WHY ARE SUICIDES OF YOUNG BLACKS INCREASING?

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Despite the common belief that suicide is a problem of whites, recent research emphasizes that it is democratically distributed (1–5). Although the total death rate for suicide among whites exceeds the rate of nonwhites, there are exceptions to this general rule. For example, in recent years the suicide rate of 15- to 19-year-old nonwhite females has exceeded the toll for their white female age peers. At ages 20–24, the suicide rate of nonwhite males has approximated and at times surpassed that of their white male age cohorts (6). Nor is this situation particularly new, as Hendin pointed out in his recent research on New York City black suicides (1, 2). He reported that the suicide rates for New York City blacks of both sexes between the ages of 20 to 35 exceed the white suicide rates. Moreover, this higher youthful nonwhite rate has been documented for more than 50 years, which is as long as such records have been kept in New York City.

Suicide rates, nonwhite male, United States, 1910-64
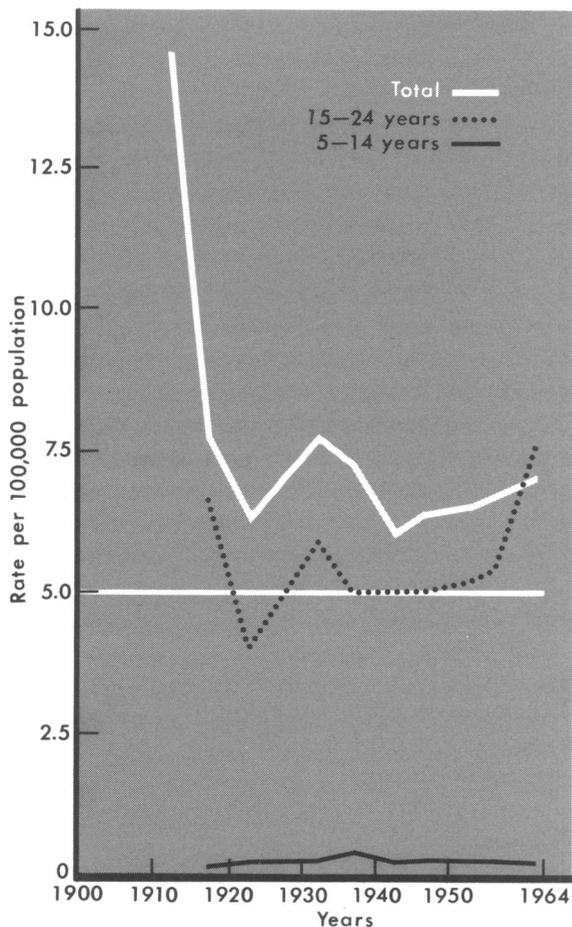
SOURCE: Reference 4.

What emerges from these and other contemporary studies is the striking contrast in age distribution: whereas suicide among whites increases in direct relationship to advancing chronological age, suicide among blacks reaches its peak in the youthful years (see chart). American Indians. are the only other U.S. ethnic group in which a similar peak of suicide at youthful ages has been documented (7). (In this paper, the terms black, nonwhite, and Negro are used interchangeably with an awareness of the political, semantic, and ethnic distinctions among these words.)

The latest available mortality data indicate that the pattern of youthful nonwhite suicide is persisting and that is has become even more pronounced in recent years. On a national level, mortality statistics disclose that the suicide rate for nonwhite males and females, ages 15–34, is now higher than it has been in more than 50 years. Furthermore, during 1966 and 1967 the national suicide rate for nonwhite males, ages 25–29, surpassed the rate of their white age peers (6). Most recently, Peck (3) reported that the suicide rate for young people in Los Angeles County has made a sudden upward surge so that the rate of suicide at ages 20–29 is now higher than it is at ages 30–49. Significantly, 40 percent of all black suicides and 30 percent of all suicides among Chicanos occur within that youthful 20–29 age group (3).

Explanatory Theories

Given these rates, it is no longer feasible to assume that suicide is exclusively a problem of whites, for it most assuredly is not. It is a substantial problem among the nonwhite population, and it is particularly acute because it occurs most frequently at such youthful ages. The time for persuasion about the reality of this situation is past, and it is now time to turn to the consideration of observations from research which may begin to explain this increase. Some of the etiological explanations that have been suggested are urban stresses, status integration, and the phenomenon of fatalistic suicide.

Stresses associated with urbanization. The most dramatic demographic shift in U.S. history has been the internal migration of black Americans from South to North and from rural to urban environments. Comparing population distributions over the past century underscores this striking change. In 1870, 91 percent of all Negroes lived in the South; by 1966 less than 51 percent lived there. In 1871, 81 percent of all Negroes lived in rural areas; by 1960 only 25 percent lived in rural settings (8). Later figures for 1965–67 (9) reveal that 69 percent of the nonwhite population now lives in Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas as compared to 63 percent of the white population. The suicidological significance of this population shift rests upon the consideration that urban suicide rates have usually exceeded the rates in rural areas and that the rates in the northern United States have invariably exceeded rates in the southern United States.

A rise in nonwhite suicide rates associated with urbanization could also be foretold by the knowledge that cities such as Washington, D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles, New York, and Atlanta for many years have had higher suicide rates for nonwhites under 35 than for their white age cohorts

(*10*) and that in cities such as Louisville, Grand Rapids, Evansville, and El Paso the total rates for suicides of nonwhites exceed those of the white population (*11*). Demographers, commenting upon Negro migration to large cities, have explained the consequent rise in suicides as a function of "exposure to new and unfamiliar stresses" (*12*). More specifically, Banks in an article in Ebony pointed the finger at "unemployment, cramped quarters, raw filth, the hunger and cold of many tenements, as the determinants of black rage and suicide" (*10*).

Certainly, unemployment is an example of a particular, largely urban, stress which affects the young black person. Although the rate of unemployment has increased across the board nationally, its effects in the black community have been devastating with unemployment approximately twice as high for blacks as for whites. As for black youths, the rates are literally catastrophic. According to figures from the U.S. Department of Labor, the 1970–71 slump in employment has resulted in a situation where one out of three of the available work force of nonwhite teenagers are unable to find employment (*13*). Although joblessness is no bargain at any age, its effect on young people is in many ways the most severe. At an age beset with problems of self-identity and self-worth, the inability to find and hold meaningful employment can leave permanent psychological scars of the most depressing sort. Indeed, one central fact of urban lower-class Negro life is the inability of Negro men to earn a living which will enable them to support their families adequately. Consequently, as Liebow (*14*) pointed out, the frequency of father-absent households is much higher among urban Negroes of lower socioeconomic classes than for any other portion of the population. Since a number of current studies have indicated the significance of absent or missing fathers to persons who commit suicide (*15, 16*), the high frequency of paternal absence may be a critical factor in the increase of suicide among nonwhite youth.

The difficulties in dealing with new and unfamiliar urban stresses are poignantly presented by Breed in his study of suicides among Negroes in New Orleans (*17*). He cites several cases of persons who killed themselves over problems which could have been easily resolved, given a knowledge of available community resources; for example, legal aid services and those offered by the Internal Revenue Service. There is some question whether community resources were unused because of limited information or because discriminatory practices were anticipated. The question is at best moot, since the persons concerned are dead—driven to suicide when constructive help for their problems was presumably available.

Theory of status integration. This comprehensive sociological theory developed by Gibbs and Martin hinges partly upon the bittersweet realization that constructive social changes may in some ways have destructive consequences (*18*). Durkheim (*19*) was among the first to note that poverty protects a person from committing suicide because if you expect little you are not disappointed when you receive little. But in the past decade, the aspirations of minority groups have been on the rise, and the increase of suicides may be one paradoxical concomitant to the narrowing of racial differences in such areas as occupation and education.

According to the status integration theory, the suicide rate of the population varies inversely with the degree of status integration of that population, but the same factors which lead to social improvement often decrease the degree of status integration. For example, as racial discrimination decreases, the stability of shared social relationships, the sense of community based upon discrimination by a common enemy, is likewise decreased.

Throughout history it has been noted that during times of marked social change there is a confusion of customs and moral codes and a high degree of mobility—old institutions are found inadequate, and there is a breakdown of group unity (*20*). Thus, as individual freedom increases, there is less need to conform to the demands and expectations of others, but this personal freedom brings with it the existential liability of increasing role conflicts, incompatible statuses, and consequently a lower degree of status integration.

Bohannon (*21*) noted in his study of suicide among Africans that the suicide rates in Africa are low because social ties are strong. Little or none of what Durkheim (*19a*) referred to as the egoistic type of suicide, which arises from excessive individuation, exists there. Perhaps these unifying social ties are destroyed as personal aspirations are realized. Could increased suicide be the ticket of admission to the middle class American dream? The psychoanalyst Prudhomme (*22*) concluded that:

The *lower* suicide rate in the American Negro is determined by a number of cultural factors each in its own

way contributing to the reaction. These factors, on analysis, appear to be traceable to the peculiar and psychologically vicious environment which the majority group has imposed on the minority. *As the environment approximates that of the majority, the suicide rate becomes higher.* [Emphasis added.]

Fatalistic suicide. Although the status integration theory indicates that when things get better they get worse in some ways, there is a contradictory theory that explains nonwhite suicides as a response to oppressive discipline, or what Durkheim (19) called fatalistic suicide. Accordingly, Hendin in his recent book (2) proposed that the youthful peaks of both nonwhite suicide and homicide stem from a central factor—the means by which the young black population deals with the rage and violence engendered by discrimination and racial prejudice. Hendin feels that the youthful years 20 to 40 are crisis periods in which you either face life or escape it—yield to uncontrollable rage or scale down your aspirations.

Likewise, Breed (17) in his comparison of white and Negro males who had committed suicide in New Orleans, found that the one area of greatest contrast was a history of problems with authorities, especially the police. Only 10 percent of the whites committing suicide were in trouble with the police and the courts, but more than 50 percent of the Negroes who had committed suicide had had these difficulties. (This differential corresponds to official statistics cited by Cressey (23) which indicate a nonwhite arrest rate three times that of whites and nonwhite prison commitment rate six times that for the white population.)

Because many Negroes view policemen as an oppressive symbol of white authority, the conditions for fatalistic suicide appear abundantly present; that is, " . . . suicide deriving from excessive regulation. . . . that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions choked by oppressive discipline . . ." (19a). Maris (24) made similar observations in his Chicago study. He noted that black youths who committed suicide had had a much greater degree of difficulty with authority in general and police in particular. In contrast to their white counterparts, Maris stated that the black suicides he studied were the outgrowth of retroflexed anger rather than from feelings of hopelessness; of acute crises rather than of pervasive or long established problems; more prone to blame others than themselves for their frustrations.

This attitude, of course, is a behavioral pattern typically associated with high homicide rates, and in fact there are some who feel that for the young

nonwhite the choice between homicide and suicide may be extremely fortuitous. If so, it makes psychodynamic sense that victim-precipitated homicide—those cases in which the victim was the first to strike a blow, use physical force, or produce a deadly weapon—is most frequent in the lower class nonwhite population (25). With sophisticated psychological autopsy procedures, I believe such cases of equivocal death could theoretically be reassigned from homicide to suicide. If this were the case, the total rates of white and nonwhite suicides would move even closer together.

A corollary topic concerns the possibility that militant revolutionary activities and the increase of young nonwhite suicides are interrelated. Hendin (1, 2) stated that black nationalistic activities may have constructive effects for persons by allowing an external socially acceptable method for channeling personal feelings of rage and anger. On the whole, Hendin may well be correct since the salutary effects of militant devotion to a common cause have been well documented in wars. In both World Wars the suicide rate dropped markedly, probably because of the galvanized sense of community which develops from a shared sense of purpose and common goals. But there has been some question whether the wartime heroics of individuals might not camouflage personal self-destructive drives. Certainly a reasonable distinction can be made between the soldier who falls upon a grenade, altruistically sacrificing his life to save his comrades, and the soldier who constantly volunteers for the most hazardous assignments, takes excessively dangerous risks, and exposes himself to unnecessary harm. Analogously, I speculated in 1970 that the same situation also might occur in revolutionary cadres (5).

Persons prone to impulsive and undisciplined behavior are not welcomed by revolutionary groups because of the obvious threat they pose to the achievement of group goals. Nonetheless, such persons sometimes gain access to these organizations, necessitating occasional purges. Therefore, one must consider whether there are instances in which some persons take it upon themselves to provoke and engage in kamikaze-like activities, such as sniping or police shootouts against overwhelming odds—a type of masked self-destructive behavior dynamically related to the phenomenon of victim-precipitated homicide. This behavior does not by any stretch of an illogical imagination mean that police harassment and brutality, such as the Chicago police shooting of Fred Hampton, can

Increasing numbers of troubled young black women are committing suicide

in any way be justified. It simply means that such groups as the Black Panthers should be taken seriously when they call for "Revolutionary suicide—that's suicide motivated by the desire to change the system, or else die trying to change the reactionary conditions" (26). Whether this statement is simply provocative rhetoric similar to the rightwing slogan "better dead than red," or whether it is a valid suicidal threat, remains unanswered.

Recommendations

1. The most obvious recommendation, no less valid for its apparentness, is that more research is needed to sift out the validity of these sometimes contradictory explanations. In particular, the investigation of these problems by black behavioral scientists and suicidologists would be helpful. Although unfortunate, it is nonetheless true that a black investigator will have greater entree into the black community, be able to establish rapport more easily, and perhaps be able to contribute valuable personal insights to these questions.

2. Among the research which would help to narrow down the critical determinants are studies of such variables as social class, stresses of urbanization, and militant activities. A discussion of these follows.

Social class. If the rise in nonwhite suicides is to be explained by the theory of status integration, one would expect the increase of nonwhite suicides to occur largely among middle class and upwardly mobile members of the population. Conversely, if fatalistic suicides were responsible for the increased rates, one would predict that the bulk of suicides would occur among the lower socioeconomic classes, particularly those in difficulties with the police and other authorities.

Stresses of urbanization. Demographic data on employment status, years of urban residency, and absence or presence of a father or father-surrogate in the home should be routinely collected to evaluate whether joblessness, recent urban migration, and father-separated households play a significant role in the suicides of young nonwhites.

Militant activities. The incidence of suicide among members of revolutionary organizations needs to be evaluated. Although past experience indicates that such involvement should have benign effects, there remains the possibility that some individual members may be driven by desperation and despair to bargain suicidally with their lives in an effort to effect meaningful social change.

3. Because of the increase in nonwhite suicides, there should be a determined outreach program on the part of suicide prevention centers extended to the black community, especially the youthful segment. The prognosis is relatively hopeful for a number of reasons. Crisis situations tend to be transient, there is a lack of long-established characterological problems, and there is a youthful client population, all factors which indicate excellent opportunities for preventive programs.

4. In the absence of the proposed research, certain steps should be taken right now to modify possible suicidogenic factors. For example, steps such as programs to combat the personal ravages

associated with unemployment, and this does not mean simply training for jobs which are being phased out of the economy or will not be available to trainees upon graduation. We must recognize that the concept of training for work in a highly technological society is in need of radical revision. Whatever the type of employment, the point is not simply to provide "make-work" but to give young people the opportunity to participate, feel useful, and be involved in a meaningful way.

We need educational programs to advise citizens of available community resources and to make these resources accessible and readily available. Increasing one's awareness that facilities exist is but a first step in the process. The use of such facilities could be greatly improved by locating them in the urban ghettos and keeping them open evenings and weekends so that those persons fortunate enough to be employed can use these services without fear of losing their jobs.

Police-community relations urgently need improvement, especially between those militant groups and police departments which display mutually hostile and dangerous attitudes and practices toward one another. The admission of more black officers to our metropolitan police forces, the appointment of more minority group members to police commissions and other policy making boards, increased police training in human behavior, and provisions for police-community dialog are all sorely needed.

Big Brother programs and other resources which provide male-surrogate figures would help to alleviate the problems encountered by youngsters growing up in fatherless homes.

All these suggestions apply to the general quality of life and are necessary for our survival, not only as persons but also as a nation committed to individual justice and human dignity.

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