

Safety Plans Save Lives When Mentally Ill Black Children Face Police

Parents of children suffering from mental illness can protect them by taking several important steps.

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<https://www.parents.com/kindred/safety-plans-save-lives-when-mentally-ill-black-children-face-police/>

Published on September 22, 2022

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It's easy to feel helpless or unsure of what to do if you are the parent of a Black child with mental health issues and/or who has experienced one or more mental health crises. Notably, there is currently a shortage of available mental health service providers across the country. But that doesn't mean that you can't ask, and find mental health help for your child, and the entire family. It doesn't mean you can't protect your child from some of the dangers they may face due to their illness.

Black Teens, Mental Health and the Juvenile Justice System

When it comes to disparate treatment between Black and Brown children or teens who have mental health issues, there are countless situations when mentally ill teens and youth are going to jail instead of getting appropriate treatment.

According to the 2015 report, [Overlooked in the Undercounted: The Role of Mental Illness in Fatal Law Enforcement Encounters](#), individuals with untreated mental illness are 16 times more likely to be killed during a police encounter. Individuals of color are thought to have an even higher rate, overall, but data is limited since there is currently no federal or state-by-state database keeping track of police-civilian deaths. Additionally, there is no national database tracking how many African-American

children and teens with mental health issues have been detained and/or arrested by law enforcement.

"Sometimes, there are community groups or crisis centers to call first [before 911.] As a parent, you want to be prepared. Know your options," says Stacey Younge, a licensed clinical social worker and founder of [Sixth Street Wellness](#), a New York City-based office providing mental health services for children, teens, adults, and families.

"Many times there are families that experienced a lot in the past. The best thing is to acknowledge what your child is going through," Younge says in the instance if a child has had a traumatic experience or witnesses violence of a friend, classmate, or neighbor.

When a Mental Health Crisis and Police Actions Collide

In a 2021 case involving Cedric Lofton, a 17-year-old foster child with mental health issues, the teen was detained by Wichita, Kansas Department police officers, after his foster family called police due to Lofton's alleged "odd and erratic behavior."

Throughout this incident, Lofton never had any kind of weapon. Responding police claim they spent up to an hour talking to Lofton at the scene of the foster family's home

outside, but it's not clear whether there was ever a plan to take Lofton to a psychiatric facility for a mental health evaluation.

Instead, at some point during the September 2021 incident, police assaulted and physically restrained Lofton and then arrested the teen for allegedly physically assaulting the arresting police officers. According to the clips from Kansas Police Department body cam footage, both during and after his arrest, Lofton appears to be disoriented—but alive—when Kansas police officers leave the juvenile justice facility.

At some point later between 3 and 5 a.m. during a trip to the restroom while at the juvenile justice facility, Lofton became agitated and allegedly hit a staff member who was trying to restrain him. This allegedly led to a second—or third—violent interaction between Lofton and multiple correction officers. To date, full video footage of the circumstances has not yet been released.

Within minutes, Lofton was left face down and unconscious in his jail cell. According to the facility records, approximately four minutes after the altercation ended, staff determined that Lofton had no pulse. After Lofton was transported to the hospital, doctors pronounced the teen dead.

Lofton's September 2021 autopsy and post-mortem reports mention "complications of cardiopulmonary arrest sustained after physical struggle while restrained in the prone position." Lofton also had "anoxic brain injury, acute respiratory failure, and acute kidney injury." Lofton's autopsy also found the teen tested positive for Covid-19, but it's not clear if he was symptomatic or taking any medications, [news reports](#) say.

Deaths from situations with Black teens with mental health issues have happened again and again and again. Oftentimes, there are no special considerations, especially for Black boys, teens and youth and those who may have witnessed their classmate or neighbor being taken away after a mental health crisis.

Safety Plans Protect Mentally Ill Black Children

Younge says it is essential for parents to have an accessible safety plan for teens with mental health needs. A safety plan ideally should be made in a clinician's office that involves the child or teen and the family, before a crisis, Younge says.

Please consult a mental health professional when creating or revising a safety plan for your child or teen. A safety plan for children in crisis may include the following:

- Self-identified potential triggers or warnings, including signs that a mental health crisis might be starting.
- Internal coping strategies, including activities that a child or teen can do like relaxation and breathing techniques
- A list of trusted family, friends and caregivers, and others whom the children can ask for help (in-person, phone, via social media, etc.)
- A list of mental health professionals who the parent and/or child can call. (including the hours they may be available.) It's important to have an up-to-date list with the exact contact numbers, and websites, including the name of the mental health professional, and business operating hours. Make sure to include at least one mental health professional who is available during non-business hours on nights/weekends/holidays.
- A list of free crisis hotlines that are available 24/7, including suicide prevention toll-free numbers.
- Keep in mind that after your child turns 18, you don't automatically have the right to access their healthcare information and make decisions on their behalf but parents can fill out power of attorney and

HIPPA release forms to grant them the access they need.

With a safety plan in place, if there is a crisis in the middle of the night, a parent or caregiver will more easily be able to contact an on-call mental health professional. It can't hurt to have a backup crisis mental health professional, along with a list of toll-free phone hotlines or online chat options of trained mental health professionals who handle emergency situations.

If possible, one option may be directly transporting a teen in crisis to a hospital emergency and letting staff know the situation. Whenever possible, make sure that the child or teen in crisis does not have anything that could be considered a weapon to minimize the possibility of self-harm or creating an unsafe situation.

When Should you Call 988 or 911?

Depending on the circumstances, the trained mental health professional on the other end of the line may call emergency specialized support on your behalf to come to your home and/or give step-by-step support if you are able to travel to a mental health emergency room with your child. Another option is the new Suicide and Crisis Hotline 988 which can be used for advice via phone or text.

Still, in certain situations, it still may be necessary to still call 911, Younge notes. She stresses it's important for caregivers to know that once the police are involved in a mental health emergency, law enforcement typically decides on the next steps—not the parents or the mental health clinician, she says.

What To Do if Child Welfare Gets Involved

The problem of racial disproportionality and disparity in child welfare or CPS cases has long been a systemic issue. In fact, according to a 2017 study, Black families are more likely to get a call from CPS or child welfare officials, including for matters relating to their child's mental health. Some advocates believe that racial bias plays a role in the significantly higher number of African-Americans who have open CPS cases due to a child's mental health issues.

Child welfare officials and medical providers may also hold Black caregivers to a different standard when it comes to their mentally ill children and teens and mandated reporter allegations. It's possible that child welfare could allege that mothers and caregivers are "at-fault" and/or "neglectful" of their child's mental health issues and needs.

If CPS contacts you, because of a child's mental health crisis and/or a mental health neglect allegation or for any related mental health reasons, it may be necessary to get professional legal or advocacy help (usually available for

free or low-cost) throughout the process of getting your child the mental health services they need. Again, if your child is experiencing a mental health crisis and you need help, don't delay—go to the emergency room and/or call your child's doctor about mental health referrals and support.

Advocate for and Support Your Child

"The priority should be that if your child is scared, you are the parent and should help them feel safe," Younge says. "If your child is up for talking, talk to them. If they need space, give them space. Check-in with your child regularly to see what they need," she says.

Sometimes, especially after a crisis or traumatic event, children and teens may not immediately be ready for therapy or mental health support. You as the parent really want to get their insight to check to see what your child needs. Look out for signs of anxiety and depression. According to Younge, signs of mental health issues may vary. "Maybe your child seems really angry. Maybe they seem withdrawn, maybe something else is going on," she says.

If your child declines regular mental health now, consider checking in with them every few weeks or months, Younge says. Perhaps your older teen may decide later they want mental health help, instead of immediately after a

traumatic event or crisis. Just continue to reach out to your child and "meet them where they are at," she says.

Don't Forget To Get Support for Yourself

It's not uncommon for parents and caregivers to get depressed or down as well, especially if your child or teen has had multiple mental health crises. Younge recommends parents get mental health help for themselves, if necessary. Let trusted people in your support circle know what is happening.

At the end of the day, Black parents should never feel ashamed to get the mental health support they need for their children, and themselves.

Disclaimer:

The information in the article above is not intended to be a substitute for professional advice, diagnosis, or treatment. Always seek the advice of your mental health professional or another qualified health provider with any questions you may have regarding any mental health or other issues you are experiencing. Never disregard professional advice or delay in seeking it during a crisis.

If you are in crisis or you think you may be experiencing a mental health emergency, call your doctor, 988, or 911 immediately. If you're having suicidal thoughts, call or text 988.

Call 1-800-273-TALK (8255) to talk to a skilled, trained counselor at a crisis center in your area at any time (National Suicide Prevention Lifeline). If you are located outside the United States, call your local emergency line immediately.