

Exposure to gun violence is associated with suicidal behavior in Black adults

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Black adults who have been exposed to gun violence are more likely to have lifetime suicidal ideation, according to a study by Rutgers Health researchers.

The study, [published](#) in *JAMA Network Open*, found that Black adults who were shot, threatened with a gun, knew someone who was shot or

witnessed or heard about a shooting are at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behavior.

Nearly 49,000 people died because of [gun violence](#) in 2021, the highest number of gun-related deaths ever recorded, and about 85,000 nonfatal shootings occurred. During the same year, the overall suicide rate increased by 44 percent among the Black population. However, few studies until now have examined the association between interpersonal gun violence exposure and risk for suicide in the Black population.

"The recent increase in [suicide rates](#) among Black Americans calls for a deeper understanding of the underlying causes," said Daniel Semenza, director of interpersonal violence research at the New Jersey Gun Violence Research Center (GVRC), based at Rutgers Public Health. "It's crucial to explore how disproportionate exposure to high levels of gun violence may be impacting [mental health](#) and contributing to the elevated risk of suicide."

Researchers surveyed 3,015 Black adults, 56 percent of whom were exposed to at least one type of gun violence and 12 percent who were exposed to at least three types. They found that being threatened with a gun or knowing someone who has been shot was associated with lifetime [suicidal ideation](#) and attempts. Being shot was associated with the individual at least once making preparations for suicide.

"Violence is damaging to mental health," Semenza said. "Our study found that exposure to gun violence, whether experienced directly or indirectly, is associated with increased suicidal thoughts and behaviors among Black adults. This suggests a possible connection between interpersonal violence and self-directed violence."

"These findings highlight how exposure to gun violence—especially repeated exposure—may influence an individual's likelihood of thinking

about suicide or even engaging in suicidal behavior," says Mike Anestis, GVRC [executive director](#) and co-author. "Given the disproportionate risk of gun violence exposure among Black adults, this means the Black community is experiencing a uniquely high risk of encountering an environment that could lead to tragedy."

More information: Daniel C. Semenza et al, Gun Violence Exposure and Suicide Among Black Adults, *JAMA Network Open* (2024). [DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2023.54953](#).
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Provided by Rutgers University

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