

Dying young: Questions about suicide

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About every two hours a young person in the U.S. between the ages of 15 and 24 dies of suicide. It wasn't always this way. The suicide rate for young white males tripled between 1950 and 1994, and it doubled in that period for white females. Though the figures have dropped slightly since then, the rate remains high. In 1999, about 4,000 young people killed themselves. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for college students (after accidents), and the third-leading cause of death (after accidents and homicides) for all those 15-24. A 1999 survey reported that 20 percent of high school students seriously contemplated suicide during the previous year, and 8 percent attempted it. Girls try more often; boys more often succeed.

Statistics like these are catastrophes with the tears wiped off. Behind each suicide statistic is a young life cut absurdly short, friends bereft, a family shaken to its roots, and survivors who can never stop asking Why? and What could we have done to prevent it?

Beyond the unique, torturous questions generated by each suicide is the larger cultural question: Why is it that more young people these days find their lives too painful to endure? Some observers point to the prevalence of divorce and the breakdown of the nuclear family, which leaves children with deep emotional scars, low self-esteem and uncertain parental support, and hence prone to depression and anxiety disorders. Others point to young people's easier access (and access at an earlier age) to drugs and alcohol. That there is a link between substance abuse and suicide is, at any rate, incontrovertible. Alcohol and drugs play a role in half to two-thirds of youthful suicides, clouding judgment, lowering inhibitions and exacerbating depression.

Yet direct correlations between suicide and these social variables are difficult to document. Suicide remains, in many respects, a mystery—as mysterious as individuals are to one another and to themselves.

Is it simply harder to grow up now than it was in previous generations? That possibility might seem hard to grasp for those who came of age with the deprivations of the Depression, or the rigors of the Second World War, or the upheavals of the Vietnam war era and the drug culture of the early 1970s. But today's young people face their own sort of deprivation: fewer adults involved in their lives, the bestowal of an empty "autonomy" at an early age, a college environment that offers a host of choices but abstains from moral prescriptions, and a pervasive consumerist culture that defines success in terms of possessions and sexual marketability. All these developments contain a subtle (or not so subtle) nihilistic message. The suicide figures may be a sign that this message is all too clearly being heard.