

# Suicide Among American Muslims and Factors Associated with Increasing Rates



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## Abstract

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death in the United States. Muslim individuals in the U.S are two times more likely to have attempted suicide when compared to other religious groups in the country<sup>1</sup>. This project explores the factors that contribute to increased suicide rates in the American Muslim population. The goal is to investigate these factors to bring awareness to the underlying issues that may exist within this community.

## Introduction

- Although mental health care has improved significantly in the United States over the last decade, Muslim Americans continue to be a community in need of help
- In the U.S, it is estimated that the total population of this group of individuals is around 3.5 million, comprising 1.1% of the U.S population<sup>2</sup>. The Muslim population is not only a prominent existence in this country, but they are also a diverse culmination of individuals in terms of race, religious practices, national origin, and immigration status<sup>3</sup>
- Despite the available studies investigating the risks associated with suicide in the general population, research regarding suicide within the Muslim population is limited
- Studies are needed in order to provide guidance for mental health professionals and community leaders in how to help this population of people and provide them with proper mental health treatment and resources

## Methods

- For this review, a comprehensive literature search was conducted using several online databases. These included the following: PubMed, Google Scholar, and JAMA Network
- Search terms included, but were not limited to: suicide, suicide attempts, risk factors, mental health, and Muslim Americans.

## Results

- The factors that may explain increased rates of suicide and suicide attempts can be separated into internal and external causes related to the Islamic religion and the individual identity of an American Muslim

### The Islamic Faith and Societal Norms:

- Within the Islamic religion, it is emphasized that one must seek closeness to God<sup>4</sup>. As a result, practicing individuals may perceive many mental health crises such as depression, anxiety, and paranoia, as being a test or even punishment from God. Some even believe it to be a possession from an evil spirit. This would explain why Muslim Americans are found to be more willing to seek help with religious leaders within their community<sup>4</sup>. Many of these leaders, however, do not receive education on mental health care during their training, as they are found to be less likely than other clergy to receive formal training on counseling<sup>5</sup>

## Results (cont.)

- While prayer is a tool used by people to combat depression and anxiety and might help alleviate symptoms short term, it may not be enough to fully address any underlying mental illness if one exists
- Stigma, in addition, may also be a contributing factor leading to individuals failing to seek out proper treatment. With possible concerns on the social standing of the individual and their family when mental health is disclosed to the public<sup>6</sup>

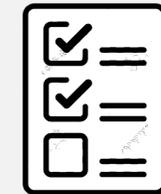
### Islamophobia and Discrimination:

- Discrimination is not only an issue within the community but also outside of it
- Muslim Americans are described by population data as a religious minority in the US. Not only a minority but also a group more vulnerable to religious discrimination through use of identifiable clothing such as wearing the hijab<sup>7</sup>
- In 2016, a study found that 60% of Muslim Americans reported some level of religious discrimination<sup>8</sup>. This discrimination has been linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, paranoia, and alcohol use among community members<sup>7</sup>
- This predisposition to higher levels of anxiety and depression, combined with the possible lack of formal mental health treatment within this community, may be the reasons behind the higher rates of suicide within this population

## Conclusion

Muslim Americans are at risk of mental health disorders and increased suicide attempts due to factors that include religious discrimination, stigma within the community, and barriers to treatment. By shedding a light on these proposed factors, we can make steps towards opening up a discussion on the importance of these issues within this community.

## Future Directions



- The next steps for this project include collecting qualitative data on possible risk factors affecting local Muslim communities using surveys and questionnaires
- In addition, reaching out to Muslim communities throughout the country with resources on mental health services they may be accessed as needed

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