

A Note on the Upward Trend in Young Male Suicides

by

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The suicide rate among young British men has doubled since the 1980s. A number of other nations have witnessed something similar. Why is this, how should we respond, and what does it tell us about society?

Perspective helps – and suggests three things.

First, the suicide rate in the whole population is much lower than earlier in the century. In 1911, 2700 men of all ages took their own lives in England and Wales. By the 1990s, that figure had risen only marginally to 2900. Yet over the period the size of the population increased by approximately 60%. Moreover, after adjusting for people's ages, the suicide rate among all men has declined gently since the early 1980s.

These young men's deaths are probably not, therefore, a signal that something is going wrong with the whole quality of life in the western democracies.

Second, although it has attracted recent publicity, the underlying problem is an old one. It worried previous generations. The rate of recorded suicide deaths among males aged 15-24 has trended upwards since the 1950s. A complete answer is thus not going to be found in an intrinsically '90s explanation.

Third, and encouragingly, young women now kill themselves less than in the 1980s. Only a quarter of all suicides in England and Wales are by females; that rate, moreover, has fallen continuously throughout the century.

There is other bright evidence. Surveys of young people's happiness and life satisfaction paint a better picture than is commonly supposed by the media. We have looked at data on 400,000 randomly sampled Europeans across ten

countries and a quarter of a century. At the start of the 1970s, 22% of those under twenty years old said they were very satisfied with their lives, and 5% said they were not at all satisfied. Publicity about unemployment and drugs and stress might lead one to believe that these numbers would have worsened sharply. Yet by the 1990s, the data show that 28% of those under twenty in Europe were very satisfied with their lives, and only 3% said they were not at all satisfied. When a formal test is done -- controlling for other factors -- there been a statistically significant rise in the reported well-being of young Europeans. Indeed the increase is greater among the young than among the old. Happiness surveys from the US tell the same story. Common perceptions notwithstanding, the data reveal that young people are doing better than older people. For the young, life is improving.

This leaves unanswered the question of why young males are ending their own lives more often.

Has the economic quality of the lives of young men visibly fallen? In a material sense, the answer is plainly no. Compared to their counterparts in the early 1980s, young males are richer and work fewer hours. Almost all watch colour television, spend more on clothes and food than their fathers did, and can choose exotic holidays. It is true that the wage differential between males and females has narrowed. But it remains the case that men typically earn a third more, on average, than equivalent female workers.

Could the rise in joblessness since the 1970s be the culprit? There is probably something to this: it is known that suicide attempts are made disproportionately by the unemployed. Yet disentangling cause and effect is not easy. A recent study in New Zealand, which has the world's highest youth suicide rate, concluded against unemployment as a true cause. And it is clear that swings in an economy's unemployment rate are not exactly correlated with movements in suicide deaths. All we know for sure is that attempted and actual suicides are made more by people who are deprived in a range of ways.

What of drink and hard drugs? Alcohol consumption has risen through time, and seven times as many people were found guilty of drugs offences in this country in the 1990s than the 1970s.

The 1996 British Crime Survey offers a still starker insight. Among those under twenty four, almost half the population of England and Wales answer yes to the question 'have you ever taken drugs?'. Ten percent of all young people, for

instance, say they have tried the drug Ecstasy. A fifth have taken amphetamines. The same survey finds that among those over the age of forty five, only one person in eight has ever tried drugs. As drug-taking is routinely implicated in individual suicides, this is thought-provoking circumstantial evidence; but it cannot be more than that.

Another plausible part of the puzzle lies in the decline of marriage. Single people report lower happiness levels and it is believed that marriage may provide a protective effect – though the mechanism is not properly understood – against life’s buffeting. Yet for this to be a large part of the explanation, it would have to be true that men gain more psychologically from marriage than women. Weddings take two.

Wilfrid Sheed remarked that suicide is the most sincere criticism that life ever gets. Although the growing number of young male suicides should be a concern to us all, it is not an indication that life is getting worse in a general sense in our country. Nevertheless, a better understanding of this topic is urgently needed.