

Suicidal Behavior in At Risk Populations

Purpose

Previous studies have determined certain ethnic groups to be at increased risk of death by suicide.

“At risk” populations include African Americans, Latinos and American Indian/Alaska Natives.

At this point, determining the specific vulnerabilities associated with these at risk groups requires further research.

The purpose of this study is to pinpoint the cultural context within which suicidal behavior occurs and subsequently determine through relevant literature which cultural factors should be targeted through therapeutic intervention.

Gender

Latina teenagers have higher-than-most suicide attempts. Conflicting feminine ideals and lack of connectedness in mother-daughter relationships contribute to this high rate.

American Indian females are also at higher risk of death by suicide than males, yet higher rates of suicidal behavior occur predominantly in Alaska Native males rather than females.

African American females, however, are protected against suicidal behavior because of intense social networks and greater access to community resources compared to males.

A Review of the Literature

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Protective and Risk Factors

Among African Americans, perceived discrimination has been associated with depression and hopelessness. Socioeconomic difficulties and lack of resources also contributes to a high rate of suicidal behavior, while high religiousness and tightly knit social networks act as protective factors.

Among Latinos, religiousness and familial connectedness are important protective factors. Conversely, family expectations can promote high stress among adolescents. Immigration and acculturative stress are two unique driving forces behind suicidal behavior within this population.

Among American Indian/Alaska Natives, high rates of alcohol abuse contribute to both accidental deaths and suicides. Isolated reservations and tightly knit social groups may spawn greater exposure to suicidal behavior and increased risk. Spirituality and identity adherence act as strong protective factors, while conflicting cultural beliefs and reference groups contribute to suicidal behavior among African Americans and Latinos.

Future Directions

It is imperative that therapeutic approaches are tailored toward culturally sensitive treatments. In fact, culturally insensitive treatments contribute to lack of help-seeking. Researchers should attempt to increase sample sizes to reach significant conclusions and support more robust findings. There is an unfortunate lack of research surrounding Alaska Natives, and efforts should also be made to research American Indian and Alaska Native as separate native populations.

Help-Seeking

African Americans and Latinos are perhaps the most underrepresented groups in treatment interventions. Universally, the stigma associated with help-seeking is a major deterrent from service utilization, especially among populations at risk. Pharmaceutical apprehensions, language barriers, lack of citizenship, distrust of the mental health field and costs also contribute to lack of service utilization. American Indian/Alaska Native populations utilize traditional healing approaches and informal sources as means of treatment, perhaps because of the lack of professional services in isolated communities.