Suicide Attempts Are on the Rise Among Black Teens

Officials call for the establishment of a task force to investigate Black youth suicide.

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In 2017, suicide was the third-leading cause of death among Black youth ages 15 to 19, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Now, new findings published in the journal Pediatrics reveal that more Black teens are attempting suicide, reports New York University (NYU).

For the study, scientists from NYU's McSilver Institute for Poverty Policy and Research reviewed data from the CDC's nationally representative school-based Youth Risk Behavior Survey spanning 1991 through 2017. (The information gathered by this annual overview helps public health and education professionals monitor and address health-related behaviors that contribute to the leading causes of death and disability among youth and adults.)

Results showed that self-reported suicide attempts increased for Black teens but decreased among teens of other races. In addition, researchers noted that adolescent Black females disclosed attempting suicide at increasingly alarming rates despite an overall decline in efforts by females to harm themselves. Scientists also observed a significant increase in injuries to Black male teens from their suicide attempts. (Surprisingly, researchers noticed that self-reported suicidal thoughts and plans decreased while actual attempts increased.)

The findings prompted New York state health and government officials to call for action to address Black youth suicide—for example, creating a state task force and expanding suicide prevention efforts to include the effects of structural and racist violence on this demographic.

"Further research must be done into why traditional precursors to suicide attempts, such as thinking about it or making plans, are decreasing while actual attempts are going up," said Michael Lindsey, PhD, MPH, the executive director of the institute and the study's lead author. "It's important that we identify the signs before young people attempt to end their lives."

For related coverage, read "Suicide Rates Climb Among Young Girls" and "Suicide Rates on the Rise Among Young Black Children."

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