



Tennessee Suicide Prevention Network

"Saving Lives in Tennessee"

Suicide and Black Americans

- Between 2001 and 2006 there were 333 reported suicides among black Tennesseans, at a rate of 5.55 per 100,000. This is slightly higher than the national black rate of 5.15 per 100,000, which itself is roughly half of the overall U.S rate of 10.98 per 100,000.
- During this period, suicide was the sixteenth-leading cause of death among blacks in Tennessee, consistent with national statistics. Suicide was the fifth-leading cause of death within the 10-24 age group (as compared to the third-leading cause nationally).
- Firearms were the most common means of death employed by black suicide victims in Tennessee, used in 68.1% of the deaths.
- Suicide is the third-leading cause of death among African-Americans aged 10-24 after homicides and accidents. Available statistics suggest that before 1965, the African-American suicide rate was only a quarter that of whites, but in only a few years had risen to half the white rate.
- While Caucasians are twice as likely as African-Americans to die by suicide, the rate of suicide among black teens aged 15-19 more than doubled between 1980 and 1995 and tripled among black youth aged 10-14, far surpassing the rate of increase among white teens. The latest statistics show that rates have decreased, with roughly 5.5 per 100,000 African-American deaths ruled as suicide in 2005. But this still translates to a rate of five per day, and given the tendency of medical examiners to obscure causes of death and the stigma suicide carries in the black community, this rate is likely much higher in reality.
- African-American females are more likely to attempt suicide, but African-American males are more likely to complete suicide.
- According to the adolescent component of the National Survey of American Life, which reviews aspects of mental illness and treatment within African Americans and Afro-Caribbean Americans, 4 percent of black teen males and about 7 percent of black teen females attempt suicide by age 17. Children from middle-class backgrounds (\$32,000 to \$54,999 annual household income) were more likely to attempt suicide than those from lower-income homes (\$18,000 to \$31,999).
- The lifetime prevalence of suicide attempts black men of Caribbean-American extraction (as opposed to those of black African descent) is almost twice as high as the overall black rate.
- Firearms are the predominant method of suicide completion among African Americans. Nationally, firearms are involved in 74% of all suicides among black teens aged 10-14 age group, 61% of all suicides among 15-24 year olds and 54% of all suicides among 25-34 year olds.
- A recent study reported that over 25% of African American youth exposed to violence met diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Black veterans are also more prone to PTSD than their white counterparts.
- Although the behavioral components of depression are typically more pronounced among African-Americans, some victims express little suicide intent or depressive symptoms prior to the act. Additionally, they are less likely to use drugs; firearms are the predominant method.
- Common suicide risk factors for black Americans include being under the age of 35, substance abuse (especially use of cocaine), presence of a firearm in the home, and a history of violent threats against others.
- The prevalence of several myths about suicide and African-Americans complicate prevention efforts. Often these communities regard depression as a constitutional weakness rather than a medical condition, and communities of faith condemn suicide as a sin. Suicide is regarded as a problem of middle-class whites, and there are tendencies within the black community to idealize their men as too strong to take their own lives and their women as too resilient to crack under pressure. While these beliefs may offer some degree of a protective factor, they may also dissuade troubled individuals and their loved ones from seeking needed interventions and compromise community mental health outreach efforts.
- While current surveys put the rate of mental illness among black Americans at roughly equal to that of whites, a report from the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General suggests higher rates might be evident if researchers were more inclined to include psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and poor rural communities in their analyses.
- A 2007 study published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* found that less than half of African-Americans and less than a quarter of Caribbean black American with major depression receive treatment and generally receive poorer quality care than white Americans.

Sources: Tennessee Department of Health, American Association of Suicidology, National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Archives of General Psychology*, *Deviant Behavior*, *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*.

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