



RELIGION AND SUICIDE IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY. By Kevin E. Early. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992. 160 pp. \$39.95 cloth.

The rate of suicide in the African-American (or black) population is somewhat of a paradox. The social circumstances of this group would lead one to predict high rates of suicide. Instead, despite recent increases in the rates of suicide among African-American youth, the rate of suicide continues to be lower among African Americans than among whites. In fact, of the 15 leading causes of death in the United States, suicide is the only example of a dramatically lower death rate for blacks than for whites.

Kevin Early begins with the hypothesis that the church in the African-American community is a protective social community that reduces the risk of suicide. In so doing he builds on Durkheim's notion that although suicide is a classic expression of individual behavior, it is nonetheless constrained by larger social forces. Specifically, Durkheim indicated that the absence of integration into religious communities or other social groups would increase an individual's risk for suicide. Early's focus on protective resources is a strength that balances the all too common focus on deficits and pathological conditions in the black population.

Early garnered evidence from participant observation, face-to-face interviews with 30 black clergy, and a survey of 220 attendees at black church services. However, the analysis does not sufficiently capitalize on the potential contribution of this multimethod approach. For example, the pastors' reports that they seldom, if ever, addressed suicide from the pulpit could have been compared to the findings from a content analysis of the sermons that Early had observed. Similarly, the data from the survey of church members are not particularly well integrated into the book. The marginals for the survey items are reported in a separate chapter. There is no attention to the reporting of subgroup differences in the distribution of survey responses, and it is not clear how much this final analysis chapter adds to the overall book.

Early concludes that the black church plays a critical role in reducing suicide. However, he is not sufficiently critical of his data. He appears to accept at face value the assertions made by the clergy. The book accepts at the outset the notion that the black church is central in the African-American community. It is noted that this centrality is repeatedly asserted by the ministers in interviews with them. Moreover, the survey of church members indicate that they share their minis-

ters' perception of the centrality of the church, and its importance to other institutions in the community. These beliefs are part of the official ideology of the black church, so it is hardly surprising that they are echoed by the official spokespersons and active participants in worship services. Evidence in support of the notion of centrality, apart from the words of participants, would make the case more compelling. Arguably, this centrality could be declining over time, especially among African-American youth — those at most risk for suicide.

Similarly, it is asserted that there are close ties between the black church and the black family and that the family plays a more central role in the socialization of blacks than of whites. No direct evidence is presented for these assertions, and it is not clear to what extent these assertions are valid. Some widely held beliefs do not survive the scrutiny of empirical examination. For example, in contrast to the conventional wisdom, Clifford Broman demonstrated, with national data, that whites were more likely than blacks to contact the clergy when faced with problems.

One of the strengths of the study is its analysis of the clergy's views of suicide compared to their attitudes toward crime and drugs. The pastors are united in their denunciation of suicide: It is sinful and opposes God's authority. They are also squarely opposed to drugs and crime, yet the church seems to be less effective in countering these problems in the African American community. Early shows that the clergy are unequivocal in their condemnation of suicide. They allow "no justification or rationale for the taking of one's life." In contrast, although they condemn the use of alcohol and drugs, they are sympathetic to how social conditions can lead an individual to a life of crime and drugs. They view crime and substance use as "unacceptable but understandable" responses to adverse living conditions.

Religion and Suicide in the African American Community is an important exploratory study that provides useful leads for hypothesis generation and future research. The data presented are not particularly persuasive and the book is repetitive in places. Its usefulness is enhanced, though, by an index and appendices that provide detail on the methodology. Early's work focuses research attention on an important but neglected topic.

DAVID R. WILLIAMS
*University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan*