

Suicide Among African American Men

Sean Joe, MSW, PhD and Mark S. Kaplan, DrPH

Charles Prudhomme, in one of his most important articles published in 1938, *The Problem of Suicide in the American Negro*, provides one of the earliest analysis of suicide among African Americans. Prudhomme found lower rates of suicide among African Americans than among Whites. His work, derived primarily from case studies, offers an account of both the risk and protective factors for African American suicide. Prudhomme argued that, compared to those of Whites, the lower suicide rates among African Americans were the result of religious and cultural differences, living in the south, and the degree to which they shared similar experiences as Whites regarding social advancement. He hypothesized that as African Americans assimilated into the dominant culture, the more susceptible they would become to the cultural beliefs, experiences, and risk factors associated with suicidal behavior among Whites.

Social and behavioral scientists, relying on Prudhomme's ideas, continue to examine the role that psychological and social factors contribute to the onset of suicidal behavior among African Americans. In spite of progress, the epidemiological patterns and risk factors associated with suicide among African Americans remains poorly understood (Davis, 1982; Gibbs, 1997; Kung, Xi, & Juon, 1998; Stacks, 1996). One reason less attention has been given to suicidal behavior among African Americans is that historically lower suicide rates have been reported for them despite the many prejudices and social obstacles they face in everyday life (Gibbs, 1997). Compounding this tendency to exclude African Americans has been the absence of reliable race-specific

data (Gibbs, 1997; Phillips & Ruth, 1993; Prudhomme, 1938; Warshauer & Monk, 1978). From a policy perspective, the problem of suicide among White men has for some time dominated the national public health agenda (Department of Health and Human Services Healthy People 1991, 2000). Furthermore, within the African American community, suicide itself is an awkward topic of discussion for both cultural and religious reasons (Early, 1992).

This paper presents both early and recent empirical contributions to the scholarship on African American suicide, particularly among African American men. The paper discusses the secular trends in suicide completion and method-specific suicide patterns; the prevalence of ideation and attempts; suicide-related risk factors for African Americans; evidence-based recommendations for suicide prevention; the need for epidemiological surveillance that is more effective and preventive interventions targeted at the risk conditions young African American men face today.

SUICIDE

An examination of the epidemiology of suicide among African Americans reveals two distinct patterns related to gender and age. Although African Americans' rate of suicide (6.2 per 100,000) is lower than whites (12.4 per 100,000), the risk of suicide appears to be greater for men in the African American population than their counterparts in the white population. In 1997, the ratio of male to fe-

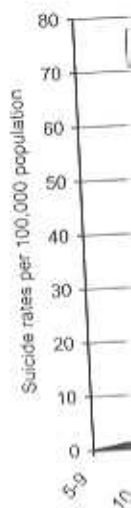


Figure 1. Suicide Rates by Race and Gender
Source: CDC, National Center for Health Statistics

male suicide rates for 1997 was 6:1, which was consistent with the 4:1 ratio among white men. The 6:1 ratio accounted for 84% of the total among African American men between 1979 and 1997. The 10.9 per 100,000, reverse trend. Beginning in 1979, the rate among African American men was in a declining trend when it increased to 12.5 per 100,000, more recent years, the rate for females decreased to 10.9 per 100,000. In general, regarding the risk of suicide, men are more likely to complete suicide (Griffith and Bell, 1997). The advancement of Psacharopoulos, Kachur, Potter, Jambor, Maris, Berman, & others, we recognize the need for the suicidality among African American men. The public health professionals have not adequately addressed the issue. We need to focus on those who are at risk. The remainder of this paper will focus on African American men.

Sean Joe is at the Center for the Study of Youth Policy, School of Social Work, at the University of Pennsylvania. Mark Kaplan is an Associate Professor, School of Community Health, Portland State University.

Address correspondence to Sean Joe, Center for the Study of Youth Policy, School of Social Work, University of Pennsylvania, 4200 Pine Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104. E-mail: sjoe@ssw.upenn.edu