An Analysis of Suicide Rates Among African American College Students in Louisiana

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the rising suicide rates among African American college students in Louisiana using a descriptive research design. It reveals significant findings, notably a demographic disparity where African American males aged 17 to 25 have the highest suicide rates, indicating a critical need for targeted intervention. The research identifies several contributing factors, including mental health disorders, academic and financial stress, and specific cultural barriers, such as stigma around mental health issues and lack of culturally sensitive support systems, all of which create a challenging environment for these students. It also highlights a gender disparity, with African American males experiencing higher suicide rates than females, emphasizing the need for gender-specific prevention strategies. Furthermore, the study addresses the role of firearm access in suicide methods, suggesting that the availability of firearms may increase the risk. To confront these issues, the study advocates for culturally sensitive prevention strategies and support systems that address the unique challenges faced by African American male students and improve mental health resource access. By providing data-driven insights and policy recommendations, this research aims to enhance understanding of the factors driving suicide rates and improve mental health outcomes among young African American adults in Louisiana, ultimately providing beneficial intervention efforts and supporting affected students.

INTRODUCTION

Suicide remains a pressing public health issue in the United States, consistently ranking among the leading causes of mortality, particularly for younger populations. This stark reality has led to ongoing prevention efforts from various stakeholders, including state legislators, community leaders, and academic institutions, all of whom are dedicated to addressing the complex factors contributing to suicide (Hoskin, 2022). These efforts include implementing statewide mental health programs, increasing funding for crisis intervention services, and fostering community-based support networks to identify and assist at-risk individuals. Despite these extensive efforts, however, suicide rates in Louisiana continue to rise, especially among individuals aged 17-25. This age group faces unique challenges, such as academic pressures, struggles with social integration, financial instability, and the transition to adulthood—all of which can significantly impact mental health. In response to this concerning trend, the present study focuses specifically on this demographic to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying causes of suicide among young adults in Louisiana.

The research aims to identify the primary factors driving the increase in suicide rates and to develop evidence-based policy recommendations that can help avert future tragedies. By generating data-driven insights, the team intends to assist policymakers and community organizations in creating targeted interventions and support systems designed to reduce the incidence of suicide and improve mental health outcomes among young adults in Louisiana. Recent findings have pointed to a troubling rise in suicide rates among college-aged African Americans, underscoring the need for urgent action on this issue (**Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Violence Solutions and Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, & Department of Mental Health, 2023**). This demographic not only faces the common challenges associated with young adulthood but also encounters additional burdens, such as increased exposure to violence, systemic discrimination, and socioeconomic disadvantages, all of which can intensify mental health struggles and elevate the risk of suicide (Still Ringing the Alarm, 2023).

Additionally, the disparity in suicide rates between men and women within this age group reflects longstanding gender-based patterns in the African American community, highlighting the importance of understanding these differences to develop targeted prevention strategies. The research conducted by the Southern University Research Team aims to delve deeper into the reasons behind these tragic deaths, including mental health issues, socioeconomic challenges, and cultural stigmas surrounding seeking help. By identifying these factors, the study not only enhances academic understanding but also contributes to the development of effective prevention and intervention programs. Furthermore, this study aims to humanize the statistics by providing insights into the lives affected by this crisis and emphasizing the need for a supportive environment for African American youths during their college years. By fostering empathy and encouraging action, the research seeks to address this critical public health issue more effectively.

Empirical evidence indicates that suicide rates are rising in disenfranchised and marginalized communities across the United States, with social media playing a significant role in exacerbating feelings of inadequacy and the pressure to conform to idealized lifestyles (Hoskin, 2022). Moreover, African American communities are disproportionately affected by violence and systemic discrimination, leading to heightened levels of depression and trauma (Still Ringing the Alarm, 2023). Given these circumstances, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive investigation into the intersection of race, age, and socioeconomic status to understand why suicide rates are increasing among African American youths in Louisiana, particularly in the 17-25 age group. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the unique stressors faced by this demographic, examining how systemic discrimination, socioeconomic disadvantages, cultural stigmas, and the influence of social media contribute to mental health struggles and suicide risk. By focusing on this specific population, the research seeks to provide data-driven insights and formulate evidence-based policy recommendations for more effective, culturally sensitive prevention strategies and interventions.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on suicidal thoughts and behaviors in youth is extensive and continuously evolving, encompassing various aspects such as prevalence, risk factors, intervention strategies, and the impact of societal changes. The following summary highlights key themes in the literature: increasing prevalence, mental health disorders, risk factors, preventive interventions, cultural and demographic differences, access to firearms, the impact of social media and technology, early identification and support, and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent years have seen a significant increase in reported cases of suicidal thoughts and behaviors among youth. This alarming trend is linked to various factors, including mental health disorders, bullying, and exposure to social media (Hoskin, 2022). The growing prevalence underscores the urgent need for targeted prevention and intervention strategies.

Mental Health Disorders—Mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, and bipolar disorder are strongly associated with suicidal thoughts and behaviors in young people. Research continues to focus on understanding the relationship between these disorders and suicide, emphasizing early detection and intervention (Musci et al., 2016; Large et al., 2020). The prevalence of suicidal thoughts among African American youth highlights the need for focused research and intervention in this group (CDC, 2019b).

Impact of Social Media and Technology—The role of social media and technology in shaping youth experiences is a critical area of research. Studies are examining how cyberbullying, online harassment, and the pressures of social media contribute to suicidal behaviors in youth (Still Ringing the Alarm, 2023). The pervasive nature of technology amplifies these risks, necessitating comprehensive strategies to mitigate its negative effects.

Risk Factors— Research identifies several risk factors for youth suicide, including a family history of mental illness or suicide, substance abuse, a history of trauma or abuse, and feelings of isolation (Hillbrand, 2001). Suicidal thoughts, often a precursor to attempts, have a strong correlation with completed suicides (Musci et al., 2016; Large et al., 2020). The need for tailored interventions that address these risk factors is evident.

Preventive Interventions— Preventive strategies are increasingly the focus of research, including school-based programs, community outreach initiatives, and mental health education. These interventions aim to identify at-risk youth early and provide timely support (Cheung & Dewa, 2005; Rich et al., 1990). Evaluating the effectiveness of these strategies is crucial for reducing suicide rates.

Cultural and Demographic Differences— Understanding cultural, socioeconomic, and demographic factors is essential in addressing suicidal behaviors among youth. Studies explore disparities across racial and ethnic groups, gender differences, and the impact of socioeconomic status (Durant et al., 2006; Lamis & Lester, 2012). Ethnic differences in suicide risk factors, particularly among college students, require further investigation to develop culturally sensitive interventions (Abe et al., 2008; Garlow et al., 2007).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study utilized a descriptive research design to explore the factors contributing to the rising suicide rates among young adults, particularly African American youths, in Louisiana. This design was selected because it allows for a detailed examination of the phenomenon by systematically collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data to provide an accurate depiction of the current situation. Such an approach is particularly effective for understanding complex social issues like suicide, where multiple variables interact and influence outcomes.

Data were collected by the faculty at Southern University and A&M College from various reliable sources to ensure a robust and comprehensive analysis. These included reports from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which provided extensive data on national and regional suicide trends, including demographic breakdowns. Additionally, information from local health departments across Louisiana was gathered, offering detailed insights into suicide rates, mental health services, and local prevention initiatives. This localized data was essential for understanding the unique characteristics and challenges of the population in different parishes. Furthermore, collaborations with academic institutions in Louisiana allowed access to scholarly articles, research studies, and datasets focusing on mental health and suicide among young adults, enhancing the depth and context of the analysis.

The data analysis employed various quantitative methods and tools for data reporting and visualization, including tables, bar graphs, and pie charts. Tables were used to present detailed numerical information, facilitating the comparison of variables such as age, gender, and race. Bar graphs visually represented the frequency and distribution of suicide rates across different demographics and time periods, highlighting key trends and differences. Pie charts illustrated the proportional relationships between different risk factors, such as mental health issues and socio-economic status, providing a clear visual summary of the data.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
Figure 1
Comparison of Suicide Rates between the United States and Louisiana (2012-2021)

Note: Data taken from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Figure 1 compares the suicide rates between the United States and Louisiana from 2012 to 2021. The national data reveals a significant increase in suicide rates, rising from 12.5 per 100,000 individuals in 2012 to 14.1 per 100,000 individuals in 2021, marking an approximate 2% increase across the United States. Similarly, the state-level data for Louisiana shows an increase in suicide rates from 12.3 per 100,000 individuals in 2012 to 14.9 per 100,000 individuals in 2021, which represents an approximate 3% increase. This upward trend is concerning because suicidal thoughts can escalate into detailed plans, including specific methods and timelines for self-harm. Therefore, the data underscores the urgent need for enhanced mental health services and support systems to address the rising suicide rates among this vulnerable demographic.

Figure 2
African American Youth Adults (17-25-year-old): Suicidal Behavioral
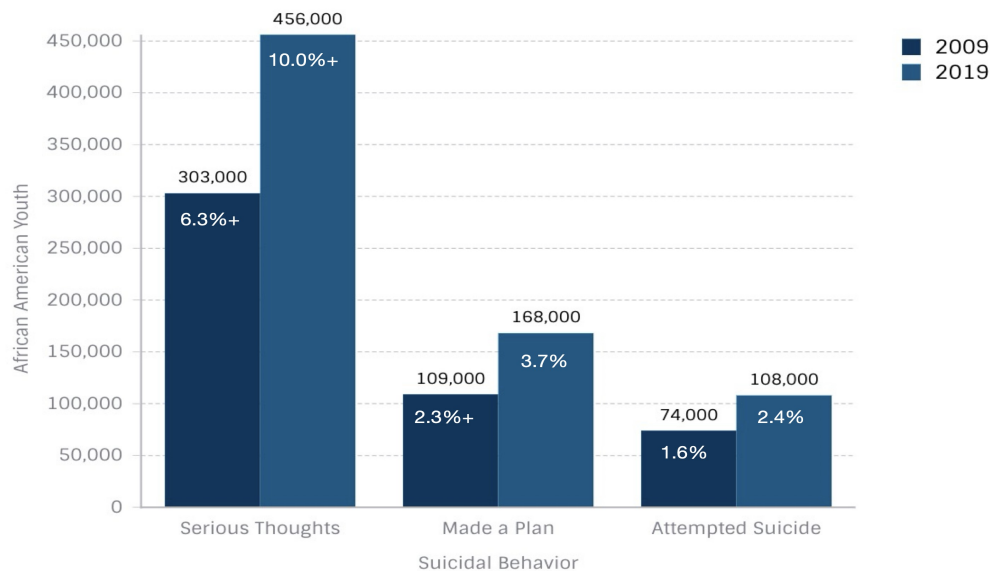
Note: Data reproduced from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Administration (2021)

Figure 2 presents an analysis of suicidal behaviors among African American young adults aged 17-25 in the United States. The figure illustrates that the mental health of African American young adults in this age group has been in a state of distress between 2009 and 2019 and continuing beyond, as reported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) in 2021. Concerning "Serious Thoughts," Figure 2 shows a significant increase in the number of individuals experiencing severe thoughts of suicide, rising from 303,000 in 2009 to 456,000 in 2019, which represents a 51% increase across the nation. This rise is particularly alarming because suicidal thoughts can escalate to the point where individuals develop detailed plans, including specific methods and timelines for self-harm.

With regards to "Made a Plan-Suicidal Behavior," the data indicates a substantial increase in the number of young adults reporting a suicide plan, growing from 109,000 in 2009 to 168,000 in 2019, reflecting a 54% increase. As individuals progress from planning to action, the likelihood of self-harm significantly increases, highlighting the urgent need for timely intervention and support to prevent tragic outcomes.

Furthermore, in the case of "Attempted Suicide," the dataset reveals a 46% increase in attempted suicides, with numbers rising from 74,000 in 2009 to 108,000 in 2019. This trend underscores the critical need for enhanced mental health services and support systems for this vulnerable demographic, emphasizing the importance of immediate action to address these concerning patterns.
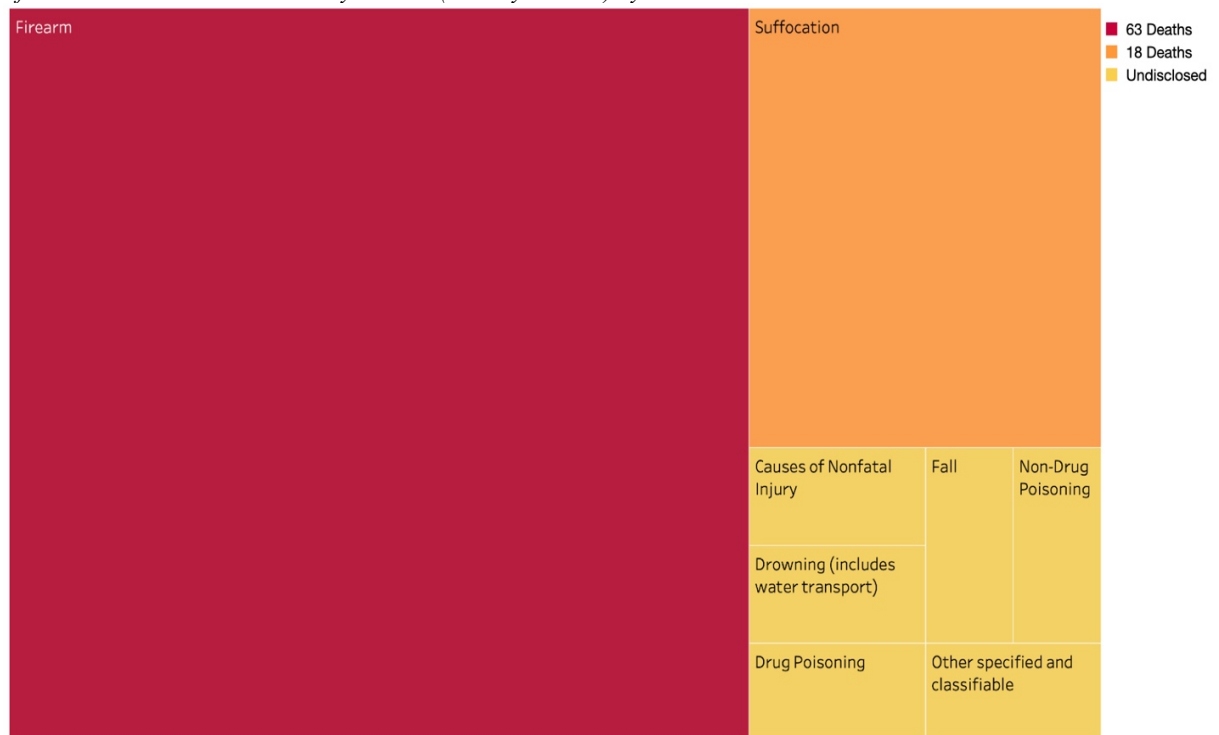
Figure 3

African American Youth Deaths by Suicide (17-25 years old) by Gender: 2018-2021
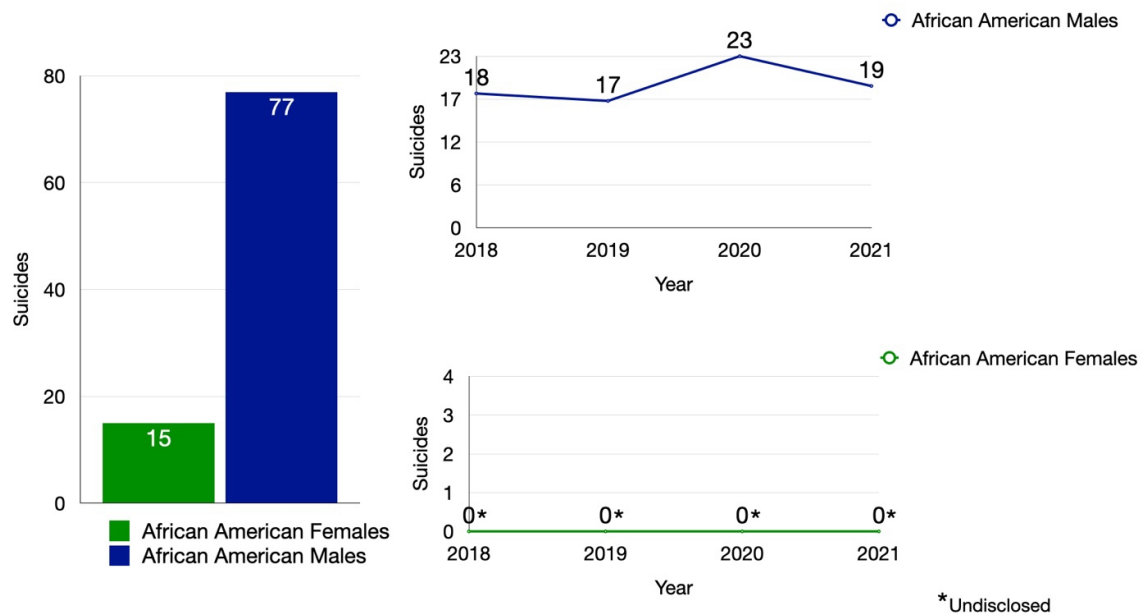
Note: Data reproduced from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Figure 3 presents data on African American youth deaths by suicide, specifically focusing on individuals aged 17-25, broken down by gender from 2018 to 2021. This data, reproduced from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, highlights the tragic loss of life within this demographic in Louisiana. Between 2018 and 2021, a total of 92 African American individuals aged 17-25 lost their lives to suicide in Louisiana, with 15 of these being female, as depicted in Figure 3. Due to the low numbers, specific annual data for African American females who died by suicide were not disclosed. During the same period, there were 77 reported deaths by suicide among African American males in this age group. The number of deaths among African American males was relatively consistent across the years, with the exception of a notable 35% increase in 2020. This peak in 2020 aligns with the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that external stressors during this period may have had a significant impact on the mental health of African American males within this age bracket. This correlation underscores the need to consider the influence of such external factors when addressing mental health and suicide prevention efforts in this vulnerable population.

Figure 4
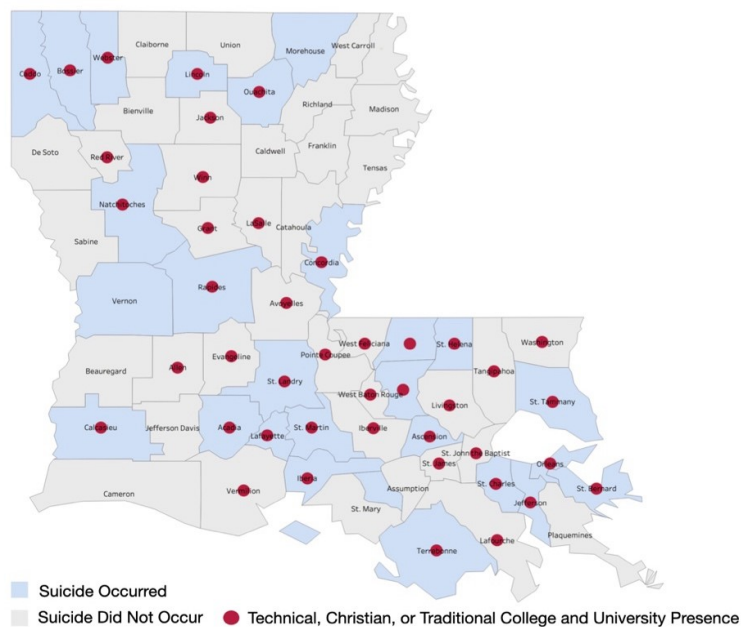*African American Youth Deaths by Suicide (17-25 years old) by Mechanism: 2018-2021*

Note: Data reproduced from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Figure 4 displays data on African American youth deaths by suicide, focusing on individuals aged 17-25 and the mechanisms used from 2018 to 2021. During this period, the data indicates that 63 African American youths lost their lives to suicide by firearms. Additionally, 18 African American youths died by suffocation. The remaining 11 individuals experienced a variety of other methods, including non-fatal injuries, drowning, drug poisoning, falls, and other mechanisms. The disproportionately high use of firearms among individuals aged 17-25, as shown in Figure 4, results in a significant disparity of 111% in reported deaths by suicide compared to the next highest category, suffocation. This stark contrast underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions and policies aimed at reducing firearm access among this vulnerable population to prevent further tragedies.

Figure 5

Mapping of African American Youth Suicides (17–25-year-old) and Colleges and Universities by Parish: 2018-2021

Note: Data reproduced from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

       Figure 5 illustrates the mapping of African American youth suicides, specifically among those aged 17-25, alongside the locations of colleges and universities by parish from 2018 to 2021. Suicide and suicidal behaviors are significant concerns for colleges and universities. According to the National Institute of Mental Health (2020), suicide is one of the leading causes of death among college and university students in the United States. However, a study conducted by the Associated Press in 2018 revealed that most of the largest public universities in the United States do not track the number of students who die by suicide. The Associated Press surveyed the 100 largest U.S. public universities regarding their annual suicide statistics, finding that only 46 tracked suicides, with 27 institutions consistently maintaining such records since 2007. Of the remaining 54 institutions, 43 reported that they did not keep records of suicides. Additionally, nine institutions could only provide limited information and did not answer questions about the consistency of their tracking processes for suicides, while two institutions failed to provide any data on this matter. These findings highlight a critical gap in data collection, as the U.S. Department of Education mandates colleges to collect data on student deaths but not specifically on suicides.

      Research on African American college students and suicidal behaviors has identified several factors contributing to thoughts and actions related to suicide (Lamis and Lester, 2012; Zvolensky et al., 2016; Bridges et al., 2017; Floyd, 2023). According to this research, various factors can influence whether an individual attempts suicide, including: (a) *Mental health issues* such as depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. (b) *Social factors* like experiences of racial discrimination, social isolation, and lack of support networks. (c) *Cultural stigmas* surrounding mental health and seeking help, which may discourage individuals from accessing necessary support. (d) *Academic pressures* and the stress associated with college life, particularly for first-generation college students and those facing financial difficulties. Understanding these factors is crucial for developing targeted interventions and support systems to address the mental health needs of African American students and reduce the incidence of suicide within this population (see Table for more details).

Table 1: Contributing Factors to Suicide Rates Among African-American College Students

Psychological and Emotional Issues	Life Circumstances and Environmental Stressors
Mental health problems	Life stressors
Relationship problems	Parental divorces
Interpersonal trauma	Hospitalizations and deaths
Prior suicidal thoughts	Poverty (highly concentrated)
Hopelessness and depression	Parents who abused drugs
Psychological trauma	Parents parenting styles
Social anxiety	

Source: Authors modification

Additionally, several studies have identified factors that may insulate African American college students from suicidal behaviors (Harris and Molock, 2000; Morrison and Hopkins, 2018; Hollingsworth and Polanco-Roman, 2022). These protective factors include: (1) **Strong Social Support Networks**: Having close relationships with family, friends, and mentors provides emotional support and a sense of belonging, which can be crucial in mitigating feelings of isolation and despair. (2) **Cultural Resilience**: Positive cultural identity and engagement with cultural practices and traditions can enhance resilience and provide a sense of purpose and meaning, helping to buffer against suicidal thoughts. (3) **Religious or Spiritual Beliefs**: Engagement in religious or spiritual practices can offer a source of comfort and coping mechanisms, fostering a sense of hope and community that can act as a protective buffer against suicide. (4) **Access to Mental Health Resources**: Availability and utilization of mental health services, including counseling and psychological support, are essential in addressing and managing mental health issues before they escalate. (5) **Academic and Career Support**: Programs that offer academic assistance, career guidance, and personal development help students navigate academic challenges and reduce stress, contributing to overall well-being behaviors (Harris and Molock, 2000; Morrison and Hopkins, 2018; Hollingsworth and Polanco-Roman, 2022). Understanding these protective factors is crucial for developing comprehensive support systems and interventions tailored to the needs of African American college students, aiming to enhance their resilience and reduce the risk of suicidal behaviors. The aforementioned protective factors are grouped into support systems and personal resilience and fulfillment in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Protective Factors

Support Systems	Personal Resilience and Fulfillment
Family	Purpose in life
Popularity	High self-esteem
Dense School Networks	Emotional well-being
Social Support	Reasons for living
Religion	School climate

Source: Authors modification

The data presented in this report highlights the urgent need to better understand and address the mental health challenges faced by African American youth aged 17-25 in Louisiana, particularly within collegiate environments. The complex interplay of psychological, emotional, and life circumstances underscores the necessity of exploring the unique experiences of college students and how these experiences may contribute to suicidal behaviors within this population.

By dedicating additional time and resources to researching the mental health needs of African American college students, stakeholders can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that both contribute to their vulnerability and foster their resilience. This understanding will be crucial for developing more targeted and effective interventions and support systems, ultimately enhancing mental health outcomes and reducing suicide rates among this demographic.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This study underscores the urgent need to address the rising suicide rates among African American college students in Louisiana by examining the socio-cultural and systemic factors that contribute to this crisis. The study reveals that African American males aged 20 to 24 experience disproportionately high suicide rates, influenced by a complex interplay of mental health disorders, social media pressures, substance abuse, and exposure to violence. The findings highlight the inadequacies of existing suicide prevention programs, which often overlook the unique cultural and socio-economic contexts of this demographic. Consequently, African American college students face heightened vulnerability, underscoring the necessity for targeted interventions. Given the political will of public officials and critical stakeholders and by implementing these recommendations, stakeholders can work towards reducing the suicide rates among African American college students and improving their overall mental health and well-being.

Policy Recommendations:

- Culturally Sensitive Mental Health Services: Develop and implement mental health programs specifically tailored to the cultural and socioeconomic needs of African American college students. These programs should incorporate culturally relevant practices and involve community leaders to enhance engagement and effectiveness.
- Enhanced Support Systems: Increase the availability of mental health resources on college campuses, including counseling services, peer support groups, and crisis intervention teams. Ensure these resources are accessible and address the unique challenges faced by African American students.
- Integration of Social Media and Substance Abuse Education: Introduce educational programs that address the impact of social media and substance abuse on mental health. These programs should provide students with tools to manage online stressors and substance use while promoting healthy coping mechanisms.
- Community-Based Interventions: Collaborate with local communities and organizations to create support networks for African American college students. Community-based initiatives should focus on violence prevention, mental health awareness, and creating safe spaces for students to discuss their challenges.
- Improved Data Collection and Research: Establish standardized practices for tracking and reporting suicide rates among college students, with a particular focus on racial and ethnic disparities. This data will be crucial for developing targeted interventions and assessing their effectiveness.
- Policy Advocacy and Awareness: Advocate for policies that address systemic issues contributing to mental health disparities among African American students. This includes pushing for increased funding for mental health programs and support services in higher education institutions.

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