

Suicidal behaviors among African American adolescents

Abstract

In the United States, suicide among adolescents continues to be a growing phenomenon that affects many young people. Research in 2017 illustrated suicide has been the second leading cause of death among individuals whose ages range from 10 to 34. Recently, African Americans suicide rates for youth have increased which provides causation for this study. This study utilizes a qualitative analysis on the contributing risk factors that have led to the increase of suicide rates within this particular group of people. In particular, the authors analyzed suicide rates within the United States regarding African American adolescents and how the contributing risk factors of one's socioeconomic status including race, mental illness, and social media play key roles. It is undeniably that these factors are group-specified in which intervention strategies should become implemented within this social context and implications would arise that would negate suicide risk among African American adolescents.

Keywords: adolescents, African Americans, blacks, suicide, risk factors, interpersonal violence, self-directed violence

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Gloria Okere, Lasheria Nance-Bush
Texas Southern University, USA

Correspondence: Gloria Okere, Texas Southern University, USA, Tel +1 713-313-7011, Email okereg@gmail.com

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Introduction

Often in the United States, interpersonal violence is utilized throughout many avenues to illustrate types of violence individuals engage in when he or she uses physical force on another. Interpersonal violence refers to violence between individuals, and is subdivided into *family and intimate partner violence* and *community violence*.¹ The Criminal Justice System has implemented laws in place that focuses on interpersonal violence in which public safety and health has become a priority. Along with interpersonal violence, the United States has seen an increase of violence as it relates to individuals engaging in self-directed violence. Self-directed violence (SDV) encompasses a range of violent behaviors, including acts of fatal and nonfatal suicidal behavior, and non-suicidal intentional self-harm (i.e., behaviors where the intention is not to kill oneself, as in self-mutilation). Injury from self-directed violence is a major public health problem throughout the United States and the rest of the world.²

Suicide is a leading cause of death in the United States, and has been rising among African American Adolescents. At 7.2 per 100,000, the age-adjusted suicide rate for Black populations in 2018 was approximately half the overall U.S. suicide rate of 14.2 per 100,000 (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, n.d.). At the same time, the Black population's racial self-identification is changing. Among those who self-identify as "Black or African American"³ is used here interchangeable to illustrate the effects of suicide. Suicide rates within the minority community is one that has not been seen as a factor or a leading cause of death for African Americans. Recently, these rates are affecting African American adolescents due to several factors. African American teens are more likely to use lethal means in suicide attempts (e.g., suffocating/hanging and use of firearm). Between 2001 and 2017, rates of suicide increased by 60% among African American teens males and 182% among African American females.⁴ The number of suicides that have been completed within the African American community is due to several factors. Research illustrates that suicide victims more than often tend to live in lower income areas that can be associated with poverty, inequalities in job opportunities, and overall one's socioeconomic status.

The 2018 real median income of Asian households increased 4.6 percent from 2017 to \$87,194, while the real median incomes of non-Hispanic White (\$70,642), Black (\$41,361), and Hispanic (\$51,450) households were not statistically different from their 2017 medians (*Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC]*, 2018). Socioeconomic status is one of many reasons that may drive someone to suicide. Children in poverty-stricken areas are more likely to not have access to mental health services needed to address the rising cause of suicide. French sociologist Émile Durkheim stated one risk factor of suicide is limited to psychological conditions. He found a correlation between suicide and an individual's social connectedness to their society. African American youths' are disproportionately affected by mental illnesses as well.

Risk factors

Suicidality – defined as suicide ideation, suicide plan and/or suicide attempt⁵ – has been associated with a number of psychiatric and psychosocial risk factors including depression.⁵ Studies have long recognized that "Adolescent suicidality is a complex phenomenon",³⁰ however, structurally racist systems and white-centered preventative modalities position African American youth and adolescents to become "suicidally vulnerable"⁶ due to the lack of cultural attunement. An individual's level of socioeconomic status plays a role in his or her risks for suicide. Socioeconomic factors are one determinant of suicidal behaviors in a range of multiple and complex causes (Raschke et. al, 2022). Disparities that exist within socioeconomic groups increases the risk of suicide for vulnerable groups. These disparities have been long associated with poor health outcomes as it relates to youths. Due to low SES and living in less safe neighborhoods, racial minority and low SES children experience poor access to educational resources and higher levels of economic, housing, and food insecurity, as well as neighborhood stress.⁷ Poverty for example creates a barrier to mental health services in communities of color that often prevent families from getting the help and support they need.

Research illustrates how poverty is highly associated with suicidal rates in youth. Across the decade studied – from 2007 to 2016 – the overall suicide rate among those 5 to 19 years old was 3.35 per

100,000 in the highest-poverty communities, compared with 3.18 in the lowest-poverty areas, the study found.⁸ Early exposure to poverty for Black youths in particular leads to toxic stressors in one's life where their cognition and behavior becomes impeded and substituted with negative thinking and actions. For the first time since the federal government started collecting the data, the number of black children in poverty appears to have overtaken the number of poor white children, even though white children far outnumber black children in the American population, the report said.⁹ Due to this, resources in certain areas are scarce where Black children are left to figure out how to cope with their environment along with situations that arise. The uneasy feelings of hopelessness and experiences of discrimination along with isolation contribute to suicide.

Poverty provides causation towards mental health services in communities of color that often prevent families from getting the help and support they need. Despite a history of poverty, racial segregation, discrimination and a host of social and economic barriers, rates of suicide among African American adolescents remain relatively low compared to other racial and ethnic groups. "Among African American men, poverty was found to reduce suicide risk whereas African American men who attained higher levels of education were at an increased risk of suicide".¹⁰ Child poverty is associated with lifelong hardships that often show themselves as adults and is a social deterrent factor that is consistent with health and wellness.

Regarding socioeconomic status, race plays a vital role in how Black adolescents view themselves and the results in their behavior due to experienced/perceived racism. Racism plays a factor in the inequality of job opportunities African Americans face in this society. When it comes to income, gains have been made as well, but African Americans are still paid less than white Americans for the same jobs and lag significantly behind when it comes to accumulating wealth.¹¹ Inequality in job opportunity dates back to the injustices that occurred in the United States against African Americans as it relates to slavery and Jim Crow laws. After Reconstruction, state and local governments doubled down on these efforts by enacting Jim Crow laws, which codified the role of Black people in the Southern economy and society.⁸ States such as South Carolina enacted strict "Black Codes" that fined Black people if they worked in any occupation other than farming or domestic servitude.¹²

Racism in our society is inescapable and is always operating and is deeply engrained in society and organizations in particular and persistent ways (racism is normal).¹³ From the Jim Crow south to implicit bias that exist within our education system,¹⁴ states, "The potential for school social workers to address structural racism through the use of the national school social work practice model as a tool to guide systemic, ecologically oriented intervention within schools and educational policy spaces". Black teens also have seen or heard about people who look like them that have been killed by police. The recent deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd received national attention during the summer of 2020. In fact, each death fueled massive protests for racial justice.¹⁵ The aspect of racism leads to feelings of depression and suicidal thoughts for Black youth. These feelings result to mental health issues towards one's mental and physical well-being. Policymakers to advocate for better accessibility to equitable resource for communities of color that are socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Racism also plays a role in how African American adolescents develop in society. Racial isolation creates disproportionate opportunities which leads to criminal behavior and a heightened chance for these adolescents towards the criminal justice system.

This heightened behavior relates to deviance, which American criminologist Albert Cohen developed his theory -deviance and delinquency which arises out of subcultures. He argued that the delinquent subculture emerged as a response to working-class boys' problems of adjustment and loss of status that occurred when they failed to meet middle-class standards.¹⁶ Deviant values and morals develop as adolescents enter systems such as subcultures where they feel a sense of belonging due to the inequality they face in society. African American adolescents that are apart of the lower class for example tend to be deprived of opportunities that can enhance their educational and occupational goals; which opens doors for criminality to occur. Community violence is a predictor for suicide among African American adolescents given the rate of occurrence and proximity for this group.

Unable to obtain an occupation, this contributes to African American youth experiencing suicide related behaviors. A heightened gateway for mental illness occurs within this group which causes behavioral and emotional problems that stem from economic conditions. Research illustrates that mental illnesses such as depression and post-traumatic stress has a profound effect on African American adolescents. Research suggests that Black youth and their families are skeptical of utilizing the limited mental health services available to medical professionals and institutions. A lack of access and mistrust among Black youth predisposes them to the risk of suicide.¹⁷ African American adolescents are less likely to follow up with treatment referrals which causes his or her mental illness to become unaddressed. Research illustrates that African American adolescents are reluctant to seek treatment and/or acknowledge any symptoms that are present. "Rather than being able to express the pain, fear and anger, what we're told when we're young is that we should suck it up and be strong — our great-great grandparents survived slavery and our grandparents survived Jim Crow," said Armstrong, a clinical social worker.¹⁸

Mental illness remains as a prevalent cause of suicide due to one's condition that surrounds his or her behavior. In fact, 95% of people who commit suicide have a mental illness. In a general sense, mental illness all too often is an isolating experience, with such isolation correlating with suicide.¹⁹ African American adolescents that experience mental illness without proper treatment increase their risk of engaging in suicidal behaviors. One negative impact of not talking about it has been an increased rate of suicides among Black children ages 5 to 12, who have twice the suicide rate of white children of the same age range, according to a study published in 2018 that looked at data from 2001 to 2015.²⁰ Education about mental illness allows for early prevention which negates mental illness as a factor of suicide for African American adolescents. Mental illness is a very common problem affecting over 50% of the population in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2018). Currently African American adolescence are two times more likely to die by suicide where they were traditionally had a lower suicide rate than their white counterparts. The third leading cause of death of African American adolescents aged 15-19 is suicide. Major contributing factors are the accumulated disadvantages of racism that impact Black communities, leading to increased mental health challenges.²¹

Another factor that is often at times overlooked regarding the rising rates of suicide for these particular adolescents is the impact and role social media plays. The rise in the suicide rate among African American adolescents is soaring with the advent of more social media platform and their popularity. Research illustrates that social media was a place where anyone could share their thoughts, ideas, music, and videos to family and friends from afar; now, social media has become a beacon for users to exhibit suicidal thoughts

outside of the clinical setting. Recent studies²² also show that people exhibiting suicidal ideation frequently use social media to share their mental state, with eight out of ten disclosing their suicidal thoughts and plans.²³ Social media's influence on African American youths' suicidal risks requires more attention from various mental health services professionals inside and outside of school. However, as we mentioned, the lack of medical services can make this quite tricky. Social media influences are both risky and beneficial depending on the content of the posting, and socioeconomically challenged adolescents are especially vulnerable to suicide. In addition, many factors have been identified that contribute to suicide risk. For example, according to studies by Yale University, there is a strong link between bullying and suicide; bully-victims are between 2 to 9 times more likely to consider suicide than non-victims.

Cyberbullying, a repetitive aggressive action toward another individual through communication such as email, text messages, or social media websites.²⁴ Cyberbullying is more indirect and can occur significantly more than in person bullying. Cyberbullying Self and Self-Harm Challenges such as "holding one's breath until they pass out are among the highest risk factors attributed to the rise of suicide among African American adolescents. In addition, bully-related suicide can be connected to bullying, including physical bullying, emotional bullying, sexting, and reinforcement of self-harming and suicidal behaviors, especially among vulnerable populations such as adolescents. Research suggests that cyberbullying results in higher levels of depression than traditional bullying victims male or female.²⁵⁻³¹

Conclusion

Viewing ---one's socioeconomic status including race, mental illness, and social media are key risk factors of suicide as it pertains to African American adolescents. It is hoped that more evidence based research will be conducted that will focus on solutions which will ultimately decrease the rates of suicide within this community. It is imperative that community members begin to recognize signs that may lead or cause suicidal behaviors which include mental illness such as anxiety and depression in which one starts to withdraw from normal activity and/or feels nervous or weak and tired. It is key that parents and guardians alike monitor their child(ren) activities on social media in order to determine baselines that involve self-care. Understanding disparities that exist within one's socio-economic status allows for adolescents to create goals which allow for an effective development period to occur during ones' adolescent years.

Suicide behavior is a public and known crisis which has increased within the African American community for adolescents. By engaging in a series of intervening events, protective factors can be established and implemented that leads to a more healthy and stable lifestyle. The persistent suicide trend should prompt a call to action among practitioners that work in child-serving systems, such as pediatric and family health care, schools, child welfare; mental health providers and researchers. It should also be a call to action for faith-based communities, families and particularly fatherhood initiatives, and community leadership.²⁵

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares there is no conflict of interest.

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