton et al., 1997), poor parent-child relationships (Fergusson, Woodward, & Horwood, 2000), and living in poverty (Beautrais, 2000; Cash & Bridge, 2009; Dupéré, Leventhal, & Lacourse, 2009; Fergusson et al., 2000; Hawton et al., 2012; Kloos, Collins, Weller, & Weller, 2007). Victimization, especially in the form of sexual abuse (Fergusson et al., 2003, 2000; Hawton et al., 2012; Molnar, Berkman, & Buka, 2001; Turner, Finkehor, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2012; Whitlock, Eckenrode, & Silverman, 2006) may be associated with self-harm and thoughts of suicide, although this association may be explained in part by psychiatric risk factors (Klonsky & Moyer, 2008).

Youth may have easier access to self-harm information than previous generations given the variety of types of information about self-directed violence now readily available online. Research has focused on websites, chat groups, and other online contacts that encourage and educate youth about how to injure and kill themselves given concerns of such exposure on actual self-injury and suicide rates (Alao, Soderberg, Pohl, & Alao, 2006; Fortune & Hawton, 2005; Murray & Fox, 2006; Tam, Tang, & Fernando, 2007; Whitlock, Powers, & Eckenrode, 2006). The content of these websites vary, including those that passively provide information and encourage suicide, provide instructions on how to commit suicide, and allow for the exchange of messages from people revealing suicidal thoughts (Mishara & Weisstub, 2007). Still other websites and online materials provide support, awareness, and encourage recovery around self-harm or thoughts of suicide (Duggan, Heath, Lewis, & Baxter, 2012). In 2010, over 5000 NSSI videos were identified on YouTube, and while some are visually graphic, others are more information-based (Lewis, Heath, St. Denis, & Noble, 2011). The fact that teens seek out these sites reinforces a need for increased understanding of motivation, as some teens may access both harmful and beneficial sites as part of their decision-making or education on the topic.

A more recent study among young adults in Japan revealed an association between Internet suicide-related searches and the incidence of suicide (Hagihara, Miyazaki, & Abe, 2012). One estimate is that there are more than 100,000 suicide-related websites on the Internet (Dobson, 1999) and a search for "self-injury" on Google yielded almost 2.5 million results (Duggan et al., 2012). Forty-one groups about "self-injury" or "self-harm" on Facebook were identified in 2010, as well as 206 groups identified on MySpace (Duggan et al., 2012) and a search on YouTube produced 2290 videos. Still, we do not necessarily know that youth have "more" access to such knowledge over previous generations or whether such exposure is related to actual behaviors, particularly given the declining rates of serious thoughts about attempting suicide among youth and young adults — from 29% in 1991 to 16% in 2011 (Child Trends Data Bank, 2014). Moreover, if there is increased access, this may be balanced by a parallel increase in access to beneficial websites on these topics, as well as support from online contacts. In fact, the possible net influence of the Internet could be positive for many youth.

The current paper seeks to answer four research questions. First, we assess rates of thoughts of self-harm and thoughts of suicide in the past 30 days. Second, we report past year rates of youth exposure to websites encouraging self-harm and suicide for all youth, those who report thoughts of self-harm, and those youth reporting thoughts of suicide. Third, we examine characteristics of youth who visit self-harm and suicide websites to determine whether youth visiting those websites present with similar known risk factors as those who report thoughts of self-harm or suicide. Fourth, we consider the relationship between visiting these websites and actual thoughts of self-harm and suicide. No data exists about how many youth in the United States have been to websites that encourage self-harm or suicide, nor whether visiting such sites is associated with actual thoughts of self-harm or thoughts of suicide above other known risk factors among a general population of young Internet users.

#### Method

The Youth Internet Safety Surveys were conducted in order to quantify and detail youth experiences with unwanted or problematic Internet experiences including sexual solicitations, harassment, and unwanted exposure to pornography on the Internet. The 3rd Youth Internet Safety Survey (YISS-3) is the source for the current article. The data collection for YISS-3 took place between August, 2010 and January, 2011. YISS-3 was conducted via telephone surveys with a national sample of 1560 youth Internet users, ages 10 to 17, and their parents. The parents in this study completed a brief (~five minute) interview aimed at determining eligibility and gathering family and household demographic characteristics. A final target sample size of 1500 was pre-determined on the basis of a desired maximum expected sampling error of  $\pm 2.5\%$  at the 0.05 significance level.

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