

Perceptions of Suicide Among African American Youth: Investigating Suicide Risks and Barriers to Help-Seeking

Susan M. Blake, PhD; Amanda E. Borsky, MPP, DrPH Candidate; Alison Dingwall, PhD; Julie Goldstein Grumet, PhD*; Robert W.H. Price, MS*; Mark Edberg, PhD; Veronica Womack, PhD; Olga Acosta-Price, PhD; W. Douglas Evans, PhD
Department of Prevention and Community Health, George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services; D.C. Department of Mental Health*



BACKGROUND

- In 2007, suicide attempts among District of Columbia (DC) youth exceeded the national average (12% vs. 6.9%) (CDC, 2008).
- Suicide risk is associated with other youth risk behaviors. In the past 12 months, more suicidal than non-suicidal DC youth were:
 - In a physical fight at school (28.6% vs. 14.4%)
 - Physically assaulted by a boy/girlfriend (31.0% vs. 12.4%)
 - A victim of school bullying or harassment (56.5% vs. 34.4%) (Blake, Ledsky, Whycoff, et al., 2010).
- Despite high rates of suicide, few studies have examined suicide perceptions among urban African American adolescents.

OBJECTIVE

- DC Department of Mental Health sought to better understand youth perceptions of suicide and the factors associated with suicide and depression risk.

METHODS

- Five focus groups were conducted with African American youth.
 - Ages 14-21 (11 males; 20 females)
 - Attending a DC Summer Youth Employment Program
- Obtained active parent/guardian consent & youth assent (i.e., youth under the age of 18), or youth consent (i.e., 18 years of age or older).
- Transcripts were analyzed using QSR NVivo software and a grounded theory-based coding approach.

FINDINGS

Meaning and Extent of Suicide Problem in DC

Although most youth understood the meaning of suicide, few viewed suicide as a problem compared to homicide.

- *“They can’t handle it anymore, so they take their own lives.”*
- *“Uh-hm; you mostly hear about homicides and people getting shot.”*

Do Kids Talk About Suicide?

While most said they don’t really talk about suicide, some said kids do talk about it in relation to the problems that are bothering them, or it is viewed as a figure of speech.

- *“They don’t talk about killing their self like I wanna to kill myself, I wanna end it all; they probably talk about things that make them want to kill their self.”*
- *“I think--yeah I think they be playing, but I guess because it’s fun; you know people don’t really take you seriously, you know. They don’t take life as seriously as most people do.”*

Experiences with Suicide

Most knew someone who made suicidal threats/gestures, but these behaviors were not always taken seriously.

- *“Like one girl, ... she was just in the house like cutting herself, ...like scratching herself. Like she wasn’t really cutting herself too deep to like kill herself. And she was just like, I am thinking about dying...”*
- *“Back in junior high--had a problem. You didn’t--you couldn’t tell that he was committing suicide or anything like that but out of the blue it then happened because of a family situation. And it was like devastating.”*

Reasons to Think About Suicide

Reasons included emotional consequences (e.g., feeling alienated, unloved, hopeless) of negative interpersonal relationships, including neglect, abuse, bullying, and problems with intimate partners, family, and peers.

- *“... it’s mostly girls--or sometimes boys because you know like it might be their first love and like if their first love breaks their heart or something, they might feel like they don’t want nobody else, or they can’t get nobody else so they kill themselves because of that.”*
- *“If they’re alone, and if like the stuff they did wasn’t good enough to fit into what they wanted to be fit in, they would take their life because they think like they’re not wanted...”*

Suicide & Other Self-Destructive Behaviors

Reasons included to fit in/be accepted, show off/look better, avoid being seen as weak, prove you’re not afraid to die, and kill yourself before others hurt/kill you.

- *“They wear guns and stuff. To show how ‘hood’ they are -- how gangster they are-- how 30’s. To show how hood they are.”*
- *“Most of the time kids just do stuff just to fit in.”*

Help Seeking (Who, Barriers, Benefits)

Help seeking barriers included distrust, stigma, and confidentiality concerns.

- *“...they don’t want to tell people their business or they think if they tell one person, everybody will know about how they feel and they’ll treat them different.”*
- *“You might not trust that person. You might not trust nobody, so you just keep it to yourself ...”*

CONCLUSIONS & APPLICATION

- Top 5 reasons youth think about suicide:
 1. Partner relationships (e.g., boyfriend/girlfriend, sexual)
 2. Personal and emotional consequences (e.g., not fitting in, abandonment, unloved, alone, alienated)
 3. Life stresses/circumstances (e.g., stress, loss, finances)
 4. Family relationships
 5. Neglect, abuse, bullying, harassment.
- Findings contributed to the development of a social marketing campaign designed to promote positive coping strategies and prosocial behaviors, and increase awareness of mental health resources to prevent suicide.



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS /CONTACTS

- Funded by SAMHSA; Grant No.: SM059169.
- This poster reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily those of SAMHSA or HHS.
 - Susan Blake (PI), smlake@gwu.edu
 - Amanda Borsky, aborsky@gwu.edu