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The Complexities of Black Youth Suicide

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The suicide of a young person is always a tragedy, an event deeply mourned by the youth's family and community. Sadly, the prevalence of this kind of tragedy is greater than many might think. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for 2005 through 2013 indicate suicide has been the third or fourth leading cause of death for people ages 10 to 14, and the second or third leading cause of death for young people ages 15 to 24. Within these age groups, suicide rates can be further differentiated by race. Although suicide incidence has tended to be lower for Black youth than for other demographic groups, today suicides of African American children and young adults are on the rise. In order to understand how to reverse this worrisome new trend, a complex set of factors need to be examined.

Suicide by Race, Age, and Gender

In the total U.S. population not taking age into account, whites have the highest rate of suicide followed by American Indians and Alaskan Natives, and Asians and Pacific Islanders. Blacks and Hispanics have the lowest rates of suicide. For young people, the highest rates of suicide-related deaths occur among American Indians and Alaskan Natives. Rates of suicide for Black youth and the overall Black population tend to be lower than these other demographics – but things have changed recently.

New evidence about generational shifts in Black suicide patterns has attracted attention from researchers, media, and community leaders. A 2015 study conducted by Dr. Jeffrey Bridge and colleagues used data from the Centers for Disease Control to examine gender and race variations in youth suicide, and found an increase in suicide rates for Black children from 1.36 death per million population to 2.54 per million. The study also found higher suicide rates for Black and white boys compared to girls in both racial groups. Suicide rates declined for white children overall. How can the findings about increased suicide rates for Blacks be explained? Dr. Bridge and his co-authors offered ideas, including the hypothesis that Black children, particularly boys, may have greater exposure to poverty, aggression and violence, and be less likely to get treatment for depression.

Factors that Contribute to Suicide

Years of research have identified factors that indicate a higher potential for individuals to die from suicide. The predictors include poor mental and emotional health, stress at home, stress from peers, and difficulties at school or on the job. Additional factors include either social isolation *or* excessive social integration, as in the pressures individuals can feel in regimented environments like the military. People are also known to be more prone to suicide if their social supports or coping mechanisms become weaker. Notably, African Americans are disproportionately likely to experience all of these stresses or deficits. Black youth, for example, suffer high rates of unemployment and underemployment, often experience poverty and low socioeconomic status, and frequently find themselves involved in violent situations. The surprise is that, despite all of these adverse conditions, Black youth – even if their suicide rates are increasing – still have lower overall rates of suicide than other social groups subject to similar adverse factors. However, the apparently low rates may not be what they seem.

Blacks often experience injustices and discrimination that can lead to poor mental health, but culture may play a role in deemphasizing behaviors that signal potential for suicide. Black youth are often taught to hide emotions by families, schools, and peers – told to "toughen up" or "pray about it." Moreover, many Black Americans do not know about or have positive relationships with mental health resources, or may be reluctant to call upon such resources. Secrecy and distrust may cut people off from medical and mental health care and perpetuate the notion that "time heals all wounds." The result may be suicides – and also behavior that leads to deaths or harms not recognized as suicidal.

Possibly, too, Black suicide rates seem relatively low because suicide is not straightforward to define. Some deaths that are not called suicides may amount to the same thing. One possibility is "suicide by cop," in which

individuals deliberately behave in threatening ways toward police, in attempts to provoke a lethal response. "Suicide by interpersonal violence" also happens, when individuals provoke family members, friends, or strangers to make lethal responses to them. Rather than simply categorizing violence among Black youth as "street violence," or even bullying, analysts should consider ways in which certain Black youth seem to intentionally invoke violent encounters in the expectation of being harmed or even killed. Some of these situations may amount to suicide, which would imply that low statistical rates of suicide for African Americans are not what they seem. Possibly, the kinds of factors that make people unusually vulnerable to suicide are leading to Black deaths that amount to suicides, even if they are not officially classified as such.

Outreach and Prevention

The assumption that Blacks are less prone to suicide than other groups must be questioned – especially as this view pertains to Black youth. Lower official rates of suicide do not mean individuals and groups are immune from suicidal ideation and behaviors. Among African American youngsters, lower rates may only mean that some deaths are being misclassified. And even if rates are relatively low, the rise in Black youth suicides shows that interventions are needed.

Fortunately, data on recent trends in suicide and self-harm have sparked new efforts at outreach and prevention, including efforts particularly aimed at minority youth. Support groups encourage individuals, families, peers, and the general public to become more aware of potentially suicidal feelings and behaviors. And new forms of treatment combine counseling with heightened social support from family members and peers. To further strengthen preventative efforts, we must do additional research on the factors that contribute to suicide attempts and deaths – with careful attention to previously understudied populations and new sensitivity to social and cultural stressors that vary for different racial, economic, and age groups.

Research and data for this brief are drawn from Kimya N. Dennis, "Black Political and Socioeconomic Status Attainment and the Direction of Lethal Violence: Comparing the Suicide of Young Black and White Males in U.S. Counties," PhD Dissertation, North Carolina State University, 2010.