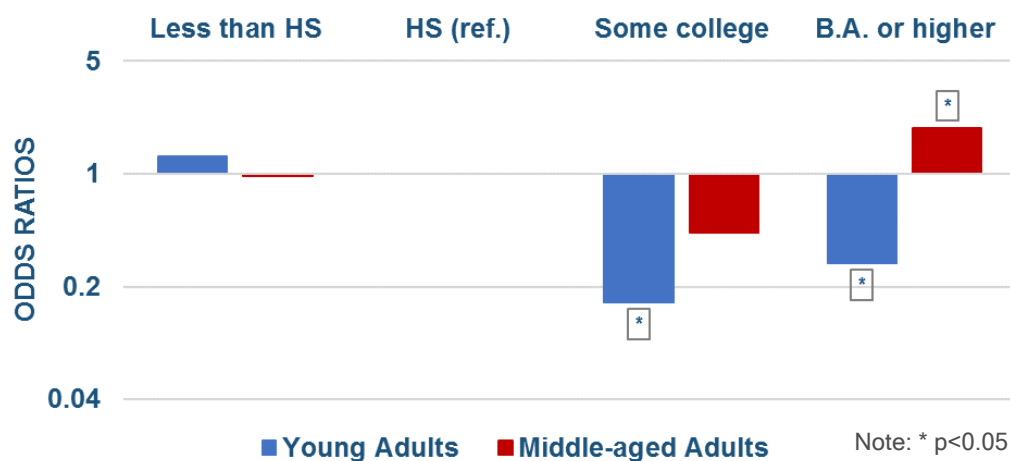


## Socioeconomic Attainments and Suicidal Ideation in South Korea: How Are Young Adults Different from Middle-Aged Adults? By Joongbaeck Kim and Soo-Yeon Yoon

Suicide is a serious mental health concern in South Korea (hereafter Korea). The crude suicide rate (the number of suicide deaths in a year per 100,000 population) was 24.6 in 2016, which was the highest among the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries. Despite the growing interest in the process from suicidal ideation to suicidal behavior, little research has paid attention to the extent to which socioeconomic attainment is differently related to suicidal ideation by age groups, specifically comparing young adults to middle-aged adults. Using nationally representative data from the 2012 Korea Welfare Panel Study (KOWEPS), we examine the association between socioeconomic attainment (i.e., education, employment status, and household income) and suicidal ideation among young adults (aged 18-35) and middle-aged adults (aged 36-55).

**Figure 1. Odds Ratios of Educational Attainment on Suicidal Ideations**



**Figure 1** presents the odds ratios for suicidal ideations predicted by educational attainment for young adults and middle-aged adults, controlling for other model covariates. Educational attainment predicts different likelihoods of suicidal ideation, but with opposite patterns for young and middle-aged adults. For young adults, those with some college or a bachelor’s degree or higher education had lower risks of suicidal ideation compared with those with only a high school diploma. In contrast, middle-aged adults with a bachelor’s degree or higher reported a significantly higher level of probability for suicidal ideation than their counterparts with only a high school diploma. The results show that the implication of education for suicidal ideation appears to differ by age group.

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Figure 2. Odds Ratios of Employment Status on Suicidal Ideations

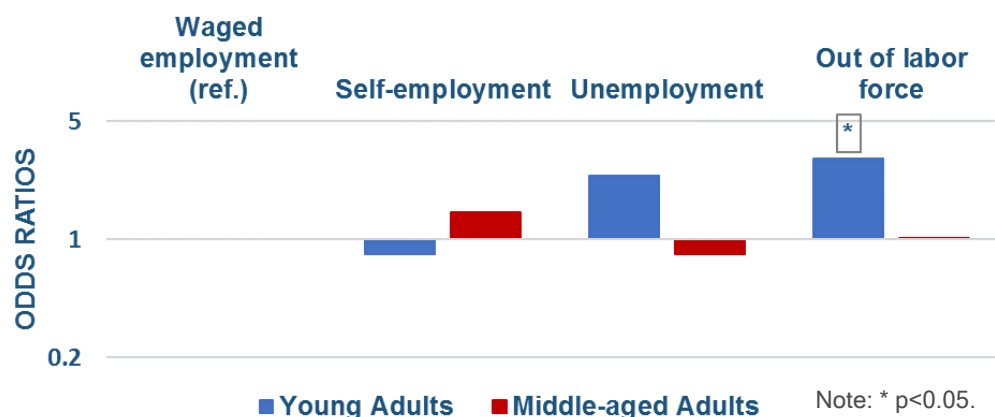


Figure 2 shows that there are no significant differences in the likelihood of suicidal ideation across employment status among middle-aged adults. This result contradicts recent findings regarding the negative association between the loss of employment and precarious employment and suicidal ideation in Korea. For young adults, however, being out of the labor force was significantly associated with a higher likelihood of suicidal ideation compared to having waged employment. We found no difference in the likelihood of suicidal ideation between waged employment and unemployment among young adults. Considering that unemployment is generally associated with a low standard of living and fewer social and economic resources, the lack of difference in the likelihood of suicidal ideation compared with waged employment is surprising.

Overall, our findings highlight that socioeconomic attainment has a different effect on suicidal ideation across age groups. The association between education and suicidal ideation is contradictory for young adults and middle-aged adults. This is embedded in the ongoing changes in working conditions influenced by massive structural changes in society. Due to the economic restructuring toward a new economy characterized by the development of information technology and globalization, middle-aged adults with white-collar jobs are at the greatest risk of losing jobs and having unprepared retirement at an earlier age than their expectation. Thus, high educational attainment would not protect middle-aged adults from a precarious position in the labor market, but rather operate as a stressor leading to suicidal ideation.

*This research brief features selected findings from:*

- Kim, Joongbaeck, and Soo-Yeon Yoon. 2018. "[Association between Socioeconomic Attainments and Suicidal Ideations by Age Groups in Korea](#)." *International Journal of Social Psychiatry* 64(7): 628-636.