

Research connects discrimination, thoughts of death among African-Americans

June 25 2016

Racial discrimination, whether it's derogatory language or unequal treatment, impacts communities and individuals in different ways. For children, the effects are sometimes emotional scars, and as a University of Houston researcher discovered, even thoughts of death.

UH psychology professor Rheeda Walker was the lead researcher on the study "A Longitudinal Study of Racial Discrimination and Risk for Death Ideation in African-American Youth." It soon will be published in the journal *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*.

Walker used data previously collected from interviews with 722 African-American children recruited from schools in Georgia and Iowa. These boys and girls were interviewed at age 10 and again at age 12. In her analysis, Walker noted that more than one-third of the adolescents reported [death](#) ideation, or thoughts of death or dying. This ideation was accounted for in part by experiences of racial discrimination. Although thoughts of taking one's life were rarely expressed or asked about during interviews, Walker indicated that death ideation can be a predictor of suicide. Her findings may assist in drawing attention to students in crisis, as recent studies have found an increased number of suicides by African-American children. Walker addressed this issue in a recent online op-ed for *Ebony* magazine.

During interviews, students responded to questions related to racially motivated slurs, insults and unfair treatment, as well as experiences in which low expectations were placed upon them because of their race.

Walker's findings offer crucial insight for educators and parents, who can perhaps implement interventions if they suspect or observe mistreatment of children because of race, as well as feelings of anxiety or stress following incidents of discrimination. She observed that girls who expressed nervousness, fear or depression as a result of racial discrimination were somewhat more likely to think about death than boys.

Although her study does not detail possible interventions, Walker indicated that parents and educators can implement or encourage adaptive coping methods to support children affected by racial discrimination. Adaptive coping methods include encouraging [children](#) to talk about their feelings either with parents or friends or documenting them through journal entries.

"When a child experiences discrimination, he or she may say to themselves, 'I'm not worthy' or 'I'm not good enough,'" Walker said. "Effective interventions can offset these feelings and help a child's self esteem."

Additional interventions could take the form of multicultural curriculum in schools that promotes inclusivity, she said.

More information: Rheeda Walker et al. A Longitudinal Study of Racial Discrimination and Risk for Death Ideation in African American Youth, *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/sltb.12251](https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12251)

Provided by University of Houston

Citation: Research connects discrimination, thoughts of death among African-Americans (2016,

June 25) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-06-discrimination-thoughts-death-african-americans.html>

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