

p-ISSN:2708-2091
e-ISSN:2708-3586



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Global Sociological Review

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GLOBAL SOCIOLOGICAL REVIEW

HEC-RECOGNIZED CATEGORY-Y

VOL. X ISSUE III, SUMMER (SEPTEMBER-2025)

Double-blind Peer-review Research Journal

www.gsrjournal.com

© Global Sociological Review

DOI (Journal): 10.31703/gsr

DOI (Volume): 10.31703/gsr.2025(X)

DOI (Issue): 10.31703/gsr.2025(X-III)

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Article title

Reviewing Methods and Means of Suicide Attempt: Lethality verses non-lethality

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Global Sociological Review

p-ISSN: [2708-2091](#) e-ISSN: [2708-3586](#)

DOI(journal): 10.31703/gsr

Volume: X (2025)

DOI (volume): 10.31703/gsr.2025(X)

Issue: III Summer (September-2025)

DOI(Issue): 10.31703/gsr.2024(X-III)

Home Page

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Volume: (2025)

<https://www.gsrjournal.com/Current-issues>

Issue: III-Summer (June -2025)

<https://www.gsrjournal.com/issue/10/3/2025>

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Submission

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Keywords: Data Privacy, Consumer Loyalty, Digital Marketing, CFIP, IUIPC, Pakistan SMEs, Privacy Calculus, Transparency, Trust

Authors:

Nasar Khan: (Corresponding Author)

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Buner, KP, Pakistan.

(Email: khannasar922@gmail.com)

Mansoor Ullah: Lecturer, Department of Management Studies, University of Chitral, KP, Pakistan.

Usra: Lecturer, Department of Psychology, University of Buner, KP, Pakistan.

Pages: 56-61

DOI: 10.31703/gsr.2025(X-III).06

DOI link: [https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2025\(X-III\).06](https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2025(X-III).06)

Article link: <http://www.gsrjournal.com/article/reviewing-methods-and-means-of-suicide-attempt-lethality-verses-nonlethality>

Full-text Link: <https://gsrjournal.com/fulltext/reviewing-methods-and-means-of-suicide-attempt-lethality-verses-nonlethality>

Pdf link: <https://www.gsrjournal.com/jadmin/Author/31rvIolA2.pdf>



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Citing this Article

06	Reviewing Methods and Means of Suicide Attempt: Lethality verses non-lethality		
Authors	Nasar Khan Mansoor Ullah Usra	DOI	10.31703/gsr.2025(X-III).06
		Pages	56-61
		Year	2025
		Volume	X
		Issue	III
Referencing & Citing Styles			
APA	Khan, N., Ullah, M., & Usra. (2025). Reviewing Methods and Means of Suicide Attempt: Lethality verses non-lethality. <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , X(III), 56-61. https://doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2025(X-III).06		
CHICAGO	Khan, Nasar, Mansoor Ullah, and Usra. 2025. "Reviewing Methods and Means of Suicide Attempt: Lethality verses non-lethality." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> X (III):56-61. doi: 10.31703/gsr.2025(X-III).06.		
HARVARD	KHAN, N., ULLAH, M. & USRA 2025. Reviewing Methods and Means of Suicide Attempt: Lethality verses non-lethality. <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , X, 56-61.		
MHRA	Khan, Nasar, Mansoor Ullah, and Usra. 2025. 'Reviewing Methods and Means of Suicide Attempt: Lethality verses non-lethality', <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , X: 56-61.		
MLA	Khan, Nasar, Mansoor Ullah, and Usra. "Reviewing Methods and Means of Suicide Attempt: Lethality Verses Non-Lethality." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> X.III (2025): 56-61. Print.		
OXFORD	Khan, Nasar, Ullah, Mansoor, and Usra (2025), 'Reviewing Methods and Means of Suicide Attempt: Lethality verses non-lethality', <i>Global Sociological Review</i> , X (III), 56-61.		
TURABIAN	Khan, Nasar, Mansoor Ullah, and Usra. "Reviewing Methods and Means of Suicide Attempt: Lethality Verses Non-Lethality." <i>Global Sociological Review</i> X, no. III (2025): 56-61. https://dx.doi.org/10.31703/gsr.2025(X-III).06 .		



Title

Reviewing Methods and Means of Suicide Attempt: Lethality verses non-lethality

Authors:

Nasar Khan: (Corresponding Author)

Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Buner, KP, Pakistan.

(Email: khannas922@gmail.com)

Mansoor Ullah

Lecturer, Department of Management Studies, University of Chitral, KP, Pakistan.

Usra

Lecturer, Department of Psychology, University of Buner, KP, Pakistan.

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Abstract

In suicide related studies methods and means of suicide attempt are one of the key debates (Lester, 2008). There are social, cultural, and psychological explanations to why an individual chooses a particular method for attempting a suicide? This review-based article provides an insight to answering that what the common and rare methods of suicide attempt? Why an individual opts for a particular method to attempt a suicide? Hand searching approach was adopted whereby a total of 74 peer reviewed studies were identified where 17 studies were included. Findings show that there are two categories of methods of suicide attempts; first lethal methods of suicide attempts; and second, non-lethal methods of suicide attempt. The means and methods of suicide attempt can be controlled with the help of social institutions. It is suggested to carry out qualitative exploration research to understand the subjective logic behind opting for specific methods of suicide attempts.

Keywords: Suicide Attempt, Methods, Fatal, Non-Fatal, Choice

Introduction

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death among young people throughout the globe. There is a plethora of dimensions discussed about suicide where one of the key dimensions includes the ways in which individuals attempt suicide or in other words methods of suicide attempts (Arafat et al., 2021). Broadly, methods of attempt are divided into two categories;

first, lethal; and second, non-lethal. The choice for lethal and non-lethal methods are guided by multifaceted factors including gender, trends, and availability of means and seriousness of an individual to be certain for death because of attempt (Bhatia et al., 2006). Keeping this in view, this article aims to provide a descriptive profile of lethal and non-lethal



methods of attempts along with factors contributing to choice of method of suicide.

Objectives of the Study

The major objective of this study is providing a systematic understanding of choosing a mean or method suicide attempt. This paper also provides suggestions for future research to understand that why individuals opt for specific means and methods of suicide attempt.

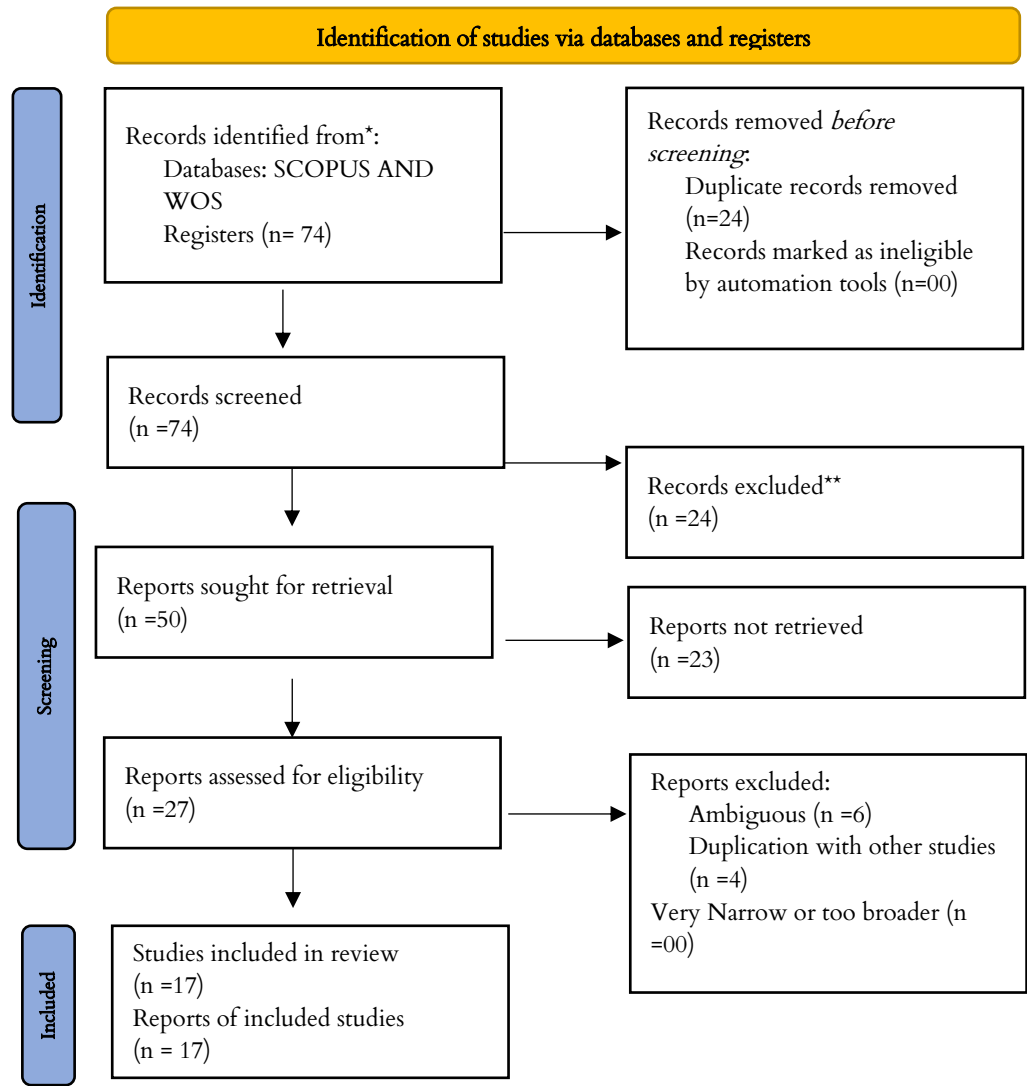
Methodology

This study reviews-based research. For this

purpose, the objectives of the study were devised, and databases were searched. Searching data bases include Google Scholar, Web of Sciences; SCIMAGO, SCOPUS and NLM. The searching key words included SUICIDE and METHODS, SUICIDE and METHODS and CHOICE.

Relevant studies were searched whereby a plethora of studies were found. Through hand searching approach 17 relevant studies were identified and selected. The studies were specifically about suicide attempts and its methods. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for studies were:

Figure 1



Findings:

Methods of Suicide Attempt

Methods and techniques chosen for attempting a suicide vary across cultures. This variation can be seen across different cultures i.e., hanging by tying a nose around one's neck and running to another part of the house is a common method of suicide in Tikopia. Suttee that refers to suicide by burning on the husband's funeral fire is famous type of suicide in India while from Japan the "Seppuku Seppukku is one of the methods of suicide attempt where a person cut or damages his organ to kill oneself (Lester, 2008)." is well known method of suicide that is ritual disembowelment. All these types of suicide have their own cultural meaning and motives and even they are culturally approved ways of attempting a suicide (Lester, 2008).

Besides, various factors contribute to variation in methods of attempting suicide across groups, cultures, nations and societies. In this context, Clarke and Lester (1989) from their research concludes that availability of tools of suicide attempt is the most important aspect, for instance, availability of firearms, benzodiazepines, high buildings etc. for the current study, keeping in view the literature and so far, available observations on suicide methods of suicide attempt have divided into the following:

Lethal or Fatal Methods of Suicide Attempt:

Use of Firearms

Presently shooting oneself with gun is the most common method for attempting a suicide in the United States and Canada (Lester, 2008). In this regard, the availability of firearms is most important factor to be mentioned. A high number of people shoot themselves with guns in countries where a high number of people own guns. However, on contrary ownership of guns had no association with the total suicide rate which indicates that if guns are not freely available then people use guns less often for committing suicide. If guns are not allowed then people will use other methods of suicide attempts i.e. poisons, hanging, stabbing, jumping and drowning (Gunnell et al., 2017). Research shows that there is a psychology behind opting for using a firearm for

suicide attempts. The most important better in this regard is a firm decision from the individual to die by suicide is the use of firearms is linked with highest rate of completed suicide (Maskill et al., 2005).

Hanging Oneself

Hanging includes in one of the top ten leading cause of death throughout the world. Statistics shows that about one million people die annually by hanging. As a method of suicide, hanging is the second leading cause of death in India particularly among young adults (Arya et al., 2019). Hanging is done through tying material that are nylon made products i.e. *Saree* *Saree* refers to a long piece of cloth that is wrapped around the body and worn as a main piece clothing by women in Sub-continent (Oxford Advanced learner Dictionary, 201, *Dupatta* *Dupatta* refers to a long piece of material worn around the head and neck by women in South Asia with Shalwar and Qamis (Oxford Advanced Learner Dictionary, 2010). and rope while tying points mostly includes ceiling fans, beams and window grills. There are numerous factors associated with hanging in India including marital problems, dependency, problem related to dowry and interpersonal problem (Vijayakumari, 2011). Like certainty in dying by using firearm, hanging oneself is also a very fatal method and an individual is certain to die by suicide when he/she opts for hanging is a method of suicide attempt (Maskill et al., 2005).

Domestic Gas

Gas is one of the important daily usage products and in the current century, it is available in each home. However, gas is also included in one of the hazardous and dangerous products when kept in homes. In England there is a common proverb "to take the pipe" which means inhalation of toxic gas in homes to commit a suicide. Advancement in current technology has made scientists able to make domestic gas less toxic by changing coal gas to natural gas which led to decrease in rates of suicide through inhalation of domestic gas (Lester, 2008). The work by Maskill and colleagues showed that domestic gas is not a first option for attempting suicide; however, there are psychological factors which can lead to

opting for this method of suicide attempt (Maskill et al., [2005](#)). Goldsmith and colleagues wrote a comprehensive book on suicidality whereby it has been mentioned that certain unique and deadly methods of suicide attempt are provoked by psychological factors such as mental illnesses. Specific type of episodes of depression and mania can make an individual think about opting for rare methods of suicide including domestic gas (Goldsmith et al., 2002).

Jumping from High Places

Thousands of people attempt suicide by jumping from high places every year resulting in hundreds of deaths. Parking garages and bridges are the common place where people jump to commit suicide. There are various concepts attached to jumping from high places where *assurance* is important to be discussed. Adam Kaplan who is an assistant professor of psychiatry at Johns Hopkins Medical Institute quotes in an article *Inside the Mind of a Suicide Jumper* by Emily Friedman (1945–2004) that “*Jumping is sort of like using a gun – once you make that decision to (kill yourself), it’s pretty much a done deal.*” In the same article Richard McKeon (1932–2002) who was clinical psychologist at the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration states that “*Many people who die by suicide, as best we can determine, may have had some level of ambivalence right up until that final moment ... If you use less lethal means like an overdose, there is still a possibility of taking it back [by calling for help]. But with a firearm, once someone pulls the trigger the likelihood that they’ll be mortally wounded is high. Similarly, jumping off a bridge or a high story of a skyscraper has a high likelihood of death.*”

Jumping from high places is a sort of *convenience* where to Madelyn Gould (1956–2011), a clinical psychologist and a suicide expert, is of the opinion that “*Jumping from tall structures is often chosen by suicidal people simply as a matter of convenience*”. Chuck Cullen, a parking consultant with The Integrity Group points out the chilling practicality of suicide by jumping: “*Jumping from a building is less costly and can be done without delays. Most office*

buildings, however, are closed at night, have sealed windows, and security in the lobby. Hence a garage provides a solution. The garage has open sides for ventilation, will usually allow customers to enter without any security check, and will have fewer people walking around” (Mouw and Troth, [2010](#)). Thus, considering the previous arguments it is evident that jumping from high places increases the risk of death in case of attempting a suicide.

Non-Lethal or Non-Fatal Methods of Suicide Attempt:

Use of Insecticides and Pesticides

Insecticides and pesticides are chemicals that are used to kill pests and insects. However, these chemicals are dangerous to humans as well; for instance, they are toxic and even can kill human beings. There are various types of insecticides available in the market chemically named as organophosphate, N-methyl carbamate and synthetic pyrethrin etc (Arya et al., [2021](#)). Moreover, exposure to this hazardous chemical also produces various adverse symptoms such as itching, burning, headache, muscle twitching, nausea, diarrhea, dizziness, sweating, vomiting, abdominal pain as well as serious issues i.e. respiratory depression, seizures, loss of consciousness, muscle weakness, pulmonary edema and even coma. Exposure to insecticides and pesticides can be accidental as well as intentional i.e. self-poisoning (Lorenz, [2020](#)).

Suicide is one of the under researched areas in Pakistan, however, a study conducted at start of 1st January 2007 which ended at 31st December 2007 showed that a total of 60 people attempted suicide in Karachi. The study also showed that 23% of suicide attempters poisoned themselves through insecticides and pesticides (Aftab et al., [2011](#)).

Use of Benzodiazepines

As a method of suicide attempt, Benzodiazepine is widely cited (Gibbons et al., [2024](#)). Leo Sternbach (1908–2005) is known as the pioneer of benzodiazepine tranquilizers (Saleem et al., [2010](#)). Benzodiazepines is a class of drugs which were introduced in 1950s and got popularity in treatment of various mental disorders including anxiety,

depression, insomnia as well as have muscle relaxant capabilities. Till 1980s benzodiazepines were prescribed for long duration, however, research showed various serious problems and side-effects due to benzodiazepines such as with drawl symptoms, dependence and tolerance (Ashton, 2005).

Apart from its side effects, the most important concern regarding benzodiazepines is high dosages or self-poisoning where in developing countries about 30-40% of suicides are attempted through benzodiazepines (Saleem *et al.*, 2010). In Pakistan, more than 80% of self-poisoning cases are attempted through benzodiazepine overdose; a fact which can be generalized to most developing nations as well (Khan and Reza, 1998).

Means Reduction

Intervention and prevention of suicide attempts are one of the key areas of debate in the studies of suicidality. School of Public Health Harvard ([n.d.](#)) published an article on preventing suicide by controlling the means or methods of suicide attempt. The article emphasized that along with other prevention methods such as mental health interventions, it is also important to control the means of suicide attempts. In this regard, control on firearms, domestic gas and availability of benzodiazepines is very important. Khan et al. (2017) asserts that Family is an important social institution which can play an important role in suicidality but at the same time it is important regarding intervention and prevention off suicide attempt. Family can play an important role in reducing the means of suicide such as observing an individual, keeping firearms in a safe place, and keeping medicine in a safe place which can be used for suicide attempts such as alprazolam. Goldsmith et

al. (2002) Stated that the role of government and health institutions is very important in controlling available methods and means of suicide attempts such as assessment before prescribing medicine which can contribute to suicidality.

Conclusion

It is concluded that there are two categories of methods and means of suicide attempts; first lethal or fatal methods of suicide attempts (including firearms; hanging, domestic gas and jumping from high places; and second, non-lethal or methods and means of suicide attempt with less fatality including benzodiazepine (sleeping pills) and insecticides and pesticides. The logic behind opting for fatal means of suicide includes a firm decision by an individual to die by suicide whereas the option of a relatively less lethal method of suicide attempt includes the confusion among individuals to die by suicide.

Future Research

One of the purposes of this review is to understand the dimensions and logic behind methods and means of suicide attempts to suggest future research. It is extracted that means and methods of suicide are also embedded in sociocultural and psychological factors where numerous circumstances work in a specific manner to contribute to choosing of mean or method for suicide attempt. It is suggested to conduct qualitative exploratory research to understand the subjective approach of individuals towards opting means and methods of suicide attempt. In this regard it is suggested that individuals who attempted suicide and survived may be sampled in order to understand opting for specific means and methods of suicide attempt.

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