

Understanding black youth suicide: Steps toward prevention

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While little research exists on how and why the rates of Black youth suicide are rising, research does show the rate of suicide in Black youth younger than 13 years of age is approximately two times higher

compared to white peers. From 2009 to 2019, the percentages of Black youth who considered suicide, made a suicide plan and attempted suicide all increased.

In a statement published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, researchers at the Nationwide Children's Hospital, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the nonprofit research institute RTI International responded to a call from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) requesting information on how to prevent Black [youth](#) suicide. The researchers emphasize the need for research and action of suicide prevention among Black youth must start from the ground up.

"Applying the white-centric lens that has driven existing suicide research is not sufficient to solving the increasing rates of suicide among Black youth," said Arielle Sheftall, Ph.D., lead author of the statement, and principal investigator in the Center for Suicide Prevention and Research in the Big Lots Behavioral Health Pavilion at Nationwide Children's Hospital. "That's why we call for a 'ground zero' approach. We need to look at our basic assumptions and theories about suicide, and assess whether they hold true for Black youth."

The three key points described by the authors include:

1. Set a 'ground' zero research funding agenda prioritizing theory development and tests of culturally relevant [risk factors](#) for Black youth suicide. Risk factors for suicidal behaviors (e.g., depression, trauma) may not apply equally to Black youth compared to white youth. A particular area of concern is the exposure to the murders of unarmed Black men. This exposure has been associated with negative mental health outcomes throughout the Black community, but it is unclear how exposure (either direct or via media coverage) affect Black youth mental health.

2. Fund research aimed at understanding the developmental trajectory of Black youth suicidal ideation and behavior. Because evidence suggests that Black youth may not exhibit expected or "classic" warning signs of suicidal behavior, such as depression, reported suicidal ideation or attempts before dying by suicide, research aimed at understanding the trajectory of suicide should be a priority.

3. Engage trusted [community organizations](#)/institutions in suicide prevention efforts for Black youth. Community interventions, including those in barber and beauty shops, have already been tested to tackle [health issues](#) such as high blood pressure, cardiovascular health and HIV testing. Similar successes could be achieved in mental health, within settings where trust may already exist, such as churches, Black Greek organizations, Boys and Girls Clubs of America, after-school programs and others.

"To understand how disparities in suicide rates are driven, we need to develop and test culturally informed theories of suicide risk and behavior," said Dr. Sheftall. "Identifying unique risks, specifically race-related stressors, will enable us to create more effective prevention tactics."

In the statement, the authors note that common risk factors for suicide, including mental [health](#) problems, may be less likely to precede Black youth suicide, but more research is needed.

"Black youth suicide is on the rise, but our effort to understand it is not keeping pace," said statement author Adam Bryant Miller, Ph.D., research assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and Neurosciences at the UNC-Chapel Hill and researcher at RTI. "We hope this article brings more attention to the issue and motivates communities and funding organizations to support research and outreach related to Black youth [suicide](#) prevention."

Provided by Nationwide Children's Hospital

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