

Suicide risk increases in teens who knew murder victims

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Nearly half of black teenagers surveyed in Allegheny County report

losing a friend or family member to murder, a disproportionately stark statistic that is associated with suicide attempts and other negative childhood experiences, according to research led by UPMC and University of Pittsburgh scientists.

The findings are presented today at the American Public Health Association's 2018 Annual Meeting & Expo in San Diego. "Health Equity Now" is the theme of this year's meeting.

"Our analysis is a call to action for both practitioners and researchers to engage in work related to homicide survivorship," said Patricia Murungi Bamwine, Ph.D., M.A., M.S.W., postdoctoral scholar at Pitt's School of Medicine and UPMC Children's Hospital of Pittsburgh. "This work highlights that violence prevention and youth development cannot solely focus on reducing homicide. We also must focus on the ripple effects of traumatic loss on not only young people, but communities as a whole."

While Bamwine was serving as an AmeriCorps member at the Braddock Youth Project, a youth-driven employment program south of Pittsburgh, a young man was shot and killed a few blocks away. Following the murder, she observed behavioral changes in the youth she was working with. The experience led her to shift her research focus from East African conflict and terrorism to community violence intervention and prevention in America.

Motivated by her experience, Bamwine and her team, which included researchers at Pitt's School of Social Work, analyzed the results of a 2014 survey of 1,609 youth ages 14 through 19 in Allegheny County, called The Healthy Allegheny Teen Survey. Of all the participants, 13 percent reported losing a friend or family member to murder. But black youth were disproportionately affected—despite comprising 15 percent of the participants, they accounted for 46 percent of homicide survivors.

After adjusting for demographics, participants whose loved ones were victims of homicide had twice the odds of considering the idea of suicide when compared to those who did not lose a friend or family member to [homicide](#). Of those who reported suicidal ideation, the teens whose family or friends were murdered had nearly three-fold higher odds of actually attempting [suicide](#).

"Traumatic loss is one of the greatest barriers for youth to thrive," said Bamwine. "Not only are young people who live in oppressed neighborhoods exposed to disproportionate rates of violence, but they also must wrestle with questions related to death, life, hope and healing. I believe that youth are agents of change, and my ultimate mission is to help young people turn their pain into action by creating spaces for [youth](#) to both process and support others that are grieving."

Provided by University of Pittsburgh Schools of the Health Sciences

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