Background

- Students may be at risk of considering suicide in their first year of university due to unprecedented levels of psychological distress and a lack of effective coping strategies (Verger et al., 2009).
- In a large-scale national survey, 6.4% of post-secondary students had seriously considered suicide in the previous 12 months (American College Health Association, 2019).
- Poor sleep quality is frequently reported among university students and has previously been correlated with increased suicidal thoughts and risk of suicidal behaviour (Holdaway et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021).

Research Question:
Over the first academic year, in months where first year university students experience compromised sleep quality, is increased frequency of suicidal ideation reported?

Hypothesis:
Over the 8-month academic year, in months where sleep quality is compromised, increased frequency of suicidal ideation will be reported by first-year students.

Methods

Participants
- N=627 first-year, Canadian university students drawn from an 8-month longitudinal study of the transition to university (75% female, M_age = 17.97, SD = 0.76)

Measures
- Global Sleep Quality: Pittsburgh Sleep Quality Index (PSQI; Buysse et al., 1989)
- Suicidal Thoughts: Single item from the Self-Injurious Thoughts and Behaviours Interview (SITBI; Nock et al., 2007): “How many times in the past month have you thought about killing yourself?” with responses from 0 (Never) to 3 (Four or more times).

A significant coupled association was found between sleep quality and suicidal thoughts.
- In months when students’ sleep quality was poorer than their individual mean, more frequent suicidal ideation was reported (β = .017, SE = .004, p < .001).

Conclusion

- Evidence for a relationship between compromised sleep quality and suicidal ideation in a sample of university students across their first academic year.

Limitations & Future Directions

Limitations:
- Majority White, female sample, and limited to examining first-year students, therefore our results cannot be generalized to other racial/ethnic groups, gender identities, or years of study.
- The longitudinal study design offers a robust association, but conclusions cannot be drawn as to the directionality of our findings.

Clinical Implications:
- Universities should focus on psychoeducational campaigns to promote sleep hygiene during first-year student orientation and throughout the academic year.
- Regular monitoring of clients’ sleep quality could provide valuable information for campus mental health professionals to prevent suicidal thoughts that may escalate to behaviours, and for informing intervention strategies.

Research Directions:
- Future studies should look at the potential for a multidirectional relationship; suicidal ideation might compromise sleep quality, while compromised sleep quality may also exacerbate suicidal ideation.

References


