



Preventing Suicide among Youth in *Black Communities*

Suicide rates among Black youth are increasing. Over 40 million people in the United States, or 12.8% of the U.S. population, identified as non-Hispanic Black.¹ While suicide rates are generally lower for non-Hispanic Black populations than for the general U.S. population, suicide risk has been increasing for Black adolescents. In 2018, suicide became the second-leading cause of death for Black youth between the ages of 10 and 14 and the third-leading cause of death for Black youth between the ages of 15 and 19.²

In response to this growing crisis, in 2020, the Congressional Black Caucus published *Ring the Alarm: The Crisis of Black Youth Suicide in America*. The report outlines mental health trends among Black youth. It offers recommendations, including cultivating broader community awareness and promoting evidence-based best practices for clinicians, teachers, parents, and others who interact with Black youth. Overall, suicides are increasing at an alarming rate among non-Hispanic Blacks in the United States, with a 27.6% increase in the age-adjusted rate between 2015 and 2019.³ Together we can reduce suicides among our Black youth by using comprehensive best practices, recognizing suicide risk factors and taking action.

Recognize Suicide Risk Factors

Risk factors for suicide include a constellation of contributing factors at the individual, community, and societal levels.⁴

Some of these risk factors for suicide may disproportionately affect Black populations. For instance, exposure to racial traumatic events (e.g., seeing images or videos of others from their racial or ethnic group being hurt or beaten) can be associated with depression and post-traumatic stress symptoms among Black youth. However, more research is needed to understand how this translates to suicide risk.⁵ Depression, a significant risk factor for suicide, is often untreated in Black adolescents, who are less likely to receive care

for the condition than their White peers.⁶ Historical abuses and misconduct by the general medical community and a lack of cultural competence among mental and behavioral health care providers can also affect behavioral health help-seeking among Black youth and their families.⁷

Individual Level	Community Level	Societal Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Depression, anxiety • Family history of suicide • Early-life adversity • Social isolation • Exposure to family conflict • Immediate access to lethal means 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stigma around help-seeking • Barriers to health care • Poverty • Violence • Lack of access to culturally competent care • Loss of cultural identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public health crises • Economic turmoil • Historical trauma • Systemic forces of oppression

Take Action to Prevent Suicide

Adopt a comprehensive approach. A *comprehensive approach* requires a combination of efforts to address different aspects of the problem. This best practice in suicide prevention may reduce suicide among Black populations.⁸

Strengthen protective factors. Protective factors are those personal and environmental characteristics that can help prevent suicide. They exist at the individual, community, and societal levels.⁹

Individual Level	Community Level	Societal Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental involvement • Family and social support • Coping and problem-solving skills • A sense of purpose or meaning in life • Limited access to lethal methods • Support for gender and sexuality identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faith-based or spiritual resources • Access to health care • Stable housing and employment • Open and accessible after-school activities • Cultural heritage and connectedness • Culturally competent care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hate crime laws • Economic opportunity • Policies limiting the availability of alcohol • Access and delivery of effective suicide care • Support research for identifying locally grown evidence-based interventions for Black communities¹⁰



» **Ring the Alarm: The Crisis of Black Youth Suicide in America** is a report from the Congressional Black Caucus Emergency Task Force outlining mental health trends among Black youth and policy recommendations: https://watsoncoleman.house.gov/uploadedfiles/full_taskforce_report.pdf

» **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline** has a 24/7 free, confidential support line for those in distress: 800-273-8255. It also offers a youth-focused webpage with resources and information: <https://suicidepreventionlifeline.org/help-yourself/youth/>

» **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)**

provides mental health resources for Black and African American populations, including guidance on finding culturally competent care: <https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions/Black-African-American>

» **The Boris L. Henson Foundation** has a mission to eradicate stigma around mental health issues in the African American community and to connect those in need to help: <https://borislhensonfoundation.org/>

Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health. (2021). Profile: Black/African Americans. <https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/omh/browse.aspx?lvl=3&lvlid=61>
- 2 Gordon, J. (2020). Addressing the Crisis of Black Youth Suicide. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/about/director/messages/2020/addressing-the-crisis-of-black-youth-suicide>
- 3 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021). CDC WONDER. <https://wonder.cdc.gov/>
- 4 Caine E. D.. (2013). Forging an agenda for suicide prevention in the United States. *American Journal of Public Health, 103*(5), 822–829.
- 5 Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health. (2019). *Ring the alarm: The crisis of Black youth suicides in America*. https://watsoncoleman.house.gov/uploadedfiles/full_taskforce_report.pdf
- 6 Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health, *Ring the Alarm*.
- 7 Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health, *Ring the Alarm*.
- 8 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017). *Preventing suicide: A technical package of programs, policies and practices*. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/suicidetechnicalpackage.pdf>
- 9 Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health, *Ring the Alarm*.
- 10 Emergency Task Force on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health, *Ring the Alarm*.

