



## Ohio Psychological Association: Official Statement

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### **Mental Health Issues and Suicide Prevention in African American Males: MarShawn McCarrell – Black Lives Matter**

*March 4, 2016*

*Written by: OPA Board of Directors with special thanks to Diversity Committee and its chair, Dr. Gary Carrington*

It is with sadness in the wake of his loss that Ohio Psychological Association (OPA) offers its debt of gratitude to MarShawn McCarrell. We honor MarShawn for his efforts in addressing social and racial inequalities as a member of the Black Lives Matter movement. OPA seeks to honor the memory of MarShawn by increasing awareness of the prevalence of suicide in the African American community. OPA affirms its commitment to assist in empowering the African American community by promoting mental health.

The death of MarShawn McCarrell highlights many social issues often ignored, including suicide among Black males. Little is written and even less is said about the prevalence of completed suicide among Black males. There is a common belief that very few African Americans commit suicide. However consider the following startling statistics. According to the Center for Disease Control (CDC) suicide rates among young African American males have almost doubled since 1993, and suicide is the 16th leading cause of death for Blacks of all ages. Shockingly, suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death for African American males ages 15-24. The suicide rate for African American males is increasing and has been for the past fifty years. This raises the question as to whether suicide among young Black males is an epidemic. In order to reduce the frequency of completed suicides, it is critical that society understand the factors which contribute to suicide. OPA is committed to being a key participant in this educational process.

The appalling rate of suicide in Black males is symptomatic of deeply embedded social and racial problems which have significant implications for society. MarShawn McCarrell's suicide represents a tragic loss to bereaved family and friends, and an even greater loss of human life and potential to the African American community and the community at large. OPA is committed to highlighting, and increasing awareness of the pattern of African American male suicide rates, in an effort to address and remedy the social inequities that contribute to this silent suffering.

Notably, risk factors for Black males can look different than traditional markers of mental health concerns. Depression, often manifested in deep sadness, is seen as a significant precursor to suicidal behavior. However, anger, irritability, a sense of hopelessness owing to long-standing oppression, a

feeling of hopelessness secondary to a lack of power and control, and engagement in violence can all be unsuspected symptoms of depression.

All persons of color may experience forms of racial oppression. Racism related stress is a significant factor in exacerbating emotional debilitation of African American males. Feelings of anger, frustration, grief, and despair can all occur over time. These emotions can increase suicidal ideation, and are thought to be precursors to mood related illnesses that contribute to suicidal thinking and behavior.

A major reason for the increasing rate of suicide among African American males is that this group is exposed to high rates of social risk factors of depression and suicide. These include poverty, unemployment, poor education, medical disease, lack of health care, and systematic oppression. At the same time, persons of color tend to have less access to mental health care, and are at greater risks for poor mental health outcomes resulting from racial oppression. The majority of African American males do not receive treatment, and when they do receive treatment, it is frequently inadequate treatment at best. Black males who do seek treatment are more likely to be misdiagnosed and are disproportionately pathologized compared to the general population.

Despite the challenges, as a community we can all play a role in addressing the mental health crisis gripping our society, especially the epidemic of suicide among young Black males. Social support remains among the most important factors shielding Black men from suicidal behavior. Research suggests that African American males who report close family ties, and strong and close friendships are less likely to consider suicide. Reaching out and being responsive, attentive, and present are forms of assistance. If you or someone you know is struggling, OPA recommends they seek mental health treatment. The National Suicide Prevention Hotline number is 1-800-272-8355, and additional resources are available at <http://afsp.org/find-support/>

OPA is committed to reducing and eliminating suicide. OPA is supportive of efforts to reduce and eliminate health care disparities through improved access to quality mental health services in Ohio. We grieve the loss of MarShawn McCarrel, and OPA affirms that Black Lives Matter. We are committed to promoting the mental health and wellbeing of young African American men.

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