

# Black Male Suicide

## Why are so many young men killing themselves?

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**Sept. 15, 2008**--Not long ago, suicide and African Americans were almost never mentioned in the same breath. Despite confronting challenges from slavery to Jim Crow to structural racism, blacks rarely took their own lives. It was a positive health disparity. Until now.

There is alarming evidence that the suicide rate for young African-American men is escalating, and just as much evidence of how ill-equipped America's health-care system is to handle it.

From 1980 to 1995, the suicide rate for black adolescents rose from 5.6 per 100,000 of the population to 13 per 100,000, according to [recent research](#) by Clare Xanthos, a health services research specialist. For young black men, these changes represent a doubling of the suicide rate, making it the third leading cause of death among that demographic.

If the trend continues, it could ripple through black communities, increasing the number of children who grow up fatherless, further burdening African-American women who will have fewer partners to help them raise families. Clearly, it is a complex problem that is directly related to the life experiences of young African-American men. While the suicide rate for young black men has risen, the suicide rate for black women remains among the lowest of any demographic.

So why are young black men killing themselves?

Young black males live in some of the most-difficult circumstances in our society; the data show that black men go to jail, drop out of school and are victims of crime at rates far higher than their white counterparts. Moreover, young black males are more likely to live in more challenging family environments. Sixty-eight percent of all black households are single-parent households—pointing to an absence of male role models for young boys.

The combination of family stress, violence in their communities and the discrimination they face is taking a toll. Some mental health specialists argue that the rates may even be higher. Dr. Alvin Poussaint, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, says that "death-by-cop" incidents should be counted as suicides. He believes that some despondent young men intentionally break the law so someone else will kill them.

"How many young men who put themselves in situations where it's very likely that they're going to get shot to death are actually committing suicide?" Poussaint asked in a recent interview on National Public Radio. "There is such a thing as what we call victim-precipitated homicide, which is suicide. The most classic example would be suicide by cop."

This rising suicide tide can impact black middle-class teenagers in white suburbs, as well as those in inner-city neighborhoods. In fact, Xanthos argues that black youths living in white communities often face the trauma of not relating to their white neighbors and also feeling estranged from blacks from poorer, urban settings. Certainly, the suicide of James Dungy, the 18-year-old son of Indianapolis Colts coach Tony Dungy, underscored that suicide can strike the rich and poor.

What's clear is that black communities, health-care professionals and public-health officials must

mobilize to meet the challenges presented by this problem.

The stigma on mental illness in the black communities is so great that obvious signs are frequently ignored, even by close family members and friends. The first step must come from parents and friends recognizing the behavior patterns that indicate a problem, and then working to get help. And public-health programs, such as Medicaid, must make it easier for young black men to get the counseling and treatment they need.

Even at that point, other problems develop including the lack of black therapists, counselors and psychiatrists to help these patients. Just 4 percent of the nation's psychiatrists, 3 percent of the psychologists and 7 percent of social workers, are black.

The problems weighing on many black youths are created by racism along with the other tensions that they face in everyday life. In these instances, an African-American counselor or physician may be more likely to reach a solution.

Xanthos also issues a call for "bicultural" training for young black males, teaching survival skills to black men about how to live in a white society. Such training would better prepare black youths for integration into schools and workplaces that are predominantly white, while also preparing them to confront and overcome the discrimination they are likely to face in American society.

*Henrie M. Treadwell, Ph.D. is associate director of development at the National Center for Primary Care of Morehouse School of Medicine. He is also director of Community Voices, a non-profit working to improve health services and health-care access, for all Americans.*

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