



**Tennessee Suicide
Prevention Network**

"Saving Lives in Tennessee"

Suicide and Black Americans

NOTE: As stipulated by the Office of Management and Budget, the terms "Black" and "African American" denote people with origins in any of the Black racial groups of Africa, including those residing in or with ties to the Caribbean.

- In 2012, suicide was the third-leading cause of death within the 10-24 age group, as compared to the second-leading cause nationally. This ranking is the same for Tennessee.
- At 5.46 per 100,000 population, the national suicide rate for Blacks of all ages was slightly less than half of the overall U.S. rate of 12.94.
- Between 2008 and 2012, there were an average of 60 suicide deaths among African-Americans in Tennessee, at a rate of 5.54 per 100,000 (compared to the white rate of 15.10).
- Firearms are the leading method of suicide death among African-Americans nationwide, accounting for 49% of the national total.
- The average age of Black suicide decedents is in the mid-thirties, ten years younger than their white counterparts..
- Suicide rates among Black Americans can differ by ethnicity. Among adult males, Caribbean Blacks have higher rates of suicide attempts than African American Blacks. But the trend is reversed among teenage boys—within this age cohort, African American Blacks are about five times more likely than Caribbean Blacks to attempt suicide.
- The 2013 Tennessee Youth Risk Behavior Survey found that Black high school students report slightly lower rates of certain suicidal behaviors, such as serious suicidal thoughts and actively planning an attempt. But the rate of attempts is the same as the general high school population. It suggests that these attempts are more likely to impulsive in nature.
- Research has linked religious devotion and participation in organized religious practices, such as church attendance, to reduced suicide risk in African Americans. However, these communities often regard depression as a constitutional weakness and condemn suicide as a sin, adding an unneeded burden to people and families dealing with these issues.
- Family and peer support, along with general community connectedness have been shown to help protect black Americans, both adolescents and adults, from suicidal behavior. Meanwhile, negative interaction with family members was associated with increased suicidal behavior, and being divorced or widowed has been significantly associated with increased odds of suicidal ideation compared with being married or never married. Additionally, increased acculturation into White society, which can include loss of family cohesion and support, has been linked to increased risk for suicidal ideation and attempts.
- Among black youth, perceived racism and discrimination along with social and economic disadvantage may lead to having no hope for the future, which is a risk factor for suicide.
- Suicide is regarded as a problem of middle-class whites, and there are tendencies within the black community to idealize their men as too strong to take their own lives and their women as too resilient to crack under pressure. While these beliefs may offer some degree of a protective factor, they may also dissuade troubled individuals and their loved ones from seeking needed interventions and compromise community mental health outreach efforts.
- While current surveys put the rate of mental illness among black Americans at roughly equal to that of whites, a report from the Office of the U.S. Surgeon General suggests higher rates might be evident if researchers were more inclined to include psychiatric hospitals, prisons, and poor rural communities in their analyses.
- Studies have found that Black Americans are less likely to seek or receive psychiatric services when experiencing suicidal thoughts or attempts. Furthermore, a 2007 study published in the *Archives of General Psychiatry* found that less than half of African Americans and less than a quarter of Caribbean Blacks with major depression receive treatment, and they generally receive poorer quality care than white Americans.

Sources: Suicide Prevention Resource Center, Tennessee Department of Health, American Association of Suicidology, National Organization for People of Color Against Suicide, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, *Journal of the American Medical Association*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Archives of General Psychology*, *Deviant Behavior*, *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*.

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