
SUICIDE

Suicide is a complex behavior involving many factors. Examining the cultural influences that contribute to rates of suicide among different ethnic groups can help us to better understand the risk and protective factors associated with suicide.

Several risk factors tend to be present across most ethnic groups. Regardless of ethnicity, females tend to have more suicide attempts but lower suicide completion rates than males. Individuals with certain psychiatric diagnoses, such as major depression, bipolar disorder, and substance abuse, tend to be at a higher risk for suicide. Higher suicide rates exist among those with easy access to firearms or poisons. Protective factors such as family closeness and high religiosity are also found across many groups, but they tend to play a larger role in certain cultures.

AFRICAN AMERICANS

Historically, the suicide rate for African Americans has been lower than the rate for European Americans. This pattern seems to be changing, however, with rates for African American males (especially adolescents) increasing faster than rates for European American males. African American females continue to have a very low suicide rate compared with members of other ethnic groups, although they attempt suicide at rates similar to European American females. Although the suicide rate for European American men increases with age, the rate for African American men decreases, with risk peaking at 25 to 34 years.

Risk factors for African Americans include poverty, racism and marginalization, age under 35, drug use, presence of a firearm in the home, and violent behavior. Protective factors include rural residence and educational attainment. African American culture may contribute to lower rates of suicide through its emphasis on religion and extended family. Religion can provide a source of support for individuals in need, and many churches condemn suicide as a sin. Extended family can provide a multigenerational environment of social support. Some researchers believe that older African Americans are less likely to commit suicide than older European Americans because they are more likely to be included in the family as useful and valued members.

LATIN AMERICANS

The Latin American population is so diverse that it is difficult to estimate suicide prevalence without looking at country of origin. In comparing Latino groups, Mexican Americans tend to have lower rates of suicide, whereas Cuban Americans and mainland Puerto Ricans have relatively higher rates. Compared with suicide rates in their countries of origin, suicide rates for Latin American people in the United States are significantly higher.

The stresses associated with migration and acculturation can increase the risk of suicide. For example, poverty, language barriers, discrimination and marginalization, and the unavailability or underutilization of mental health services may increase risk. The process of acculturation can erode protective factors from the native culture. For example, Mexican culture emphasizes the importance of extended family, which often serves to protect individual members from psychological distress by providing an extended support system, and the church, which may provide a more extended support network. Thus, Mexican Americans who become highly acculturated (usually the young) will have weak ties to these traditional supports and may display levels of suicide risk that are similar to the dominant culture.

ASIAN AMERICANS

Asian American suicide rates tend to be lower than those of European Americans and other ethnic groups. Suicide rates for Asian Americans are lowest during youth. Rates for both Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans tend to increase with age.

Eastern cultures tend to emphasize the interdependence of individuals within the community, especially within families. Extended families that include grandparents or great-grandparents provide guidance and support and serve as a protective factor against suicide. Some Asian American religious beliefs may also protect against suicide. Confucianism, for example, views suicide as disrespectful to the group one is a part of. In Buddhism, suicide is seen as selfish or overly passionate, and in Taoism, it may be seen as immoderate or unwise. Shintoism, which is widely practiced in Japan, is less forbidding of suicide. Most Asian American religions include a belief in some sort of life after death, making suicide less of an escape from one's problems.

Certain aspects of Asian culture may prevent distressed individuals from seeking help. Some decisions to commit suicide are based on a strong sense of family honor, and it may be considered preferable for one individual to die to protect the honor of the entire family. Elderly Asian Americans may feel neglected and disrespected when the traditional respect given to them is not afforded by their Americanized families. They may also blame themselves for their children's failure to provide for them, believing they must have been bad parents.

NATIVE AMERICANS

The Native American population currently consists of more than 500 tribes, which vary widely in their suicide rates. As a whole, Native American suicide rates are about one and a half to four times higher than the overall rate in the United States and about three to four times higher than the suicide rates of the other prominent ethnic groups. As a whole, the Native American population tends to be younger compared with other groups; the increased suicide risk of this population may reflect the higher risk in younger Native Americans. There are some indications that the suicide rate for Native Americans is decreasing.

A number of socioeconomic and cultural forces have contributed to high levels of poverty, substance abuse, depression, and other factors that increase the risk of suicide. Suicide rates in Native American tribes are positively correlated with stresses related to acculturation and negatively correlated with traditional integration. Many Native American cultures have been forced to deal with the loss of their native land and have been bombarded with Western education, missionaries, legislation, language, and child-rearing ideas. Native American tribes have become divided: Some individuals

want to preserve the traditional ways, whereas others prioritize different goals. Cultural conflict, seemingly hopeless environmental conditions, and a view of death as a natural part of the life cycle (with the possibility of reincarnation or life after death) may influence individuals in distress to consider suicide.

PROMOTING PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Clearly, cultural influences can play a role in suicide rates, and many of the cultural factors mentioned here act to protect members of these cultures from self-harm. Promoting such protective factors may decrease the risk of suicide.

—Joseph D. Hovey
—Christine C. Larson

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