

Obesity and Suicide Behavior in Young Latina Adults: The Mediating Influences of Sleep Problems, Health Problems, and Dissatisfaction with Personal Appearance

Joseph D. Hovey, PhD, Liza Talavera-Garza, PhD, Glenn Gray, RN, MBA,
 Laura D. Seligman, PhD, ABPP, & Eric Escamilla, MA
 University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

BACKGROUND

Although a burgeoning body of research has shown that obesity is related to suicide behavior (Wagner et al., 2013), especially in females (Branco et al., 2017), and that Latina youth are at risk for suicide ideation and attempts (CDC, 2017), scant research has examined mediators of this relationship and no published research has explored obesity and suicide behavior in young Latina adults.

PURPOSES AND HYPOTHESES

The purposes of the present study were to examine the relationship of obesity to suicide behavior in young Latina adults and to assess possible mediators that help explain this relationship.

In specific, we expected that:

- Greater Body Mass Index (BMI) would be significantly associated with depression, suicide ideation, and past suicide attempts.
- The relationship between BMI and suicide ideation would be significantly mediated by sleep problems, health problems, and dissatisfaction with personal appearance.

METHODS

Participants
 • Participants were 401 female undergraduate students of Mexican heritage from a south Texas university. *M* age = 20.2 (*SD* = 2.0; range = 18-25).

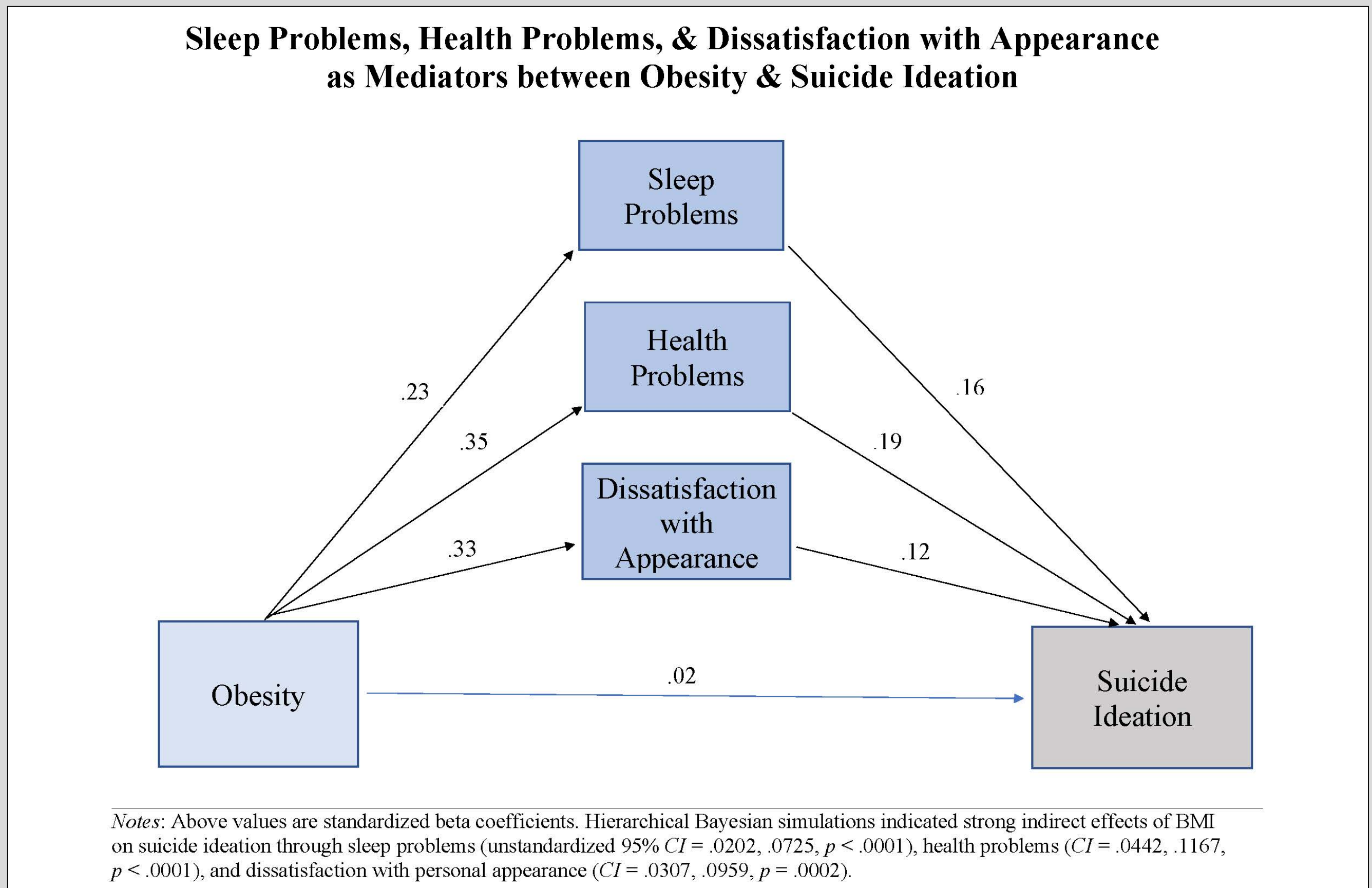
Instrument
 Data were from the *2016 National College Health Assessment*, which assessed undergraduate students' health behaviors, habits, and perceptions.

- **Suicide Ideation:** Seriously considered suicide (No, never to Yes, in last 2 weeks).
- **Suicide Attempt:** Attempted suicide (No, never to Yes, in last 2 weeks).
- **Depression:** So depressed that it was difficult to function (No, never to Yes, in last 2 weeks).
- **Sleep Problems:** Insomnia + Sleepiness + Tired during day (past 7 days).
- **Health Problems:** Health issue that was traumatic or difficult to handle (past 12 months).
- **Dissatisfaction with Appearance:** Personal appearance that was traumatic or difficult to handle (past 12 months).
- **Body Mass Index:** Based on current height and weight.

RESULTS

- 4.8% of participants were underweight, 46.5% were desired weight, 21.7% were overweight, and 27% were obese.
- 23.8% of participants reported lifetime suicide ideation, 12.3% reported suicide ideation during past year, 6.3% reported suicide ideation during past month, and 4.8% reported suicide ideation during past 2 weeks.
- 9.5% of participants reported a lifetime suicide attempt.

RESULTS CONTINUED



SUMMARY & CONCLUSIONS

- Obesity was significantly associated with depression, suicide ideation, and past suicide attempts.
- Our overall findings suggest that in Latina youth, obesity can lead to an increase in sleep problems, health problems, and dissatisfaction with personal appearance and that these, in turn, may lead to increased suicide ideation.
- Previous research (Altabe, 1998; Lindberg & Stevens, 2011) found that Latina women are more accepting of their body image and size compared to non-Latina women, thus suggesting that factors such as obesity and appearance are not culturally relevant determinants of Latina mental health. Our findings, however, suggest that being overweight may indeed lead Latina women to feel dissatisfied with their body image and that these perceptions are related to negative mental health.
- Future research should replicate our findings and examine other possible mediators between obesity and suicide behavior. These include self-efficacy and the shame that stems from being overweight and/or the lack of success at losing weight.

	Sleep Problems	Health Problems	Appearance Dissatisfaction	Depression	Suicide Ideation	Suicide Attempts
Body Mass Index	.23**	.35**	.33**	.16**	.16**	.11*
Sleep Problems	--	.30**	.31**	.40**	.26**	.19**
Health Problems	.30**	--	.47**	.32**	.30**	.23**
Appearance Dissatisfaction	.31**	.47**	--	.36**	.26**	.17**
Depression	.40**	.32**	.36**	--	.49**	.27**
Suicide Ideation	.26**	.30**	.26**	.49**	--	.51**

Note: * $p \leq .01$, ** $p \leq .001$

	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	R^2 change
Step 1				.03**
Body Mass Index	.16	3.2	.001	
Step 2				.10***
Body Mass Index	.02	0.3	.38	
Sleep Problems	.16	3.1	.001	
Health Problems	.19	3.4	.001	
Dissatisfaction with Appearance	.12	2.1	.02	

Note: ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.