

# Emotional Regulation and Suicide Risk in Adolescents Adjudicated for Illegal Sexual Offenses

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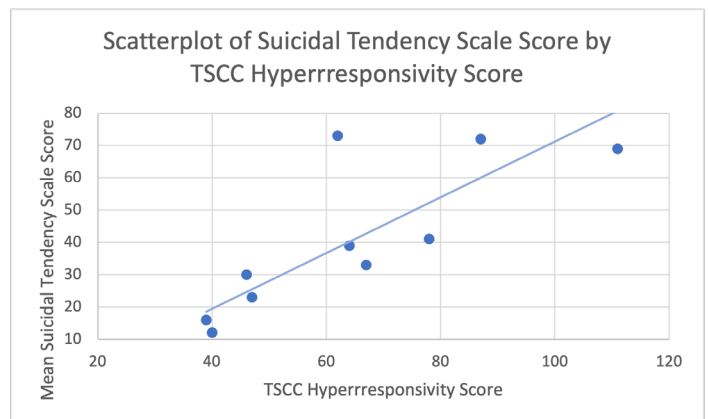
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Suicide is an important risk factor for incarcerated youth given the high rates of trauma experienced (OJJDP, 2020). Trauma has a significant effect on the onset of suicidal ideation, or thoughts and feelings related to suicide (Lannoy et al., 2022). Adolescents adjudicated for illegal sexual behavior (AISB), experience significantly more trauma, making them potentially more susceptible to suicidal ideation (Seto & Lalumiere, 2010). Emotional regulation, or one's ability to recognize and understand emotional states and respond in an adaptive way, is another correlate of suicide prevalent in AISB (Berman & Knight, 2015). One correlate is hyper-responsiveness, or an overreaction to emotionally triggering stimuli (Carthy et al., 2010). In youth and adult populations, this form of emotional distress was positively correlated in both the presence of and severity with suicidal ideation (Neacsiu et al., 2018). The current study sought to establish a link between suicidal ideation and self-reported hyper-responsiveness to trauma in a sample of AISB.

Data was collected from a sample of AISB ( $n=165$ ) at a court mandated residential treatment facility in the southeastern United States. The Millon Adolescent Clinical Inventory (MACI; Millon & Davis, 1993) is a 165-item self-report questionnaire used to assess clinical mental health symptoms and personality features in adolescents from 13-18 years of age. Thoughts and behaviors related to suicide were measured using the suicidal ideation scale. The Trauma Symptom Checklist for Children (TSCC; Briere, 1996) is a 54-item self-report questionnaire used to assess the presence of trauma symptoms in children ages 8-16. The hyper-responsivity scale was used to assess heightened emotional responses to trauma.

Linear regression was used to evaluate the relationship between reported suicidal ideation and the trauma symptom scales. The overall model was significant,  $F(2, 164) = 38.90$ ,  $p = .001$ , indicating a significant positive association between suicidal ideation and hyper-responsivity ( $r = .502$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as seen in the scatterplot results depicting in Figure 1.



**Fig. 1** Linear association of suicidality and a hyper-responsivity to childhood trauma

This positive relationship between self-reports of suicidal ideation and features of hyper-responsivity implies that those who respond externally to stress may be at a higher risk for suicidal ideation. This supports previous data that heightened emotional states as a response to emotionally triggering stimuli are related to suicidal ideation, highlighting the interaction between traumatic life events, maladaptive coping strategies, and suicide risk (Neacsiu et al, 2018). AISB may be at a higher risk for suicidal ideation due to the increased presence of emotional dysregulation and traumatic life events (Seto & Lalumiere, 2010), as well as a lack of outlets for young men to express emotion. Facilities treating AISB may

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implement more proactive approaches in addressing ideation in treatment, rather than an entirely reactive approach of close monitoring once symptoms spiked.

### Statement of Research Advisor

Madeleine independently started this project after joining my lab as a Research Assistant a year earlier. After working with the archival data for a while, she found some variables of interest, and set about designing a research question of her own. She presented this data locally at the AU student symposium and regionally at the Southeastern Psychological Association's annual conference in New Orleans, LA in April 2023.

- Kelli Thompson, Department of Psychology, College of Liberal Arts

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### Authors Biography



Madeleine Rein is a Senior-year student pursuing a degree in Psychology at Auburn University. She was awarded a Research Fellowship for the 2023-2024 school year. Her research interests include suicide, trauma exposure, and mental health in forensic clinical settings.



Kelli R. Thompson is an undergraduate alumni from Auburn University. She is the former Director of the Juvenile Delinquency Lab at Auburn University. During her time at Auburn she mentored more than a half-dozen Undergraduate Research Fellows through her lab. She is dedicated to helping students find their way into the field of psychology through research. She is now an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Texas A&M University-Kingsville where she continues a strong tradition of student mentoring.