

Title: Black Suicide Survey Finds Faith, Family Keep Rate Low
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African Americans suffer higher rates than whites of almost every disease and cause of death. Except one: suicide.

New research shows that support from friends, family and faith provides a powerful buffer against suicide in the black community, especially among those 65 and older, the age group with the highest suicide rate in the nation.

"One of the most exciting things about this study is that there are protective factors like religious faith and social support," said Joan Cook, lead author of the study and a psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania and the Philadelphia Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

According to the latest statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide rates among senior citizens are highest for those who are divorced or widowed. For that age group, the rate of suicide among white men is nearly three times greater than for African American men, and almost seven times more than for white women.

Beulah Otey, 74, of North Philadelphia, was in a Bible study class at the Lehigh Senior Center when her husband died a few years ago. After his death, she said, she continued to rely on the Bible and her Christian faith to sustain her.

"I never let go of my religion," she said. "I kept the faith."

In many ways, she is emblematic of the respondents in Cook's latest research.

The study, published in the July-August issue of the American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry, found that older African Americans who have religious and spiritual beliefs and support from family and the community are much less inclined to attempt suicide.

Researchers interviewed 835 African American senior citizens who lived in a Baltimore public housing development. The residents were asked questions to not only determine whether they were candidates for suicide, but also to plumb the extent of religion and family and social networks in their lives.

Almost 97 percent of those interviewed did not have an inclination toward suicide. About 3 percent did. Approximately 91 percent of those not suicidal said religion and social support were important in their lives. In the suicidal group, about 67 percent said the same.

Cook said the difference was \"significant.\"

Experts on suicide concur with the results of the study.

\"I'm not sure if it is a belief in God or a social connectedness that a faith community provides, but they are protective factors,\" said Mark Kaplan, associate professor of community health at Portland (Ore.) State University.

Seniors generally turn to suicide because of depression, chronic illness, and a sense of abandonment, Kaplan said. Depression can be particularly debilitating because they often cannot afford mental-health care, he said, because of Medicare's limitations.

Cook said the next step was for researchers and clinicians to address those problems.

\"[These] mental disorders often go unrecognized and untreated,\" she said. \"We have to understand and help meet their needs.\"

Experts speculate that white men may have higher suicide rates not only because of cultural differences but because of greater access to firearms.

Historically, suicide has been seen by African Americans as a white option, not a black one, said Donna Holland Barnes, president and cofounder of the National Organization of People of Color Against Suicide.

Barnes, a sociology professor, began her suicide research after her son, Marc Jamal, 20, took his life by driving his car into a Massachusetts river in 1990.

\"Unfortunately, in our community, we looked at suicide not as an illness but as a weakness,\" Barnes said.

\"It was the way we were raised. We had to get hope to get out of slavery. The Bible was the only thing we could depend on.

\"Church is someplace where many African Americans can gain power. It gives them a reason to get up in the morning,\" Barnes said. \"It gives them a sense of responsibility. Once you know you are needed and have a sense of responsibility, you think of others and not just yourself.\"

Among local African Americans, the study's findings were not surprising. Family, community, religion, and even the struggle for equality were mentioned as suicide deterrents by people at two senior centers, the Lehigh Center at 17th Street and Lehigh Avenue, and the Spring Garden Center at 12th and Spring Garden Streets.

Palmer Lee Warren, 90, said: \"[Through history], our people caught hell. Everything was against them. When [that happens], we come together and develop a strength.\"

Mary McMillian, 74, said: \"The African American has always been under stress. They had to learn to cope with that stress.\"

Between older black men and women, the latter have a much lower rate of suicide.

\"Black women have to take care of their families,\" Crippen said. \"They have no time to think about suicide.\"

The method used for attempting suicide is a big reason for the higher suicide rate among men, Kaplan said.

Guns are more likely to be used by men, especially white men, he said, while women use less violent methods. In fact, more women nationwide attempt suicide, but more men succeed.