Racial Disparities in Suicide among Young Children

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The suicide rate among black children five to eleven years of age has increased significantly since 1993, from 1.36/million (1993-1997) to 2.54/million (2008-2012), according to a new analysis of data from the Centers for Disease Control’s Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System. During that period, the suicide rate among white children in the same age group decreased significantly, from 1.14/million to 0.77 per million. The authors explain that both of these trends were masked by the relatively stable rate of suicide among children of this age overall, (1.18/million from 1993-1997 and 1.09/million from 2008-2012) so that only a race-specific analysis revealed “a potential racial disparity that warrants attention.”

Most of the difference in race-specific suicide rates is a result of changes in the rates among boys. The suicide rate among white boys decreased significantly over the study period (from 1.96/million to 1.31/million) while the rate among their black peers significantly increased (from 1.78/million to 3.47/million). The suicide rate among black girls increased, but this increase was not statistically significant. The rate among white girls remained fairly stable.

There were also changes in the pattern of the means used for suicide in this age group. Overall, more than 78 percent of suicides were by hanging/suffocation. Almost 18 percent involved firearms. The rate of suicide associated with firearms among white boys decreased significantly during the study period, while the rate of suicides associated with hanging/suffocation among black boys increased significantly.

The authors note that their study did not examine possible correlations between changes in suicide rates and changes in risk factors, and encourage further research on this topic. They also suggest exploring whether upstream interventions such as the Good Behavior Game, a classroom management program for elementary school students which has been shown to reduce suicide rates later in life, may help prevent suicide among younger children as well.
