

Black college students who turn to their faith think less about suicide, finds study

January 31 2023, by Janelle R. Goodwill



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Black college students who resorted to self-blame when faced with stress were also more likely to experience suicidal thoughts within the past year. This is in comparison to those who were less likely to resort to self-

blame.

But those who turned to their faith to cope with stress were less likely to think about taking their own lives.

These are just two of the key findings from a [study](#) on Black students' mental health that I published in 2022. I initially conducted this work for my dissertation, analyzing previously collected surveys of 400 Black [college students](#) in the U.S. All participants were 18 to 35 years old. The overarching goal of this study was to examine the relationship between depression and suicidal ideation—or thoughts of suicide—to better understand how to disrupt the relationship between the two.

While the [suicide rates](#) for [white children](#) between ages 5 and 11 decreased slightly—going from 1.14 to 0.77 per 1 million from 1993 to 2012—suicide rates for Black children of the same age [nearly doubled](#). Specifically, they went from 1.36 to 2.54 per 1 million during the same time frame.

Further, an analysis of data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey showed that [suicide attempts rose 73%](#) for Black [high school students](#) between 1991 and 2017.

A more recent report indicates that deaths by suicide among 15-to-17-year-old Black youths [increased 4.9% between 2003 and 2017](#), with suicides increasing 6.6% in Black girls and 2.8% in Black boys.

My colleague and I published a related study in 2020 in which we found that in a survey of more than 150,000 college students, the odds of attempting suicide within the past 12 months were [1.48 times greater for Black students](#) than for white students.

Therefore, it seems that if Black students are experiencing increased risk

for suicide both before and during their time in college, additional safeguards may be needed to help Black students cope with the various stressors they encounter not just during their time on campus, but throughout all stages of development.

For these reasons, I believe it is important for educators and those who support Black students to understand that experiencing persistent feelings of self-blame is potentially harmful to students' mental health.

Examples of self-blame as measured in this study include asking participants to respond to statements like "I have been blaming myself for things that happened" and "I have been criticizing myself." Other statements, like "I have been trying to find comfort in my religion or [spiritual beliefs](#)" and "I've been praying or meditating," were used to measure Black students' personal engagement with faith, religion and spirituality. While the questions included in this survey offer some insight into connections among self-blame, faith and mental health, I still see a need to explore other aspects of religion that highlight the role that faith plays for young people and their overall well-being.

Therefore, I am working to assess how various practices—such as attending [religious services](#), reading sacred texts, joining faith communities and developing a personal, intimate relationship with God—influence mental health outcomes over time. I believe this will ultimately help identify which specific parts of being religious are most helpful or harmful for Black students as they transition from adolescence to adulthood.

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