Suicide Attempt Risk among Youth in Impoverished Communities

June 19, 2015
News Type: Weekly Spark, Weekly Spark Research

The authors of a longitudinal study of African American youth living in extremely impoverished neighborhoods found that they had a nearly 36-percent risk of attempting suicide by the time they reached the age of 20. The risk of attempting suicide rose as the children entered adolescence and then remained fairly stable, peaking at age 15. The authors conclude that suicidal behavior among impoverished African American youth may be far more prevalent than has generally been reported.

The more positive peer support a child reported at age nine, the less likely the child was to attempt suicide by age nineteen. A sense of social worth at age nine was also found to protect children from the risk of suicide attempts. The protection offered by peer support and a sense of social worth persisted, but did not increase, as children aged. Neither parental warmth nor a sense of community was found to affect the risk of suicide attempts. The authors suggest that young people in extremely impoverished environments may value their relationships with peers more than those with their parents.

Both a belief in the inevitability of violence and being a victim of violence were identified as important risk factors. Children who reported being victims of violence at age nine were 70 percent more likely to attempt suicide by age nineteen than children who had not been victimized. The risk associated both with the belief that violence was inevitable, and with the experience of having been victimized in the past year, decreased as the children aged. The authors suggest that “as children age and inevitably are exposed to increasing prevalence of violence [given the overall level of violence in their environment], the mental strain caused by that violence begins to reduce, resulting in lower levels of suicide attempt.”

Children who perpetrated violence were also found to have a higher risk of suicide attempts, but this risk neither increased nor declined as the children aged. Although a sense of hopelessness at age nine was not related to suicide risk, a relationship between hopelessness and suicide attempt developed as the children grew older. The authors theorize that “the causes of hopelessness become more tangible and are perceived as more insurmountable” as children age, resulting in higher risk.
