

Risk and Protective Factors: Black Populations

Black and *African American* are terms used to describe people descended from any of the Black racial groups of Africa.¹ In this information sheet we use the term “Black.”

This sheet covers the common risk and protective factors for Black populations. For data on suicidal thoughts and behaviors and suicide deaths in these populations, go to the web page “Black Populations.”

Risk Factors

Across all racial and ethnic populations, some of the most significant risk factors are:^{2, 3}

- Prior suicide attempt(s)
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Mood and anxiety disorders
- Access to lethal means

For individuals who are already at risk, a “triggering” event causing shame or despair may make them more likely to attempt suicide. These events may include relationship problems and breakups, problems at work, financial hardships, legal difficulties, and worsening health.

In addition, research has shown the following to be among the most significant risk factors in Black populations.

Marital status: Among Black American people, being divorced or widowed has been significantly associated with increased odds of suicidal ideation compared with being married or never married.⁴

Family conflict: Negative interaction with family members was associated with increased suicidal behavior among Black adults. The effect was more pronounced among Caribbean Black adults than among African American adults.⁵

One study noted that Black adolescents reporting parental conflict were 6.4 times more likely to attempt suicide than Black adolescents who did not report parental conflict.⁶

Acculturation: Increased acculturation into White society, which can include loss of family cohesion and support, leads to increased risk for suicidal ideation⁷ and suicide attempts.⁸

Hopelessness, racism, and discrimination: 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.⁹

Mental health services access and use: In a study using a nationally representative sample, Black youth were substantially less likely than White youth to have used a mental health service in the year during which they seriously thought about or attempted suicide.¹⁰

In a large national survey, Black people who reported suicidal thoughts or attempts were less likely than White people to seek or receive psychiatric services.¹¹

Percentages of Adults Who Did Not Seek or Receive Any Psychiatric Services in the Year Prior to Having Suicidal Thoughts or Attempts

	Black Adults	White Adults
Suicidal Thoughts	59.7%	42.8%
Suicide Attempts	57.8%	24.1%

Protective Factors

Across all racial and ethnic populations, some of the most significant protective factors are:^{12, 13}

- Effective mental health care
- Connectedness to individuals, family, community, and social institutions
- Problem-solving skills
- Contacts with caregivers

In addition, research has shown the following to be among the most significant protective factors in Black populations.

Religion: Orthodox religious beliefs and personal devotion have been identified as protective against suicide among Black people.¹⁴

Participation in organized religious practices, such as church attendance, is linked to lower suicide risk in the African American population.¹⁵

Among Black people with psychiatric disorders, religiosity has been found to delay age of onset of ideation as well as decrease the number of psychiatric disorders.¹⁶

Social and emotional support: Family support, peer support, and community connectedness have been shown to help protect Black adolescents from suicidal behavior.¹⁷ Similarly, positive interactions and social and family support have been shown to significantly reduce risk for suicide attempts among Black adults.¹⁸

Although emotional support from family decreased the risk of suicide attempts for both the Caribbean Black and African American populations, the impact was stronger in the Caribbean Black population.¹⁹

Black identity: Two small studies of African American women found that having a strong sense of African American identity, heritage, and history was protective against suicide.^{20, 21}

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