



Suicide Among Black Americans

General Statistics

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report that, between 1999 and 2004¹:

- The suicide rate for Black Americans of all ages was 5.25 per 100,000, about half the overall U.S. rate of 10.75 per 100,000.
- Young males (ages 20-24) had the highest rate of suicide in the black population, 18.18 per 100,000.
- Suicide was the third leading cause of death for Black Americans between the ages of 15 and 24.
- Black Americans have a lifetime prevalence rate of attempted suicide of 4.1%, similar to the general population rate of 4.6%.²

Youth Statistics

In the 12 months preceding the 2005 Youth Risk Behavior Survey³:

- 7.6% of black American high school students reported having made a suicide attempt (vs. 8.4% U.S.).
- 9.6% reported having made a suicide plan (vs. 13.0% U.S.).
- 12.2% reported having seriously considered attempting suicide (vs. 16.9% U.S.).

Among black American high school students, more females than males reported:

- Seriously considering suicide (17.1% vs. 7%).
- Making a suicide plan (13.5% vs. 5.5%).
- Making a suicide attempt (9.8% vs. 5.2%).

Risk for attempted suicide in Black Americans is highest among 15 to 24 year olds. Younger generations of Black Americans are at significantly higher risk for suicide attempts.⁴

Mental Health Considerations

- Epidemiological surveys suggest that the rate of mental illness among African-Americans is similar to that of Caucasians. However, there is evidence to suggest that higher rates of mental illness among African-Americans might be detected if researchers surveyed individuals within psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and poor rural communities.⁵
- One study concluded that most Black Americans with major depressive disorder do not receive treatment: less than half of African-Americans and less than a quarter of Caribbean Black Americans with severe symptoms received treatment. Evidence shows that Black Americans who do receive treatment get poorer quality care than White Americans.⁶

Ethnic and Cultural Considerations

- African American beliefs about suicide may act as a protective factor. Religious communities condemn suicide while secular attitudes regard suicide as unacceptable and a behavior of white culture, alien to black culture.⁷

Risk factors for suicide among African-Americans include⁸:

- o being under age 35,
- o residing in southern and northeastern states,
- o using cocaine,
- o having a firearm in the home,
- o and threatening others with violence.

Strengths and Protective Factors

- Black women attempt suicide at almost the same rate as white women but have fewer completions. One study found that, when compared to white women, black women have greater social support, larger extended families, more religious views against suicide, and stronger mothering philosophies, all of which may act as protective factors.⁹
- When compared to their white and Hispanic counterparts, black high school students report the lowest rates for both considering suicide and making plans to attempt suicide.¹⁰

Notes

The term “Black Americans” includes many racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. We used the term because the majority of data and research use this category. When specific sources refer to African-Americans or Caribbean Americans, that term is used.

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) collaborated with the Suicide Prevention Action Network (SPAN) USA to produce fact sheets on suicide in various American populations – American Indians/Alaska Natives, Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders, Black Americans, and Hispanic Americans. All facts sheets are available at www.sprc.org.

The National Strategy for Suicide Prevention emphasizes that cultural appropriateness is a vital design and implementation criterion for suicide prevention activities. SPRC and SPAN USA hope these fact sheets advance the work of those continuing to strive for cultural effectiveness.

References

- ¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. *Web based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System (WISQARS)*. Retrieved Jan. 3, 2007, from: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncipc/wisqars>
- ² Joe, S., Baser, R.E., Breeden, G., Neighbors, H.W., Jackson, J.S. (2006). Prevalence of and Risk Factors for Lifetime Suicide Attempts Among Blacks in the United States. *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 296,(17), 2112-23.
- ³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2006, June 9). Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance — United States, 2005. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 55(SS-5), 50,52. (Accessed online).
- ⁴ Joe, S., et al (2006). Prevalence of and Risk Factors for Lifetime Suicide Attempts Among Blacks in the United States.
- ⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2001). *Mental health: Culture, race, and ethnicity- A supplement to Mental health: A report of the Surgeon General (DHHS Publication No. SMA 01-3613)* Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- ⁶ Williams, D.R., González, H.M., Neighbors, H., Nesse, R., Abelson, J.M., Sweetman, J., et al. (2007). Prevalence and Distribution of Major Depressive Disorder in African Americans, Caribbean Blacks and Non-Hispanic Whites: Results from the National Survey of American Life. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 64: 305-15.
- ⁷ Early, K.E., & Akers, R.L. (1993). “It’s a white thing”: An explanation of beliefs about suicide in the African-American community. *Deviant Behavior*. 14, 227-96.
- ⁸ Willis, L.A., Coombs, D.W., Drentea, P., Cockerham, W.C. (2003). Uncovering the mystery: factors of African American suicide. *Suicide and Life-threatening Behavior*, 33(4), 412-29.
- ⁹ Goldsmith, S. K. (2001). *Risk factors for suicide: Summary of a workshop*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- ¹⁰ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance — United States, 2005.