



July 29, 2020

Trauma, Mental Illness, and Suicide

According to a recent article by Lakeidra Chavis in the Chicago Sun-Times, midway through 2020, Cook County is seeing an alarming rise in the number of suicides among Black residents. The number of deaths already has matched all of last year and has this year on pace to be the worst in a decade. As of July 24, the Cook County medical examiner's office has recorded 57 deaths of Black men, women and children from suicide this year. That compares to 56 — which was a nine-year low — for all of 2019. Since 2010, the average number has been 65 a year.

There hasn't been a similar rise in suicides among white Cook County residents. Whites account for the majority of suicides here as well as nationally. Nor has there been a rise in suicide among Latinos. Also, the number of suicides among Black people under 30 midway through this year is nearly double the average for the same six-month period going back to 2010, according to the medical examiner's data.

It's difficult to know the precise number of Black suicides for a variety of reasons. Among them: whether what appear to have been accidental drug overdoses actually were suicides.

The rise in the number of Black Cook County residents taking their own lives this year began even before the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and the state's stay-at-home order. Most of the victims were male. Just over 40% of the deaths involved a gun. About a third were hangings. The median age at death was 36, according to the medical examiner's data. But the youngest victim, a boy who died earlier this month, was only 9 years old.

We have to recognize that we have a problem and a deficit as it relates to mental health support in our communities with high levels of trauma. Our Black communities have been dealing with all the things poverty creates: violence, poor mental and physical health, drug use, and now a sharp increase in suicide. Even before the pandemic, we were already dealing with a violent society suffering from major mental health conditions.

In co-founding the West Side Mental Health Task Force, I have asked a group of community leaders and mental health professionals to come together to help identify and implement ways to address the heightened level of trauma and resulting mental illness that people on the West Side are experiencing, including addressing the explosion in the number of suicides affecting us.

This month is National Minority Mental Health Awareness Month. If you or someone you know is struggling, the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is a free, 24/7, confidential service that provides support and connections to resources for those in distress. Call (800) 273-8255 or text (800) 273-8255, both toll-free.

Sincerely,

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, sweeping initial 'L' followed by a series of connected loops and a final horizontal stroke.

La Shawn K. Ford
State Representative-Eighth District