

# Racial discrimination is linked to suicidal thoughts in Black adults and children

November 5 2021, by Janelle R. Goodwill

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Frederick Douglass is regarded as one of the most prominent abolitionists the world has ever seen. Alongside his extraordinary contributions as an influential [speaker](#), [writer](#) and human rights

advocate, Douglass—who was born into slavery and gained freedom in [September 1838](#)—also wrote openly about his struggles with suicidal thoughts.

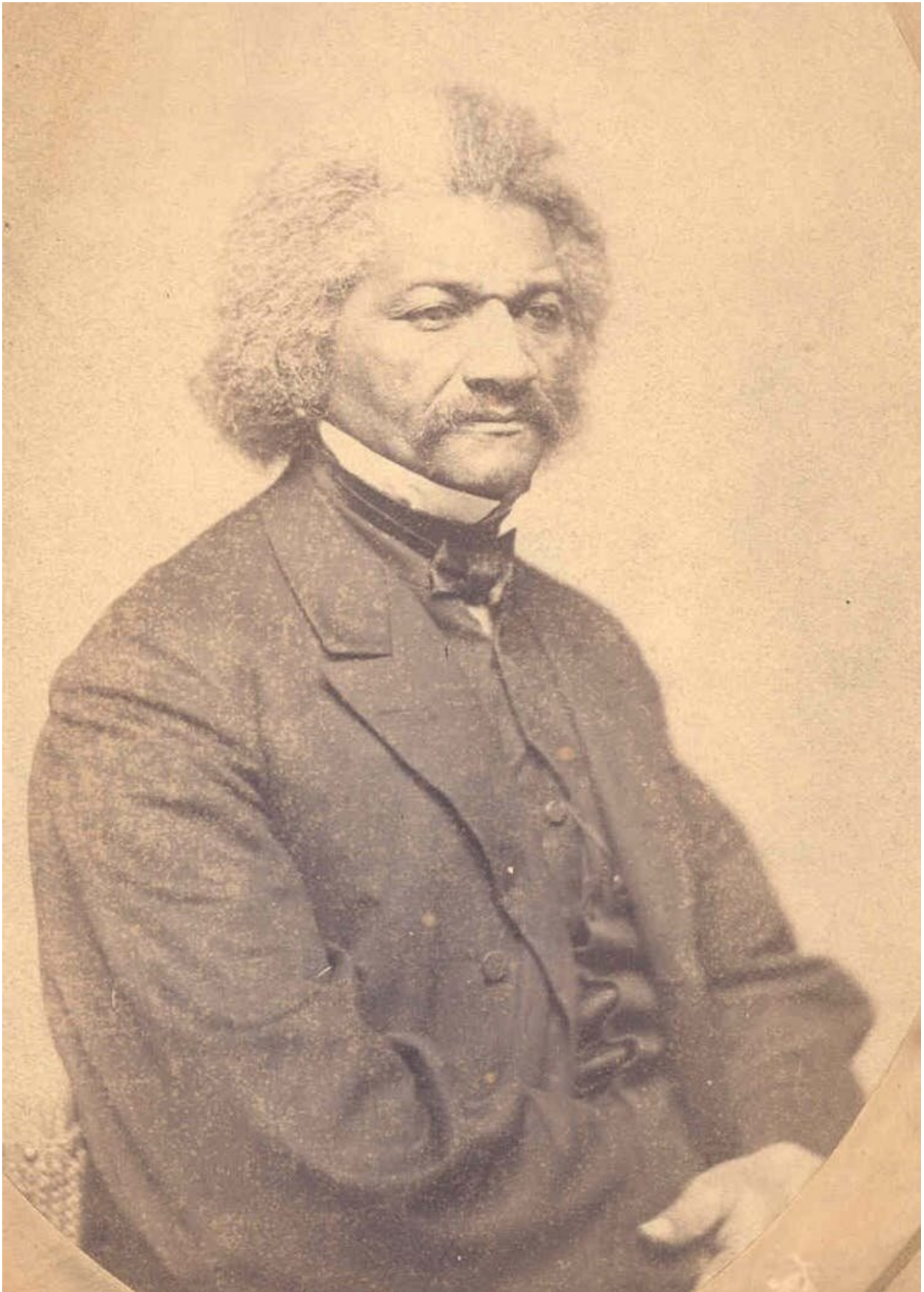
### [Douglass' writings](#)

[are both revolutionary and transformative, particularly when considering that he lived during a time when several anti-literacy laws prevented enslaved Blacks from learning to read and write.](#)

### [Douglass published his](#)

[first autobiography](#)—"Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass"—in 1845. In it, he boldly shared, "I often found myself regretting my own existence, and wishing myself dead; and but for the hope of being free, I have no doubt that I should have killed myself, or done something for which I should have been killed."

It's not hard to imagine why formerly enslaved persons like Douglass would consider ending their own lives. It may, however, be harder for some to understand the links between racism, [discrimination](#) and thoughts of [suicide](#) among Black Americans today.



Frederick Douglass described how his feelings of despair were countered by his hope of becoming free. Credit: Frederick Douglass National Historic Site/NPS

The United States abolished chattel slavery through the [Thirteenth Amendment](#) in 1865. However, Black Americans are still grappling with the effects of both [structural](#) and [everyday](#) forms of racism that permeate U.S. customs, culture and laws.

As a [researcher and assistant professor](#) at the University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy and Practice, I [explore how factors](#) like discrimination, stigma and depression contribute to suicide risk in Black Americans. I also assess how positive psychological forces—like having a sense of life purpose or receiving social support from others—may improve an individual's mental health outcomes.

[Several studies](#) have reported that exposure to discrimination is related to negative mental and physical health outcomes in Black Americans. These can include increased rates of depression, hypertension and sleep disturbance. Fewer studies have explored how [racial discrimination](#) is related to suicidal risk.

Therefore, in 2019 I [led a study](#) that examined whether racial discrimination was linked to depression and [suicidal thoughts](#) in adult Black men.

The events that have unfolded since this study was published underscore the need for this line of research.

My work, along with research done by a host of other scholars, affirms

that any attempt to systematically address inequitable treatment of Black Americans—such as the [recent White House executive order](#) on advancing educational equity and economic opportunity—should also account for the ways in which racial discrimination has impacted mental health outcomes among this particular population.

## **Racial discrimination and mental health**

My co-authors and I analyzed survey responses from more than 1,200 African American men ages 18 to 93 who resided in different states across the U.S. Data was originally collected from 2001 to 2003 through the [National Survey of American Life](#). This project was led by the late social psychologist James S. Jackson, [whose groundbreaking career](#) shifted the way that Black Americans were represented and studied in research.

[This survey](#) is one of the few nationally representative data sources that uses probability—or random—sampling to explicitly address the mental health experiences of Black adolescents and adults.

We decided to focus our study on Black men because historically, Black males have been four to six times [more likely to die by suicide](#) compared to Black females.

Participants in this [national survey](#) were asked to indicate how frequently they encountered discrimination in their everyday lives. The experiences surveyed ranged from being treated with less courtesy or respect to being harassed and followed in stores, along with being perceived as dishonest, not smart or not as good as others.

We analyzed men's responses with a series of statistical tests that measured whether different forms of discrimination were related to negative mental health outcomes. [We found that](#) Black men who

reported more frequent encounters with racial discrimination were more likely to experience depression symptoms and thoughts of suicide at some point during their lifetime.

These [findings suggest](#) that experiences of discrimination do not have to be overt or extreme in order to be harmful. Rather, regularly occurring acts of racial discrimination that may initially seem minor can become increasingly stressful over time.

When interpreting these results, it is important to note that we analyzed findings from a cross-sectional study. This means that surveys were administered to participants at only one point in time. Therefore, we were able to establish associations among the variables, but cannot use this data to confirm that racial discrimination caused subsequent thoughts of suicide.

Nonetheless, our findings still offer an important step forward by establishing that links between racial discrimination, depression symptoms and lifetime suicidal thoughts do exist.

## **Mental health of Black children and youth**

Our study builds on other research that has also identified links between racial discrimination and suicidal thoughts in Black Americans.

For example, University of Houston clinical psychologist Rheeda Walker and her colleagues [found that among 722 Black children](#), experiences of racial discrimination were linked to more depression and greater odds of suicidal thoughts two years later. Members of the research team contacted participants two times and asked the same survey questions—once at age 10 and again at age 12.

Findings generated from [their 2017 study](#) are particularly meaningful

because the authors analyzed data over time, which allowed them to confirm that racial discrimination significantly predicts an increase in suicidal thoughts, and [not the other way around](#).

Since then, clinicians, researchers and organizational leaders have partnered with members of the [Congressional Black Caucus](#) to call attention to the urgent mental health needs of Black youth. In 2019, this group created an emergency task force and released a [powerful report](#) that carefully describes the current state of suicide among Black youth.

As detailed in various studies, [Black children ages 5 to 12](#) were two times more likely to die by suicide relative to white children, with [young Black boys](#) being particularly vulnerable to suicide risk. Notably, rates of suicide have also significantly increased among Black teenage girls in [recent years](#).

In response to these concerns, leaders at the National Institutes of Health have [allocated research funds and invited applications](#) for projects promoting suicide prevention among Black youth.

Researchers have also begun to explore the links between structural forms of racism and suicide risk. For instance, [a study published in 2020](#) found that being unfairly fired from a job and experiencing abuse from the police were linked to suicidal thoughts, plans and attempts among Black adults.

Despite these advances in research, it remains unclear whether any existing suicide prevention interventions account for the specific ways that racial discrimination impacts Black Americans' psychological and emotional well-being.

Therefore, it will be essential for researchers, clinicians and community members to work together in promoting the mental health needs of

Black children and adults, while simultaneously encouraging Black Americans to hold on to the hope that Frederick Douglass professed more than 175 years ago.

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