

Teen Suicide Rate in Alarming Rise

By Laurence Mullin
RNS Staff Writer

At a time when their lives are supposed to be full of bright promise and shining hope, children, teen-agers and young adults, in increasing numbers, are saying no to life, and either killing themselves or trying to do so.



Special Report

Suicide may be the second or the third leading cause of death, after accidents among American young people — experts disagree — but it is a leading cause.

Last year, approximately 5,000 Americans between the ages of 15 and 24 did away with themselves.

That is about twice as many as 10 years ago and three times as many as 20 years ago.

And attempted suicides by American young people, in the past decade, have risen at an even more alarming rate. According to Dr. Michael Peck, director of youth services at the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center, 100,000 Americans under 24 tried to kill themselves in 1977, and 200,000-300,000 contemplated suicide.

This means that 10 to 15 per cent of America's young people have thought seriously about self-destruction or attempted it.

The suicide rate among 10-to-14-year-old children has risen nearly as fast as the rate for 15-to-24-year-olds.

These U.S. figures do not include children under 10 years of age, whose suicides are automatically classified as accidents, nor do the figures include most drug overdoses, willful accidents, or all the suicides termed accidental deaths at the behest of grieving parents or relatives.

Why do so many young people in growing numbers in the U.S. kill themselves, or try to kill themselves, or think about killing themselves?

Experts offer a variety of reasons.

The special anxiety of adolescence is one of them. Adolescence, says Washington psychologist Alan Berman, is "full of emotional fluxes, self-doubts, searches for identity, and the need for peer acceptance. Often, kids don't know how to deal with it" especially if they lack strong support from family or friends.

With teen-agers, who generally take set backs harder than adults, a specific emotional blow — the loss of a girlfriend or a boyfriend, a poor grade in school, even the simple failure of a driver's test — piled on top of

deeper problems, can trigger a suicide attempt.

Some experts say the shifting state of the American family is a major cause of the growing youthful suicide problem. Many parents, preoccupied with their own lives and careers, often stir feelings of isolation and rejection in their children. And when parents, for whatever reason, fail to provide guidance and directives for their children, it is often seen by the children as a lack of caring.

Divorce can also have an unsettling effect on children, who may feel responsible for the parents' breakup or simply lost in a new family situation.

But even if family life is relatively secure, many young people suffer severe anxieties stemming from competitive pressure of getting high grades or a good job after graduation.

"Many kids feel it's not worth living, that jobs won't be there after they graduate," says Dr. Pamela Cantor, a clinical psychologist at Boston University. "Society can't absorb them, and they know that most of them simply won't make it."

Heightened competition for school and jobs seems to have boosted the suicide rate for young blacks, which in the past ran one-third to one-half the rate of young whites. Today the rates for black and white teenagers are about the same.

Suicide and attempts at it are often cries for help, says William Springs Jr., psychologist for the Baptist Children's homes in Thomasville, N.C. When a young person receives no assurance of his or her worth, self-inflicted death may become a last bid for love and affection.

Statistically, there are more suicides among young men and more attempts among young women. The women succeed less often because they use less lethal methods, such as taking pills, while the men tend to favor guns.

Dr. Calvin J. Frederick of the National Institute of Mental Health explains the difference this way: "A suicide attempt is a cry for help, a cry for someone to care. But men don't feel free to cry for help. Women do."

Consequently, he says, women use slower, less final methods — but the underlying stress on both men and women is about the same.

Whatever the reasons young people want to kill themselves, Dr. Frederick remarks, the reasons add up to a state of mind that is "hapless, helpless and hopeless. They don't believe in the future."

What can be done? Experts stress that family, friends, and teachers must be alert to the warning signs of possible or impending suicide attempts by teenagers. A teenager doing well in school may suddenly start

doing poorly. He or she may withdraw from friends and start spending a lot of time alone. There may be difficulty sleeping or excessive sleeping. There may be an increase in drug or alcohol use. There may be a sudden loss of appetite, or sharp mood changes, or a loss of interest in sports or former hobbies. The teenager may begin giving away prized possessions, begin to show increased anxiety, tension, or apathy.

Experts agree that people should be particularly alert to any talk about suicide by a teen-ager, especially if threats are made.

"One of the most dangerous myths is the belief that those who threaten or talk about suicide won't go through with it," says a new Public Affairs pamphlet, Adolescent Suicide: Mental Health Challenge.

When parents or friends realize what is happening, the best help they can provide, according to experts, is to listen.

Says Dr. Peck of the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center: "What is needed is for parents to learn to listen . . . Just listening and being there is what's important. The deterrent is almost always on an interpersonal level — someone saying in effect, "Wait, there has to be an alternative. I care about you and want to help you find it."

Sally Casper, who works at the Samaritans, an international suicide prevention organization that got its start in Britain, says: "Our job is to listen. Most people who attempt suicide just need a chance to talk and be listened to," to be assured they are lovable and loved.

"Some people say that a suicide attempt is just a bid for attention," Miss Casper adds. "I don't begrudge giving people that attention. I don't want them to kill themselves to have to prove how bad they feel."

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In order to handle copy and photographs properly, all news releases must be received by the Courier-Journal by noon Thursday for the following week's edition.

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Calendar

pull 1 p.m., chicken barbecue 4-6 p.m.; dancing from 8:30. Money-raiser for parish center, St. Mary's of the Lake.

DANNY THOMAS BIKE-A-THON— Sunday, July 15, 9:30 a.m. Riders check in at War Memorial, 8:30.

LEUKEMIA BENEFIT— The Hair Loft, 124 S. Main, Fairport, offers all proceeds July 14 and 15 to Leukemia Society of America. Haircut \$7; 9 a.m.-4:30 p.m.

JAZZ WEEK— Faculty concert at 8 p.m. Thursday, July 12, Kilbourn Hall;

student concert 8 p.m. Friday, Room 120. Both free.

FINGER LAKES MUSIC FESTIVAL— Rochester Philharmonic with Gap Mangione, 8 p.m. Sunday, July 15, Community College, Canandaigua.

THURSDAY IN THE PARK— Noontime concerts in Brown Square Bicentennial Park. July 12, Harold Tausch and His Royal Bavarians.

CORNERSTONE PARK CONCERTS— Fridays at noon. July 13, Vic Platti and the New Portrait.

COUNTY PARKS BAND— At Manhattan Square Park July 13, 7-9 p.m.; at Seneca Park Zoo July 14, 2-4 p.m.

CLASSIC FILM SERIES— In museum auditorium, RMSC, 2 and 8 p.m. July 12: Child of Manhattan (1933).

COUNTRY ART

FESTIVAL— Original works of 75 artists, July 14, noon-9, at Security Trust grounds off route 20A, Livonia. Continuous music, entertainment; chicken barbecue.

SETON 80— Steak roast July 15 at home of Mr. and Mrs. Fred Brown, Greenbriar Drive.

MIDSUMMER FESTIVAL

AL—Saturday, July 14, at Firemen's Field, Rt. 104, Ontario. Daylong arts, crafts, flea market, tractor

Family Camp Sets Dates

A week of family camping, sponsored by the diocesan Office of Family Life and the Divorced-Catholics Group, will be conducted at Camp Stella Maris the week of Aug. 26-Sept. 1.

Reservations for the program are now being taken by the Office of Family Life.

1150 Buffalo Road, Rochester, N.Y. 14624; (716) 436-5450. The fees for the program are: \$40 per person over 7 years old, \$20 per child 7 and younger, and \$5 per family for evening snacks.

The first third of the payment must accompany the reservation request.

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