

# Black Youth Suicide: Exploring a Public Health Crisis and the Role of Racial Trauma

**Danielle Busby, PhD and Dana Cunningham, PhD**  
**Black Mental Wellness**

**June 6, 2023 12:00 PM**

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**MHTTC**

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

The purpose of the MHTTC Network is technology transfer - disseminating and implementing evidence-based practices for mental disorders into the field.

Funded by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the MHTTC Network includes 10 Regional Centers, a National American Indian and Alaska Native Center, a National Hispanic and Latino Center, and a Network Coordinating Office.

Our collaborative network supports resource development and dissemination, training and technical assistance, and workforce development for the mental health field. We work with systems, organizations, and treatment practitioners involved in the delivery of mental health services to strengthen their capacity to deliver effective evidence-based practices to individuals. Our services cover the full continuum spanning mental illness prevention, treatment, and recovery support.

# MHTTC Network

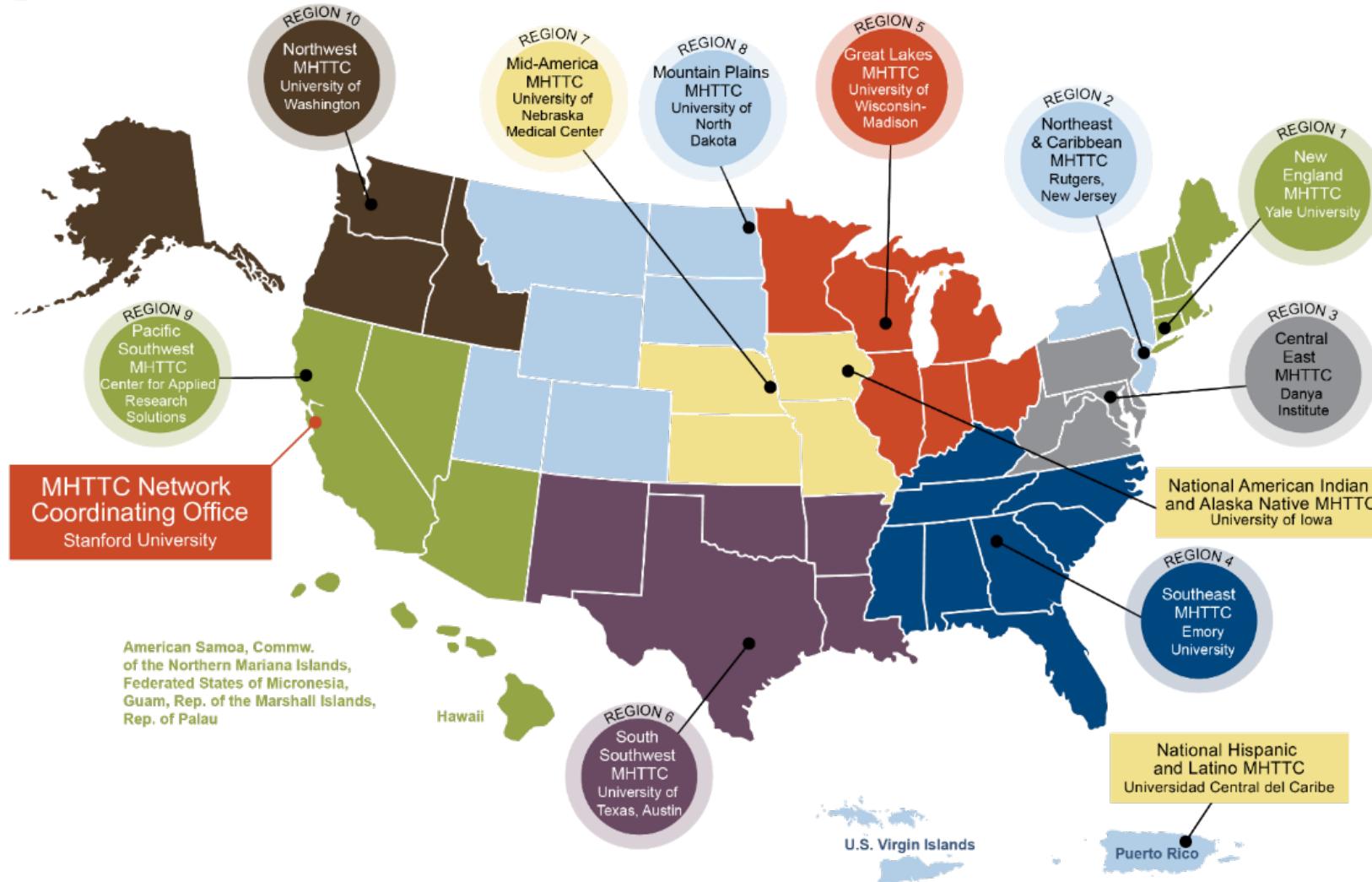


MHTTC

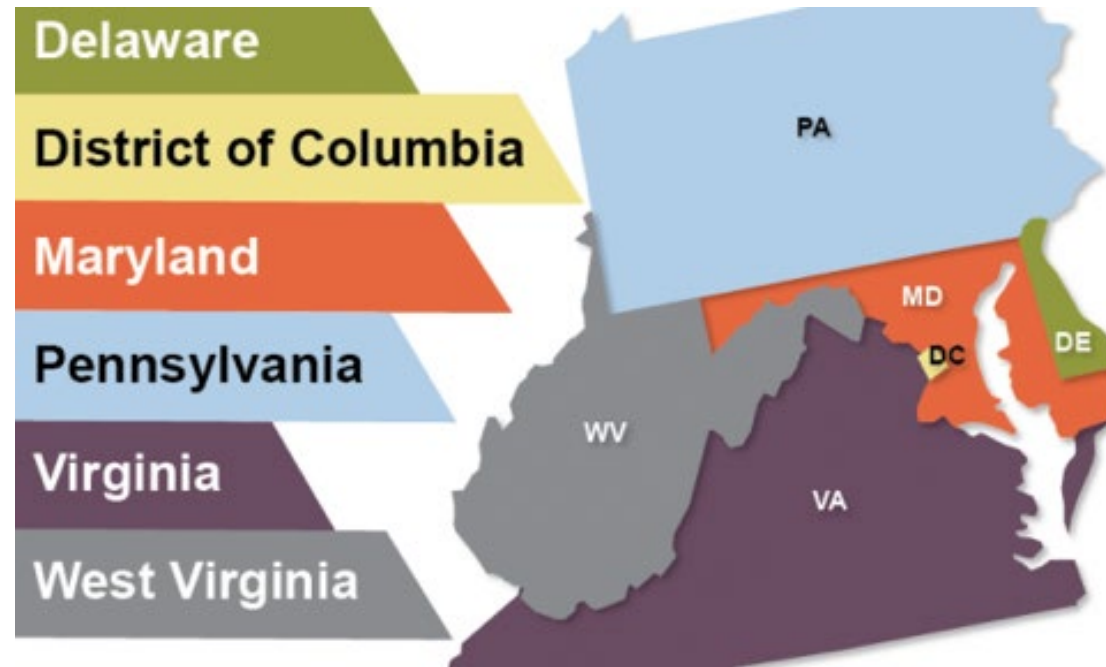
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# Central East Region 3



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**MHTTC**

Mental Health Technology Transfer Center Network

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The MHTTC Network uses affirming, respectful and recovery-oriented language in all activities. That language is:

STRENGTHS-BASED  
AND HOPEFUL

INCLUSIVE AND  
ACCEPTING OF  
DIVERSE CULTURES,  
GENDERS,  
PERSPECTIVES,  
AND EXPERIENCES

HEALING-CENTERED AND  
TRAUMA-RESPONSIVE

INVITING TO INDIVIDUALS  
PARTICIPATING IN THEIR  
OWN JOURNEYS

PERSON-FIRST AND  
FREE OF LABELS

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AVOIDING ASSUMPTIONS

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At the time of this publication, Miriam E. Delphin-Rittmon, Ph.D, served as Assistant Secretary for Mental Health and Substance Use in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Administrator of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

The opinions expressed herein are the views of the authors and do not reflect the official position of the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), SAMHSA. No official support or endorsement of DHHS, SAMHSA, for the opinions described in this document is intended or should be inferred.

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Presented 2023



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# Black Mental Wellness, Corp.

- **Dr. Nicole L. Cammack:**  
President & CEO
- **Dr. Danielle R. Busby:**  
Professional Relations & Liaison
- **Dr. Dana L. Cunningham:**  
Community Outreach & Engagement
- **Dr. Jessica S. Henry:**  
Program Development & Evaluation



# Black Mental Wellness, Corp.

## The Mission of Black Mental Wellness

- To provide information and resources about mental health and behavioral health topics from a Black perspective
- To highlight and increase the diversity of mental health professionals
- To decrease the mental health stigma in the Black community

[Black Mental Wellness website](#)



# Series on Suicide in Black Youth

March 1, 2023:

[Social Influencers of Health and Suicide in Black Youth](#)

April 4, 2023:

[Shame and Stigma: Re-imagining Masculinity and Strength for Black Boys](#)

May 2, 2023:

[Barriers and Risk Factors for Black LGBTQ+ Youth: Suggestions for Improving their Lived Experiences](#)

June 6, 2023:

Black Youth Suicide: Exploring a Public Health Crisis and the Role of Racial Trauma

# Objectives

1. Identify suicidal risk characteristics and how they differ from suicide warning signs
2. Define racial trauma and name at least three common race-based stressors for Black youth
3. Identify strategies to help Black youth respond to race-based stressors
4. Identify ways to support youth who have a high number of suicidal risk characteristics



# • STOP when you notice heightened emotions

- **S**low Down
- **T**ake some deep breaths
- **O**bserve what you are feeling in your body
- **P**rocess and proceed

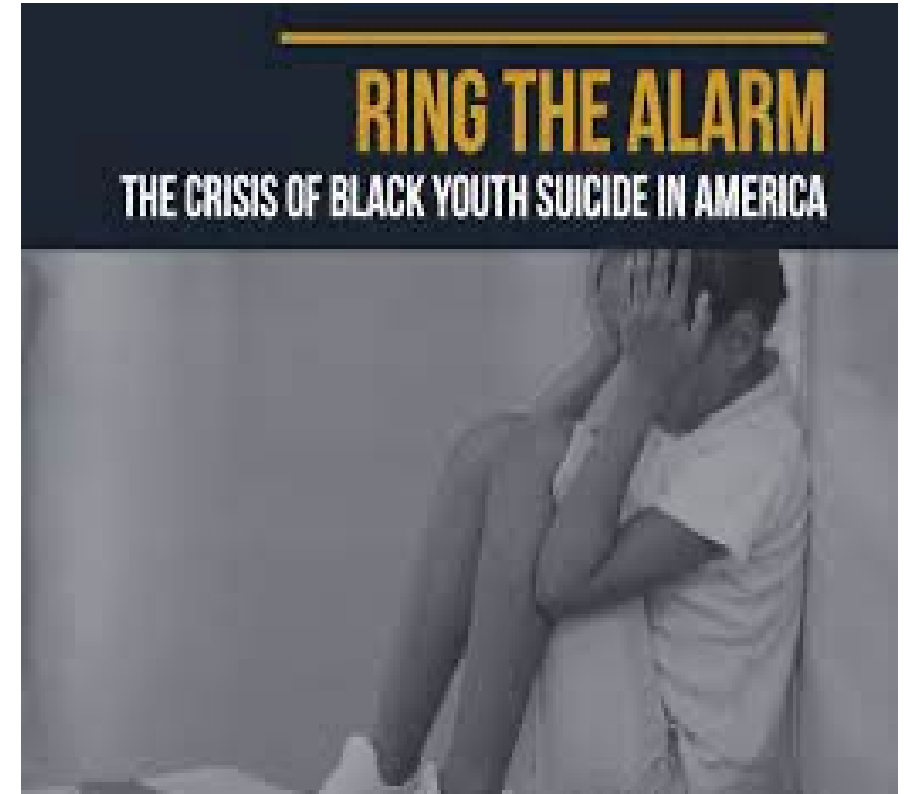




# Suicide in Black Youth: A State of Emergency

Death by suicide is a serious public health issue for children in the United States

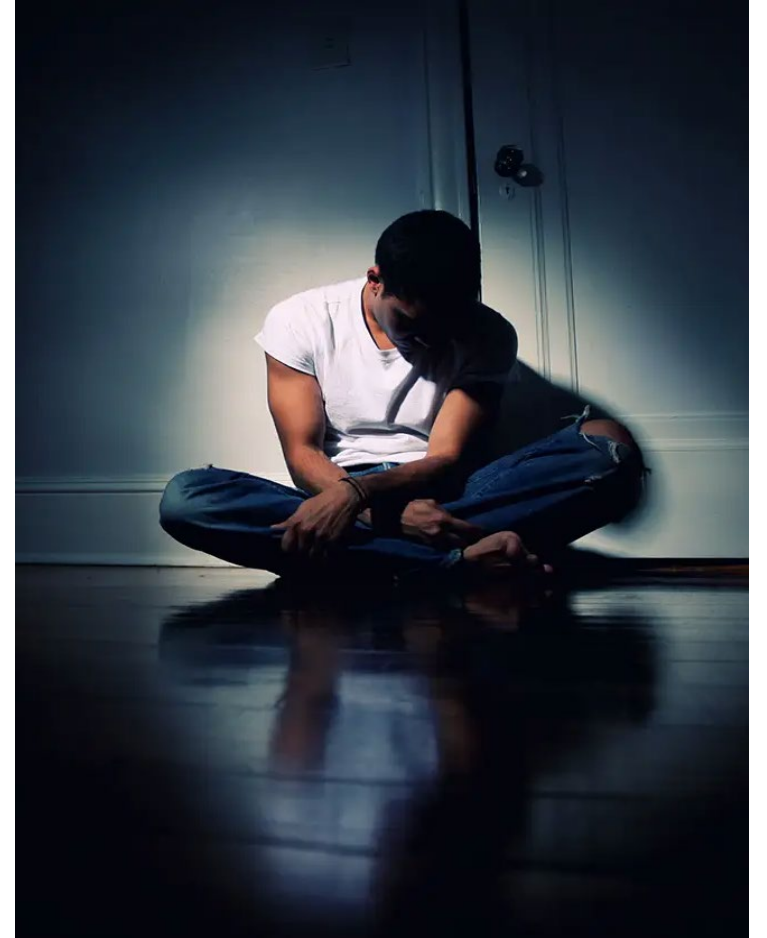
**The Congressional Black Caucus** convened an emergency Taskforce in 2019 and released its report, *Ring the Alarm, The Crisis of Black Youth Suicide in America*, as a call to action to increase research on **suicide prevention for Black youth** (Congressional Black Caucus, 2019)



# Suicide in Black Youth: A State of Emergency

- Suicide rate of youth aged 5-12 is almost twice as high for Black youth compared to white youth (CDC, 2018)
- Suicide rate among 10-17 increased by 70% between 2006 and 2016
- Between 2018 – 2021, suicide rate among 10 -24 year olds increased by 37%
- Highest rate of suicide attempts have been reported by Black girls in last two years of YRBS data collection (CDC, 2022)

- Black youth who do come to clinical attention **are often diagnosed with behavioral problems, rather than other mental health conditions** that identify an increased risk for suicide
- Black youth **are more likely to receive poor quality care and are less likely to receive follow-up care** after discharge from crisis or hospital services
- These well-documented inequities in health care foster distrust in health care systems, **limiting opportunities for prevention, identification, and timely intervention**



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**Risk factors:** Risk factors indicate that someone is at heightened risk for suicide, but indicate little or nothing about immediate risk

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**Warning signs:** Warning signs indicate an imminent risk of suicide and may require prompt intervention

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*What's  
the  
difference?*

# Risk Factors for Suicide in Black Youth

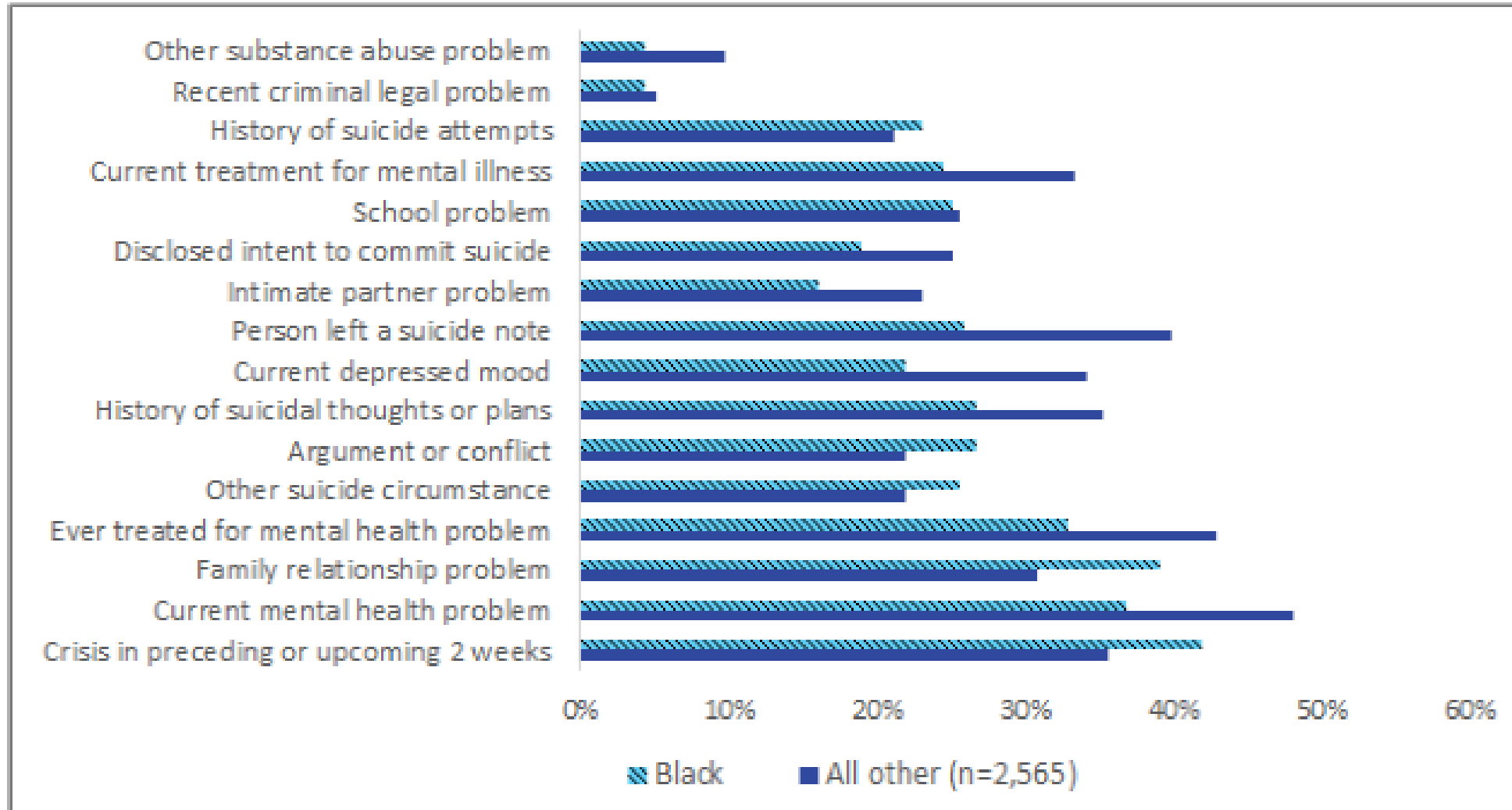
Interpersonal problems with family and friends

Higher rates of ADHD

Social determinants of health:

- Lower SES
- Lower educational achievement
- Unemployment
- Living in high poverty neighborhoods and homelessness
- Homelessness
- Racial discrimination

**Figure B-2. Circumstances\* preceding suicide among children aged 10 to 17, by race—United States, 2014–2017**



# Common Warning Signs of Suicide

Express desire to die

Marked changes in behavior

- Significant changes in sleep (increased or decreased)
- Increased irritability or agitation

Statements of extreme  
hopelessness/overwhelm

- “I don’t want to be a burden.”
- “I can’t deal with this anymore.”

Significant change in mood

Giving away possessions

# Common Warning Signs May Not be Present for Many Black Youth

- Black youth who have died by suicide were more likely to be diagnosed with behavior problems and not depression (AACAP, 2022)
- Black youth were almost 3 times as likely to report suicide attempts and not express suicidal ideation or plans compared to white youth (Romanelli et al., 2021)
- Only about a third of Black youth who have died by suicide were in mental health treatment or had a documented mental health problem (Sheftall, Vakil, Ruch et al., 2021)



# The Impact of Racism

# Types of Racism

## Systemic

- Under-resourced communities

## Institutional

- School discipline policies
- Higher representation of Black boys in special education

## Interpersonal

- Bullying
- Teasing

## Internalized

- “I hate the color of my skin.”

# Racial Trauma

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Dangerous or frightening race-based events, stressors, or discrimination that “overwhelm one’s coping capacity and impacts quality of life and/or cause fear, helplessness, and horror...” (Carter, 2007)

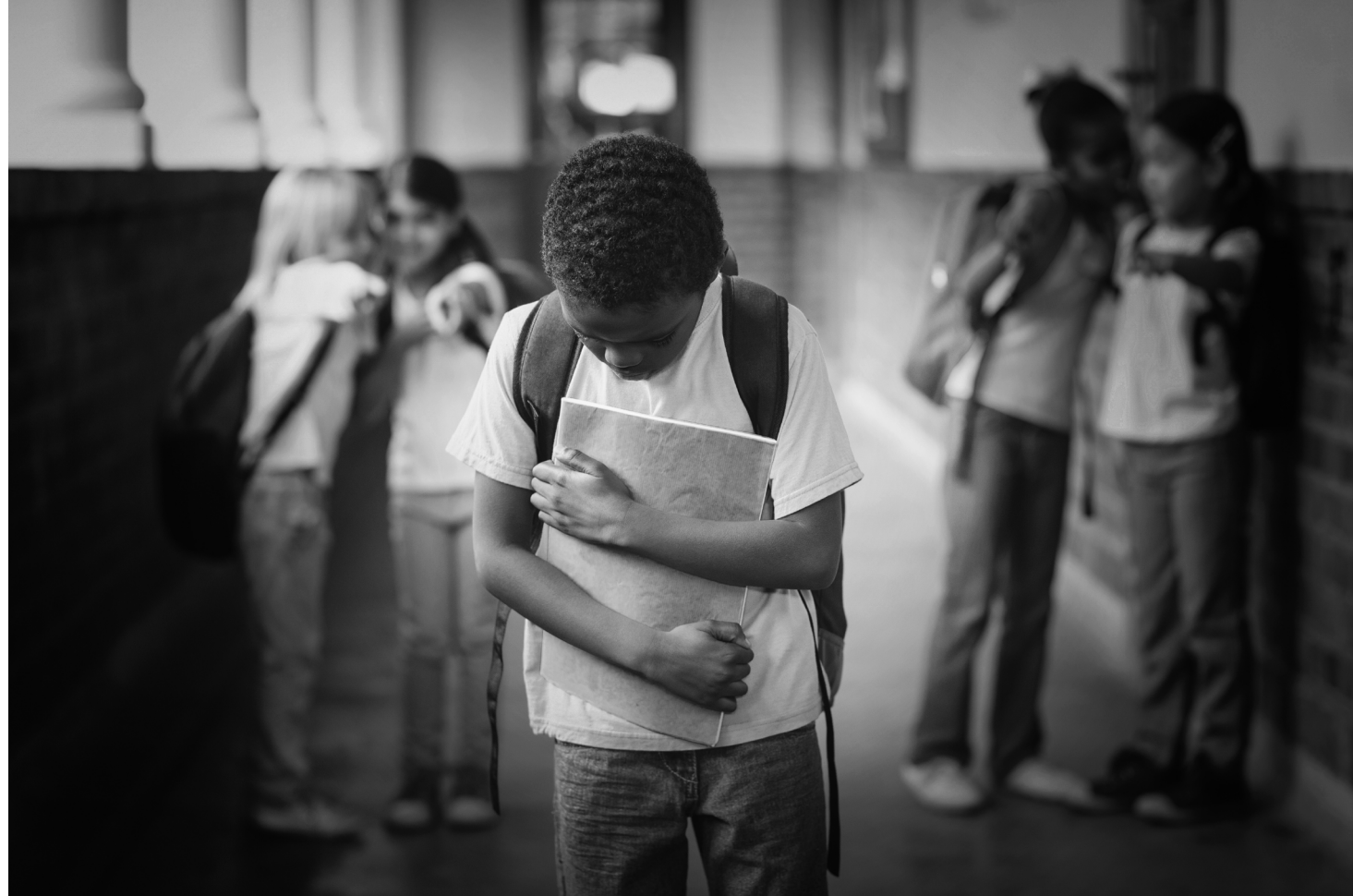




Image [Source](#):

## Exposure to Racism and Racial Stress

- In a national study of over 7,000 students, approximately 55% of Black high school students report experiencing racism (Mpofu et al., 2022)
- Black youth experience an average of 5 experiences of racial discrimination per day (Metzger, 2020; English et al., 2020)

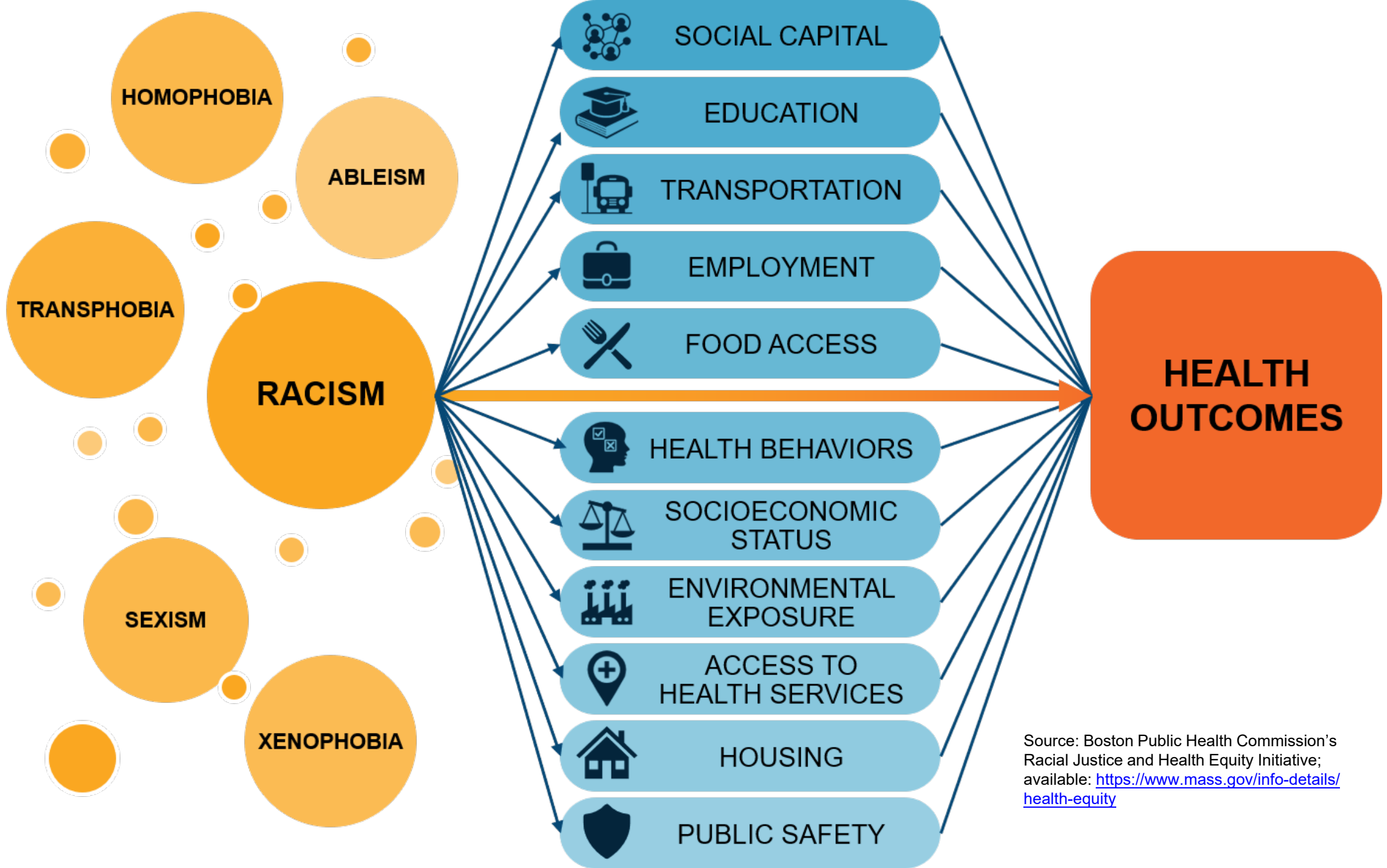
# Impact of Racism

- Black students were more likely to be expelled, suspended, and arrested in counties with greater anti-Black racial bias compared to white students (Riddle, 2019)
- People, including police officers, are more likely to perceive Black youth as older, less innocent, less intelligent, and more violent compared to youth from other demographic backgrounds (Epstein et al. 2017; Goff et al. 2014).
- Black students report lower school belongingness, less equity, and more adjustment problems in schools with greater disparities in their disciplinary actions (Bottiani et al, 2017)

# Inequities & Trauma Exposure

- **EDUCATION:** Youth of color experience high rates of racism, bias, and discrimination at school
- **INCARCERATION:** Youth of color are more likely to be arrested at school and referred to law enforcement
- **PUBLIC SAFETY:** 1 in 1,000 Black men or boys will be killed by the police in their lifetime
- **COMMUNITY VIOLENCE:** More than 85% of youth who live in urban areas witness some form of community violence and almost 70% experience direct victimization

Children's Defense Fund, 2021; Freedenthal et al. 2008; McDonald et al., 2021; Lopez et al., 2018



Source: Boston Public Health Commission's Racial Justice and Health Equity Initiative; available: <https://www.mass.gov/info-details/health-equity>

# Structural Racism and Suicide Prevention Systems Framework (Alvarez et al., 2022)

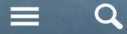
Structural racism:

- Restricts access to high quality mental health services
  - Child psychiatrist shortage in low-income communities
  - Black youth are less likely to receive a 7-day follow up after discharge from inpatient care
  - Black youth are less likely to be screened by primary care
- Impacts the continuum of suicide prevention
  - Identification
  - Referrals
  - Treatment
  - Crisis response



# Racism and Suicide Risk

- In young Black adults, **racial microaggressions** (invisibility, low-achievement/undesirable culture, and environmental invalidations) and **experiencing racism online** are associated with feeling like a burden to others (Hollingsworth et al., 2017; Keum et al., 2022)
- **Feeling like a burden to others** is associated with higher suicide risk in young Black adults (Hollingsworth et al., 2017; Keum et al., 2022)
- **Experiencing discrimination** increased the risk of depression and suicidal thoughts in Black youth (Assari et al., 2017; Tobler et al., 2013)
- **Overt and subtle experiences of racism** are associated with thoughts of suicide in Black youth (Madubata et al., 2022)



# Why Are More Black Kids Suicidal? A Search for Answers.

Mental health experts assumed that people of all races had the same risk factors for self-harm. Emerging evidence suggests that is not the case.

# THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Journal of Black Studies

Volume 51, Issue 6, September 2020, Pages 611-631


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<https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934720935641>



## Article

## Suicide among Black Children: An Integrated Model of the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide and Intersectionality Theory for Researchers and Clinicians

Ijeoma Opara <sup>1</sup>, Maame Araba Assan<sup>2</sup>, Kimberly Pierre<sup>3</sup>, John F. Gunn, III<sup>4</sup>, Isha Metzger<sup>5</sup>, Jahi Hamilton<sup>5</sup>, and Eileen Arugu<sup>6</sup>

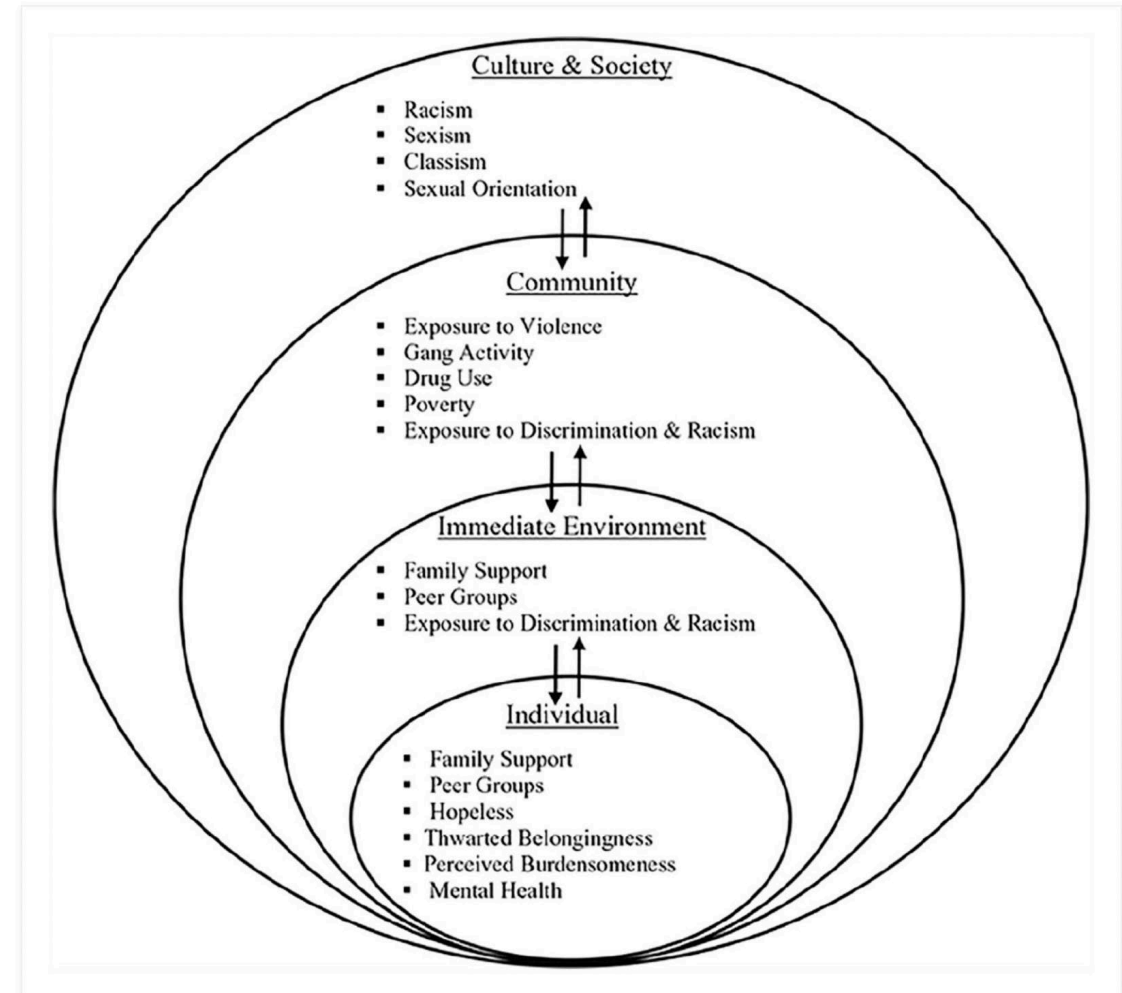


Figure 1. Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide through an Intersectional Framework.

## Frequencies for free listing of reasons for suicide (N=50)

	n	%
<b>Racism &amp; Social Justice Issues</b>		
Racism	20	40
Discrimination	8	16
Marginalization	8	16
Discrimination by police	3	6
Inequality	2	4
The pressure from white people	1	2
Because of prejudice, youth could believe they may be 'stupid' or 'inferior' to other people	1	2

*“Black people no matter what age have it worse than white people in society. They are harassed for the color of their skin. This treatment maybe has been died down with generations, but that doesn’t mean it has stopped. Some black teens may have been groomed to think they aren’t worth much because of this.”*

*“Lack of love from the community due to skin color.”*

*“Discrimination by policemen in the streets.”*

## Socioeconomic & Neighborhood

### Related Factors

	n	%
Poverty	13	26
Gangs	3	6
Not able to have mental health facilities in the neighborhood	1	2
Community violence	1	2
<b>Trauma, Abuse, and Neglect</b>		
Traumatic experiences	3	6
Abuse/Neglect	3	6
Sexual harassment	2	4
Neglect by family and community	1	2

*“poverty among Black families”*

*“a lot of black parents are not well to do and it takes a toll on their kids”*

*“The violent nature of most black neighborhoods guarantees one that it’s not likely to have a normal life.”*

*“not [being] able to have mental health facilities in the neighborhood”*

# Supporting Black Youth

# Supporting Black Youth

- Teach Youth about Racism
- Discuss How to Respond to Racism
- Identify Cultural Assets
- Instill Cultural Pride and Positive Racial Identity

# HEALING RACIAL STRESS WORKBOOK FOR BLACK TEENS

Skills to Help You Manage Emotions,  
Resist Racism & Feel Empowered



Respond to racial stress & trauma • Deal with microaggressions • Build resistance & resilience

JESSICA S. HENRY, PHD | FARZANA T. SALEEM, PHD | DANA L. CUNNINGHAM, PHD  
NICOLE L. CAMMACK, PHD | DANIELLE R. BUSBY, PHD  
Foreword by Howard C. Stevenson, PhD

**This workbook is designed to help Black teens:**

- Name and define their experiences
- Explore how racial stress can impact thoughts, feelings, and behavior
- Create a “game plan” for responding to racism
- Apply the information learned at home, school, and in the community



# How do you celebrate Black pride and joy?

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- Draw
- Write
- Sing
- Rap
- Movement
- Videos
- Images



# *You So Black* by Theresa Tha SONGBIRD



Link: <https://youtu.be/sSpXZ8MrEWw>

# Activity: What are some ways to celebrate Black pride?

<b>Affirmations-</b> How do you affirm Black pride and joy in yourself?	<b>Community-</b> Join in community with others	<b>Creativity-</b> How can you creatively express Black pride and joy?
“I am proud to be Black.”	Join an organization dedicated to uplifting the community	Dance
“I am filled with love and joy.”	Learn about your family history and traditions	Write poetry or raps

# Activity: Develop a Game Plan

Stand up for yourself

Tell an adult

Organize a community event

Take some deep breaths

Talk to a friend

Document what happened

# Protective Factors

**Families, caring adults, and/or schools that provide safe, supportive, and affirming environments**

Family cohesion

School connectedness

Sense of belonging

Problem solving and coping skills

Positive peer relationships

Hope

Religiosity / Spirituality

Strong sense of ethnic identity

# Systemic Needs

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Decrease barriers to mental health care access

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Increase in child mental health providers and providers of color

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Increase in school-based mental health services

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Enhanced screening that includes exposure to racial stress/trauma

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Increased funding for suicide prevention research

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# CASE EXAMPLE

**Scenario:** Dante is a fifteen-year-old Black boy who lives in a predominantly Black neighborhood. He has a younger brother, loves hip hop music, and is on the school chess team. Dante attends a charter school in a neighborhood across town, and he is usually the only Black person in most of his classes. Attending a predominantly white school has been difficult for Dante because he had some negative experiences and often feels like he does not fit in. For example, Dante has been on the chess team for two years, but still remembers when he walked into the first chess team meeting and one of the students said, “The basketball team meeting is in the room down the hall.” After he made the chess team, and he told one of his teachers, his teacher said, “Really? I didn’t expect someone like you to enjoy playing chess.” Hearing biased comments like this made Dante think a lot more about his race, and how the white students and teachers thought about him. These experiences made him really upset and he wrote about his frustrations in his journal. One day, while cleaning his room, Dante’s mom found and read his journal where he talked about these incidents. His mom read passages that stated, “I wonder what it would be like to go to sleep and never wake up” and “I sometimes wish I just was not here anymore.” This was Dante’s mom’s first time ever learning of him having these types of thoughts. There are no firearms in Dante’s home, and after reading his journal his mom collected and locked up sharp objects and pills, as his mom had a history of depression and suicidal thoughts in her adolescence and is often anxious about Dante struggling with the same symptoms. Dante wrote that his reasons for living are his cat, his family, and he wants to go to Paris to study art.

**Questions to discuss:**

1. What protective factors are present for Dante?
2. What would you recommend Dante’s school do to better support him?
3. What would you recommend for Dante and his family?



# Resources



[Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)

# Resources

## [Therapy for Black Kids](#)

Dedicated to helping Black parents raise healthy kids in the 21st century.

## [Embrace Race](#)

A multiracial community of parents, teachers, experts, and other caring adults who support each other to meet the challenges that race poses to our children, families, and communities.

[EMPOWER Racial Trauma Resource Guide](#) provides information and research about racial trauma and provides resources and tools to help youth cope with racial trauma

# Resources

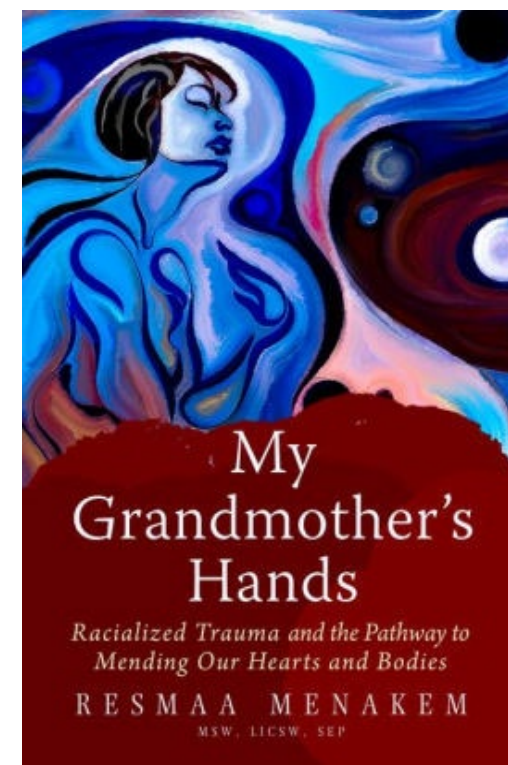
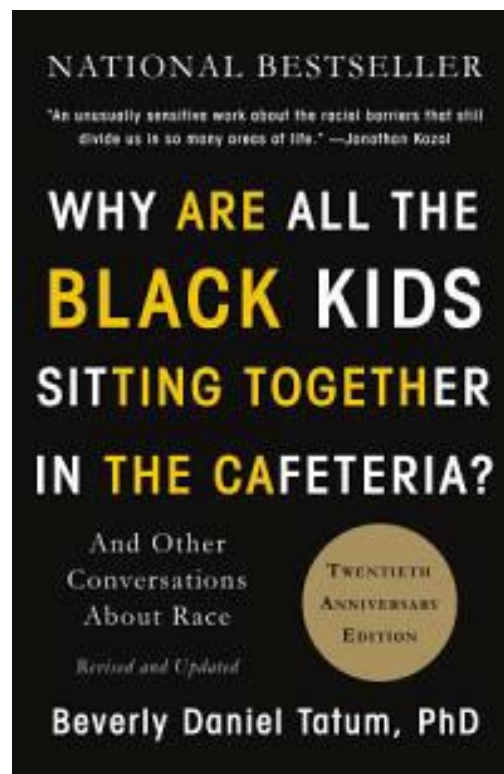
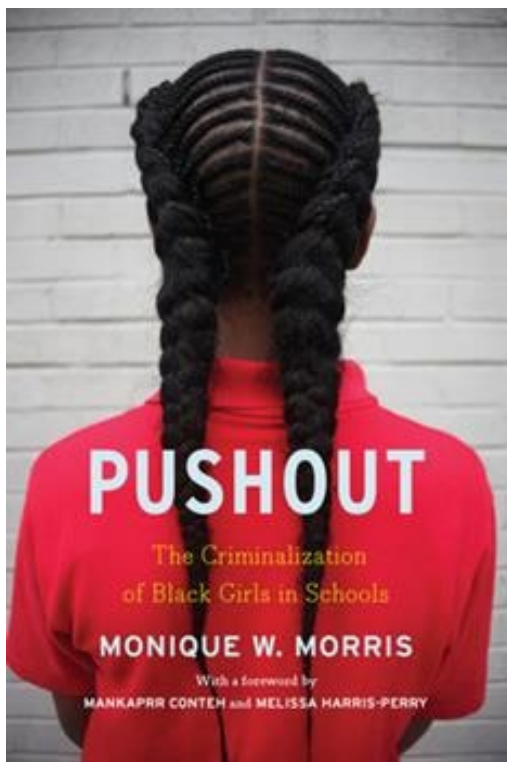
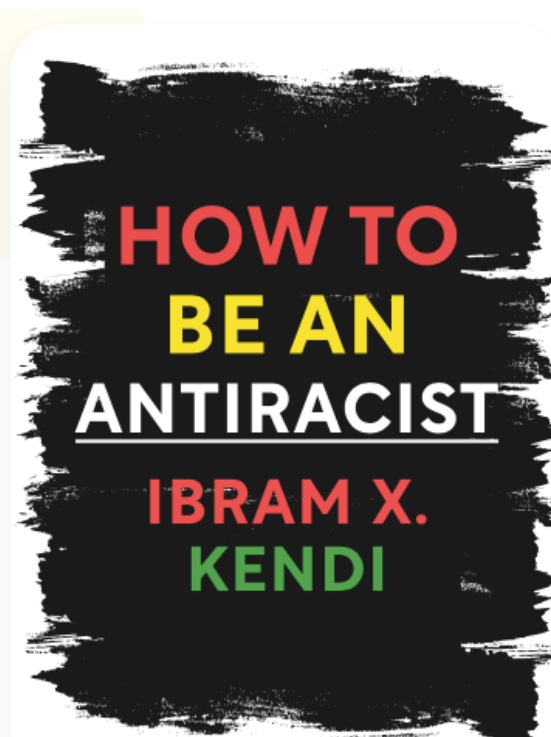
[Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#) Offers online trainings, resources, and information about suicide prevention and intervention

[American Foundation for Suicide Prevention](#) is a non-profit organization that provides education and research on suicide and has local chapters across the United States to engage in advocacy efforts

[National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention](#) is working to advance the national strategy for suicide prevention by transforming health systems and communities, and changing the conversation about suicide

[Center for Healing Racial Trauma](#) Offers intervention and prevention services to address racial trauma

# Books



# Therapy Resources

**Open Path Psychotherapy Collective (Affordable Therapy)**

<https://openpathcollective.org/>

**The LoveLand Foundation (Vouchers for Therapy)**

<https://thelovelandfoundation.org/>

# For More Information

## Black Mental Wellness Website

[www.BlackMentalWellness.com](http://www.BlackMentalWellness.com)

## Email

Dr. Danielle Busby: [DrBusby@BlackMentalWellness.com](mailto:DrBusby@BlackMentalWellness.com)

Dr. Dana Cunningham: [DrCunningham@BlackMentalWellness.com](mailto:DrCunningham@BlackMentalWellness.com)

## Social Media



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# Questions





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Funded by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

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Let's connect:

