

ANNA S. MUELLER, PHD

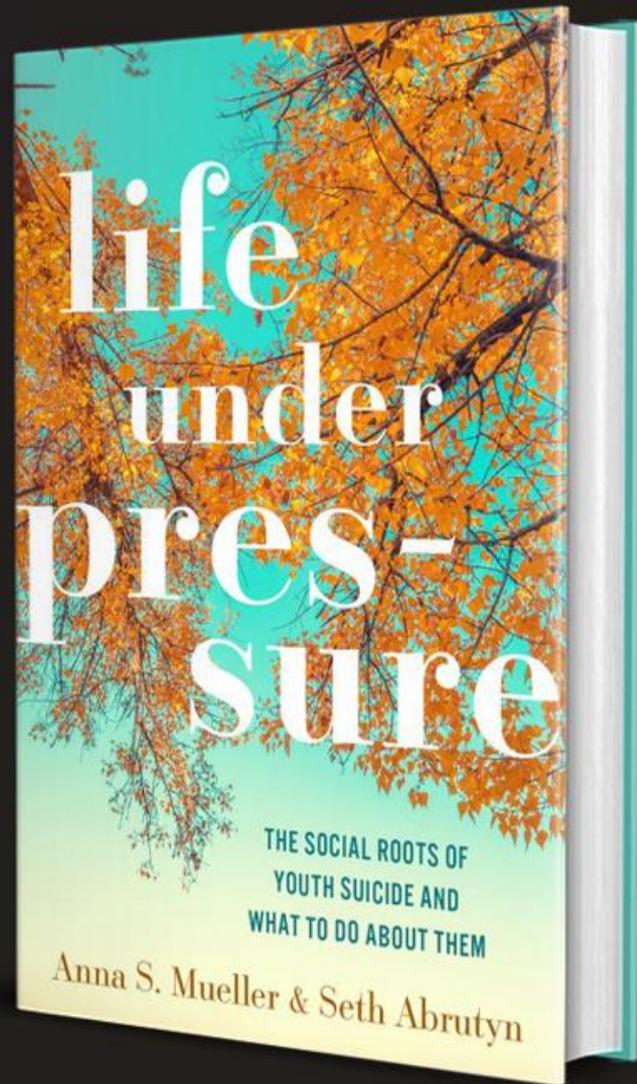


The Social Roots of Youth Suicide

And what to do about them

Handout

<https://go.iu.edu/8s7Q>





If you or someone you care about
is in crisis, please contact 988
or text TALK to 741741
(English & Spanish, 24/7)

For more resources, visit
<https://988indiana.org/>
<https://afsp.org/get-help/>



Handout
<https://go.iu.edu/8s7Q>





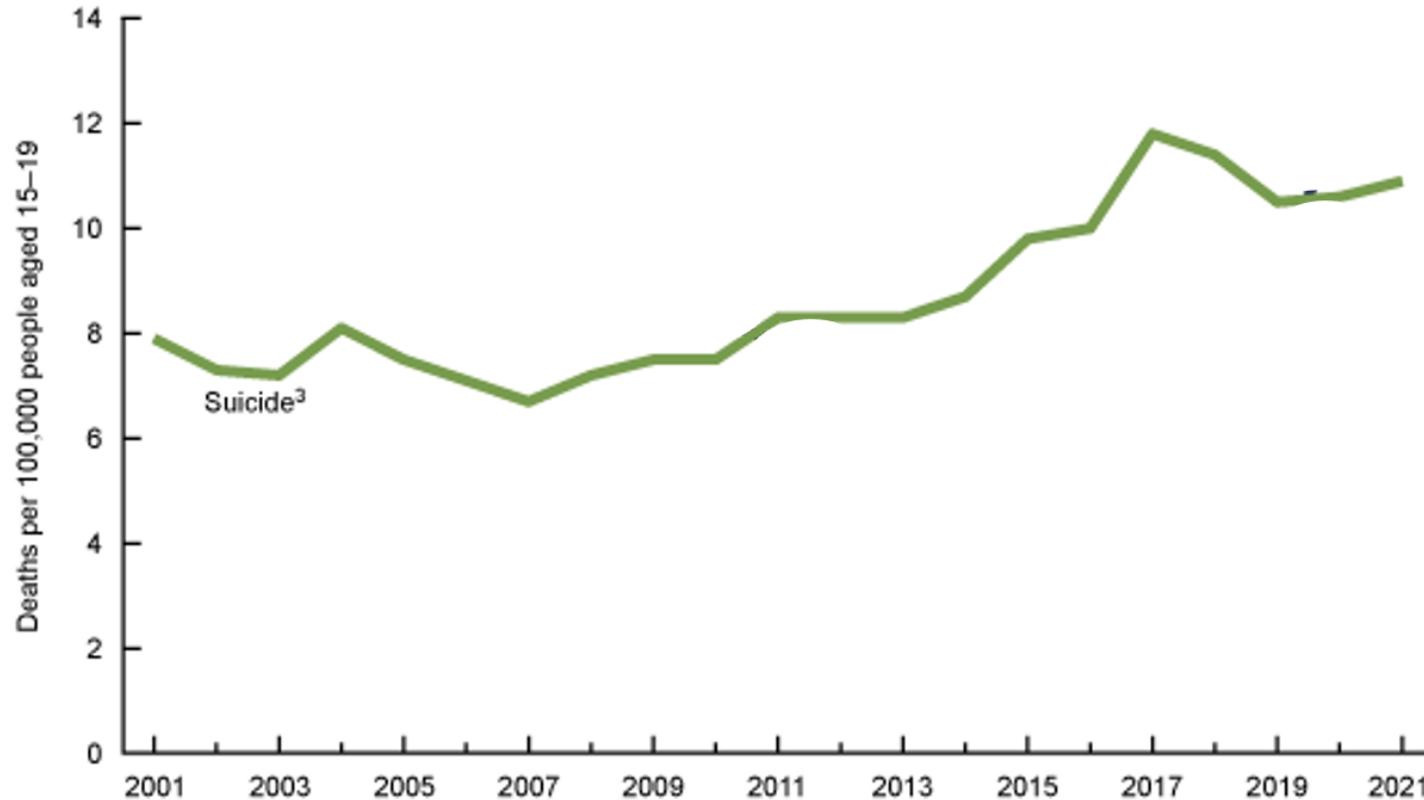
MENTAL HEALTH IN ADOLESCENCE



Handout <https://go.iu.edu/8s7Q>



Suicide rate among people aged 15–19: United States, 2001–2021



This is a national problem



SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Vital Statistics System, Mortality data file.

What we Know about Why People Die by Suicide

Life Events + Emotional Distress



Psychological Pain



Feel Trapped in Pain

(Pain overwhelms protective factors)

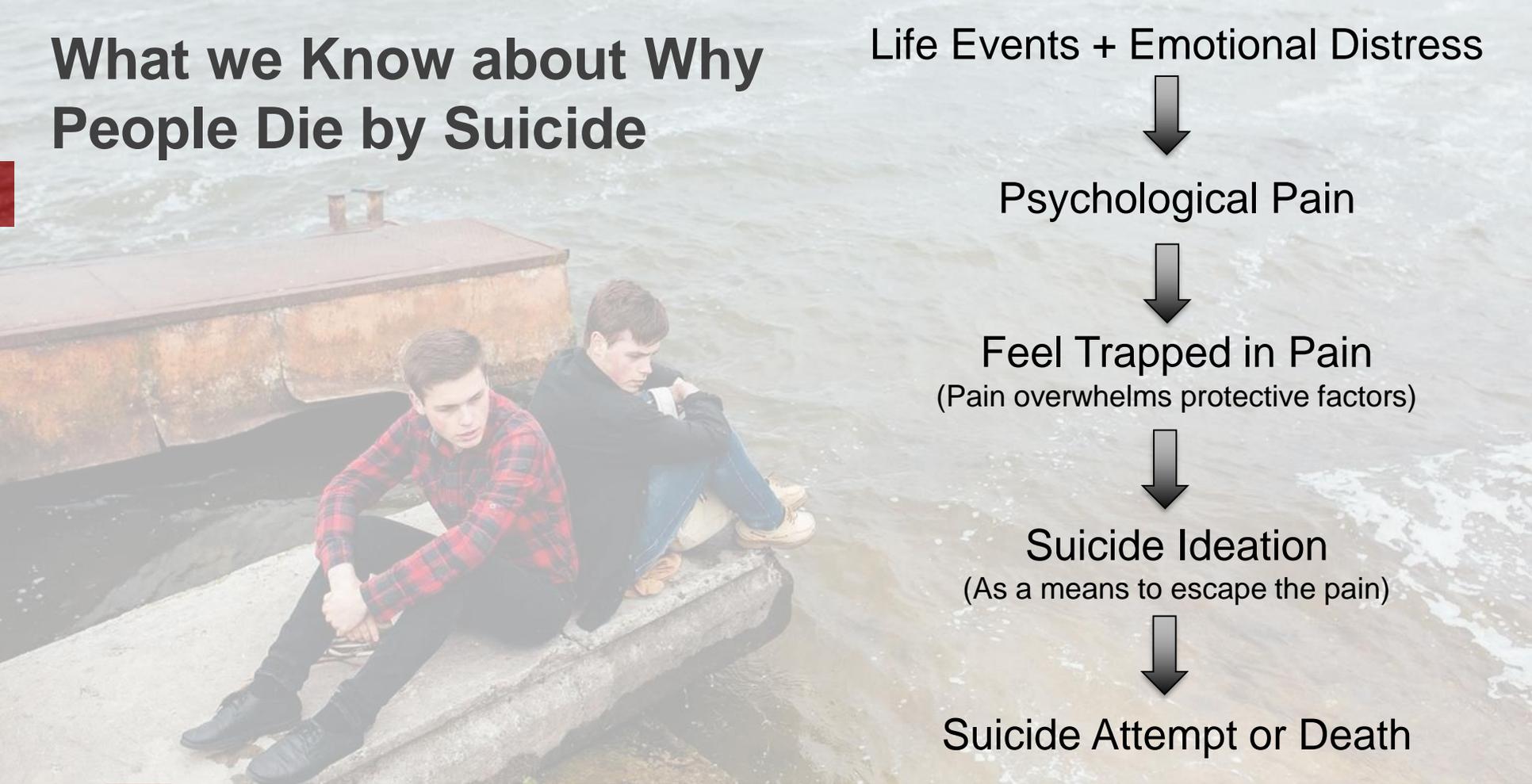


Suicide Ideation

(As a means to escape the pain)



Suicide Attempt or Death



What we Know about Why People Die by Suicide

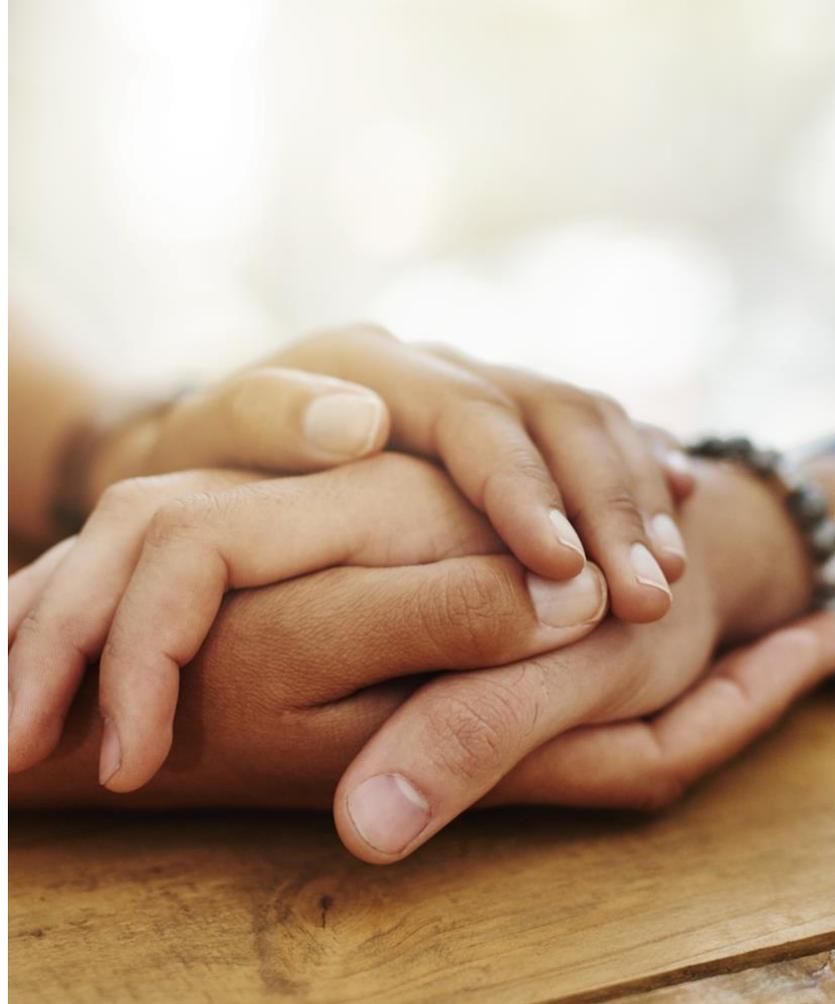
BOTTOM LINE

- Very difficult to know why one youth experiences suicidal thoughts or escalates to an attempt, while a seemingly similar youth does not
- Suicide and psychological pain is ***outrageously complex***



Youth Suicide Clusters

- Extremely limited knowledge re suicide clusters
 - Youth, males, and individuals with pre-existing risk factors more likely to die in a suicide cluster
 - For reviews: Cox et al. 2012; Haw et al. 2013
 - Bounded social organizations – like schools – are more vulnerable



Upstream Solutions

- Change the question...
- Focus on upstream solutions
 - Promoting mental health & help-seeking
 - This is where the social roots of suicide can really matter...



A group of six students, three men and three women, are walking away from the camera on a paved path. They are all wearing backpacks. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning. The background is filled with trees with yellowing leaves, creating a bokeh effect. The overall mood is welcoming and serene.

WELCOME TO POPLAR GROVE



In-Depth Case Study: Poplar Grove,* USA

- Affluent, educated, privileged community
 - Homogeneous population
 - Enduring suicide problem
 - Focused on the local high school PGHS
 - 15 former or current PGHS students died by suicide over 15 years
 - 3 youth died during our fieldwork
 - Echo suicide clusters
 - 3 or more youth died by suicide in a short period

**All names of people and places are pseudonyms; All pictures of people are stock photos*



In-Depth Case Study: Poplar Grove,* USA

- BROAD community-engaged approach to the research
- 3 years of fieldwork (2013-2016)
 - In Poplar Grove
 - ~100 interviews & focus groups
 - » Youth, Parents, Mental Health Workers, Faith leaders, Teachers, Crisis responders, etc.
 - Participant observation
 - With suicide bereaved individuals outside of Poplar Grove
 - ~50 interviews



A Brief Note on Language Choices & Best Practices

Preferred language: Died by Suicide

Potentially hurtful and stigmatizing language: Committed suicide

<https://afsp.org/how-to-talk-safely-about-suicide/>



Overview

- Describe 3 social roots of suicide
- Connect the social roots to individual vulnerability to suicide



Take Home Point

Suicide has social roots

The external social world matters...

- to youth's vulnerability to psychological pain
- to their ability to cope and seek help
- and thus to suicide





THE SOCIAL ROOTS



INDIANA UNIVERSITY BLOOMINGTON

Rigid Cultural Expectations

Douglas (Mental Health Worker):

“The expectation and the performance of students at Poplar Grove High school and the whole cluster that feeds into Poplar Grove has been one of **athletic excellence, academic excellence**, and I use the word expectation on purpose because the kids impose much of that need on themselves, but **there’s also a community expectation that we are Poplar Grove and that we are going to achieve.**”



Social Root #1



Rigid Cultural Expectations *Valued in the Adolescent Society*

Samantha (young adult):

“The more [advanced placement (AP)] courses you take the better, the more sports you’re involved with the better; the more trophies in your bedroom, the better.”

Shannon (teen):

“I don’t wanna sound cocky, but I tend to be exactly what the Poplar Grove ideal is...Like I said, I’m in [student government], team captain, varsity sport..., but I still go out every single weekend.”



Rigid Cultural Expectations

Amplified Mental Health Stigma

- Having a mental health problem is seen as contrary to the ideal of a “perfect” kid or family
- People hide mental health problems or don’t want to discuss them
 - When they are discussed its more to deflect or place blame on others

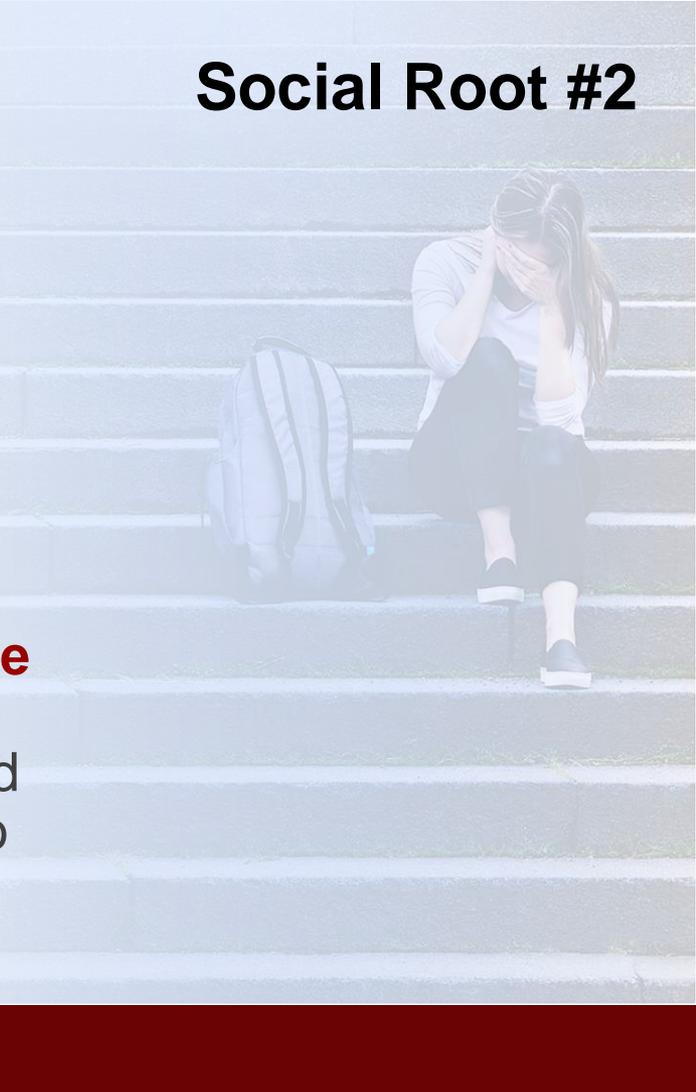


Mental Health Stigma

Social Root #2

Hannah (teen):

“All the bad stuff gets covered up. So nobody wants to be like ‘I have an issue.’ And nobody wants to come out and be honest about it. **So kids cover it up and try to act like they are doing well in school and they are being the Poplar Grove kid that they are supposed to be.** So it gets covered up, and then when it gets to the point where it's so bad that somebody would consider suicide, it's too late...”



The Role of Social Connectedness

Community was very socially connected

- **Isabelle (teen):** “For me growing up...if I got hurt...I could just walk in [to any house], crying with a busted knee, and they would help...I love that sense of community that we feel”
- **Victoria (mom):** “Nobody ignores a request for support – somebody will always rearrange their commitments. It's pretty amazing.”
- **Jim (dad):** “it's a very tight-knit community...we have a [community] pool and everybody knows everybody and we know all the kids, so you feel like there's network, a safety net around you all the time.”



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The Power of Reputation

- Poplar Grove is an elite community
- Sarah (mom, young child):

“People live in Poplar Grove because they want the best schools. They want the best for their children. I grew up in Annesdale [a nearby community]. I moved to Poplar Grove [as an adult] because having gone to Annesdale High School, I wasn't going to send my kid there. There wasn't anything wrong with it, but **Poplar Grove ... is Poplar Grove...Everybody wants to get in because they think they're missing out if they're not in.** And then the people that are in feel pressure to maintain that level of what people associate with the area.”



Consequences for Youth Mental Health



The Amplification of Psychological Pain

Consequence #1



Amplification of Psychological Pain

- The pressure to meet narrow expectations in Poplar Grove was painful for many youth
 - They felt the expectations were challenging to meet
- Many youth mentioned:
 - “midnight tears”
 - life being a “teenage nightmare”
 - hair falling out from stress
 - secret “breakdowns”



The Amplification of Psychological Pain

Vanessa (young adult)

“I definitely put a lotta pressure on myself...just because I saw all those people doing so well...it's a very toxic thing because you compare yourselves to others...because you're trying to do better than everyone else...the pressure kinda got to me, though, sometimes. I definitely – I get overwhelmed very easily...– there were times where I had mental breakdowns because of it.”





The Pressure Felt Inescapable

Consequence #2



To Illustrate this, Meet Scott

Scott understands the cultural expectations:

- **“You have to play a sport, you have to have at least four or five APs and we are pressured into this”**
- **“We’re so achievement conscious...We’re an upper middle class neighborhood. A lot of people don’t want to, I don’t think, give that up. There’s a lot of doctors and lawyers here. We have a lot of tech entrepreneurs, which is a real high paying job so I don’t think people are willing to accept that being successful and having money is not necessarily the same thing. I don’t know.”**



The Inescapable Pressure

Rejects them:

- “**I made a choice to break away from the culture** and do something that made me happy.”
- “I think **it’s not a good culture**...I’m not saying its bad to get a good education...You need to get an education but **you also need to make sure you’re living life**”
- “**If I start a family I won’t start it here.** I would start it in a middle of the ground neighborhood where they can be children. **I made the choice that I wasn’t going to force myself to do too much. I was going to do what I needed to do to be happy.** I wasn’t going to slack off. I was going to do work, but I wasn’t going to work to the point of where I would have lost my childhood because you’re only young once. **I made that decision.**”



The Inescapable Pressure

- Damages his sense of self (at least somewhat)
 - **Scott:** I feel stigmatized. **I feel I'm not at the educational level that I should be** with everyone else. I should be up there but I'm just not that academic....I'm okay with it sometimes. Sometimes **I feel like bad about it**, ya know...Sometimes I wake up in the morning and wonder why I even try because I know I'm not academic. **We are a very academic town.**
 - **Interviewer:** Do you feel like you're mismatched?
 - **Scott:** Yeah. I feel like I'm mismatched. **Fish out of water.**



Suicide & the Painful, Inescapable Pressure

- Molly, young adult (lost her best friend Michelle):
“**[Michelle] never felt like she could be perfect in her own eyes**, and she explained this to me just a week and a half before she died...Even though on the outside it's like [she's] super athletic, varsity athlete, stellar grades, headed for a great college to play lacrosse...but...**she felt like she wasn't doing everything right**...That was not very long before [her suicide].”





The Suppression of Help- Seeking

Consequence #3



Suppression of Help-Seeking

- Youth reported an unwillingness to ask for help
 - Recall Hannah (teen):
 - “All the bad stuff gets covered up. So nobody wants to be like ‘I have an issue.’ And nobody wants to come out and be honest about it...”
- Poplar Grove (youth and young adults), **32%** were classified as help-seekers
 - Youth who sought help from an adult, not a friend
- Comparison sample: **67%** were classified as help-seekers



Suppression of Help-Seeking

- Confirmed by mental health workers
 - Bill: “As professionals, we try to get the parents on board with [coping with their kids problems] but they don’t want to deal with it. I think that’s my biggest issue. **You can see the red flags all over the place and the parents don’t want to do anything, even to the point to where kids can even threaten to kill themselves and you call [the parents] and [they say] “oh they’re just playing around,”** or [I’ll call and say] “I think you need to take them in...” [and they’ll respond] “oh they’ll be perfectly fine,” and it just tears you up inside.”
- 60% of mental health workers reported this
 - (11 out of 17)



Suicide & Suppression of Help-Seeking

- Many who died by suicide were surrounded by friends who offered help
- Carrie (young adult, suicide attempt survivor):
 - “the best way I can explain [my refusal to seek help even though I had amazing friends] is it’s kind of the person I became. I don’t know if this goes back into **that mentality of where I was just like I gotta be a good person, where I just sort of became the person I was known as** and then I saw myself as was this strong, independent **person that...didn’t need anybody guiding me.** “



The Social Roots Shaped Care after a Suicide Loss

Silence and the School's Postvention Response

- Vanessa (young adult):
 - People here, they, like, think it's sad and everything, but then **they just kind of like dusted [it] under the rug, like it didn't even happen.** And then, when it happens again, they just do the same thing, and they just, like, **don't really acknowledge it.**
- Isabel (young adult) speculated:
 - “So many things [got] swept under the rug...**[The school] just doesn't want to be seen as anything less than perfect.**”



The Fear of Another Suicide Cluster

- The school faced a lot of public blame for the recurring suicide clusters
 - They were understandably very concerned about avoiding anything that could possibly exacerbate their risk of experiencing another cluster
- A PowerPoint summarizing the district postvention strategies emphasized how important it was to do nothing that could possibly increase risk of “contagion” – like memorialize or “glorify” the student who has died
 - The Powerpoint stated [Even if this could make the postvention] “feel less caring” and more “awkward”
 - This included limiting conversations about suicide, which numerous youth noticed



Youth Need to Talk, to Understand

- Isabel (young adult):
 - “I felt like a lot of adults didn’t understand or maybe didn’t want to understand, or maybe just didn’t believe us when we said, “We’re stressed out!” ...”This is really hard!” and “We’re really scared!” They were like, “Oh, you’re fine. It’s just high school.” But it’s so much more—and people are dying! **This is a big deal—this anxiety, this depression, this whatever it is is very real...I wanted to talk about *that*, [about] what it was like to *live* in Poplar Grove rather than to die here.”**



Challenges with Postvention Also had Further Consequences for Youth

Breakdown in Trust between Adults & Youth

1. School and community generally didn't want to talk about suicide with youth
 - No interventions; no suicide gatekeeper trainings...
2. **BUT**
 - **Youth are talking about suicide**
 - amongst themselves at school, over text, online after a suicide
3. Youth were largely making sense of suicide on their own
 - Angry, scared, anxious



Passive Views of Suicide

1. Suicide as something that can just “happen” to you

- **Grace:** I think a lot of the kids were just like “Oh my gosh, that’s gonna be us [meaning someone who dies by suicide]. **We’re all gonna stress out and lose it, even if your life is great you can still snap one day.**”



Expansion of Suicide as an Option

Becca, who has a history of suicide ideation and self-harm:

- “I’ve wanted to get away from having all these problems. Seeing all these other people go through all these problems, **their answer is suicide so why can’t my answer be suicide.**
- (Abrutyn, Mueller, Osborne 2019; Mueller 2017)



Summary

1. The social connectedness, mental health stigma, and homogeneous and narrow culture in Poplar Grove generated intense pressure for youth and families, schools, and the community to uphold these ideals that felt inescapable
2. Resulted in
 - Increased psychological pain
 - Suppression of help-seeking
 - Poor postvention and problematic memorialization practices
 - Too much silence, too little helpful, factual information about suicide and help-seeking
3. Combined to expand the interpretation of suicide as a means to escape the oppressive context → amplified vulnerability to suicide



What we Know about Why People Die by Suicide

THE SOCIAL ROOTS

Life Events + Emotional Distress



Psychological Pain



Feel Trapped in Pain
(Pain overwhelms protective factors)



Suicide Ideation
(As a means to escape the pain)



Suicide Attempt or Death



Why do suicide clusters form?

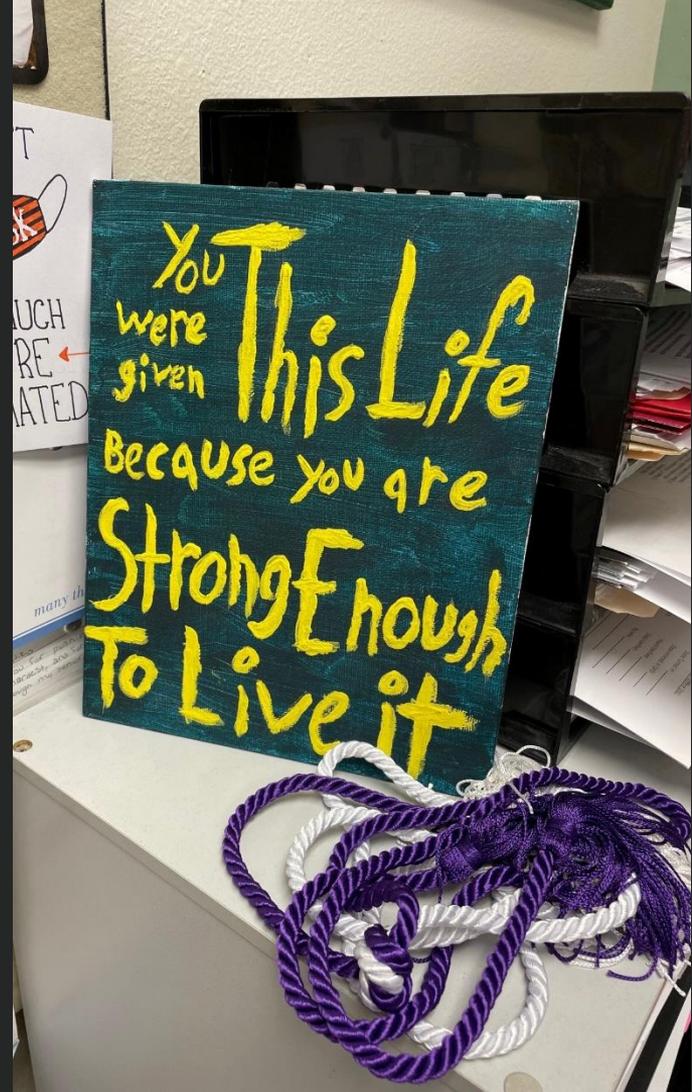
Environmental Pathway:

- Suicide clusters emerge when the social environment does not satisfy youth's psycho-social developmental needs.
 - E.g., places where:
 - Youth struggle to have their psychological needs met
 - Cultural values or social relationships thwart help-seeking
 - Mental health safety systems are not sufficient* (current project)
 - Connect to Care in Schools Study – Irsay.iu.edu/c2c



Suicide prevention must

- Incorporate interventions that address suicide's social roots
- Opportunity!
 - Expands our toolkit for suicide prevention



IN PURSUIT OF SOLUTIONS



Empower Youth

- 1. What causes youth psychological pain or distress?**
 - Poplar Grove
 - Academic and social pressure to be perfect
 - Gossip and rumors
 - LGBTQIA Youth
 - Social rejection ...
 - Narrow ideals & not fitting in – universally painful experience!
- 2. What do youth need in the aftermath of suicide?**
 - Poplar Grove
 - Acknowledgment of their pain
 - Address their fears
 - Provide information

**Engage
youth in
finding
solutions**



Challenge Mental Health Stigma

1. Mental health problems are no different than other forms of medical problems
 - They do not diminish other aspects of people
 - They deserve respect and treatment
2. One can be a beautiful “good” kid or have a “good” family and have mental illnesses or experience suicidality



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2. An Ideal Place
3. Great Expectations
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6. **The School's Postvention Response**
 - Read an earlier draft for free
7. Safer Memorialization
 - Read for free (through June 11 ?)
8. Addressing the Social Roots of Suicide

Other Writings:

- "Transforming U.S. Education to Prevent Youth Suicide"
- A Whole Child, Whole School Approach to Suicide Prevention in Schools

Postvention



Memorialization



US Education



Whole Child

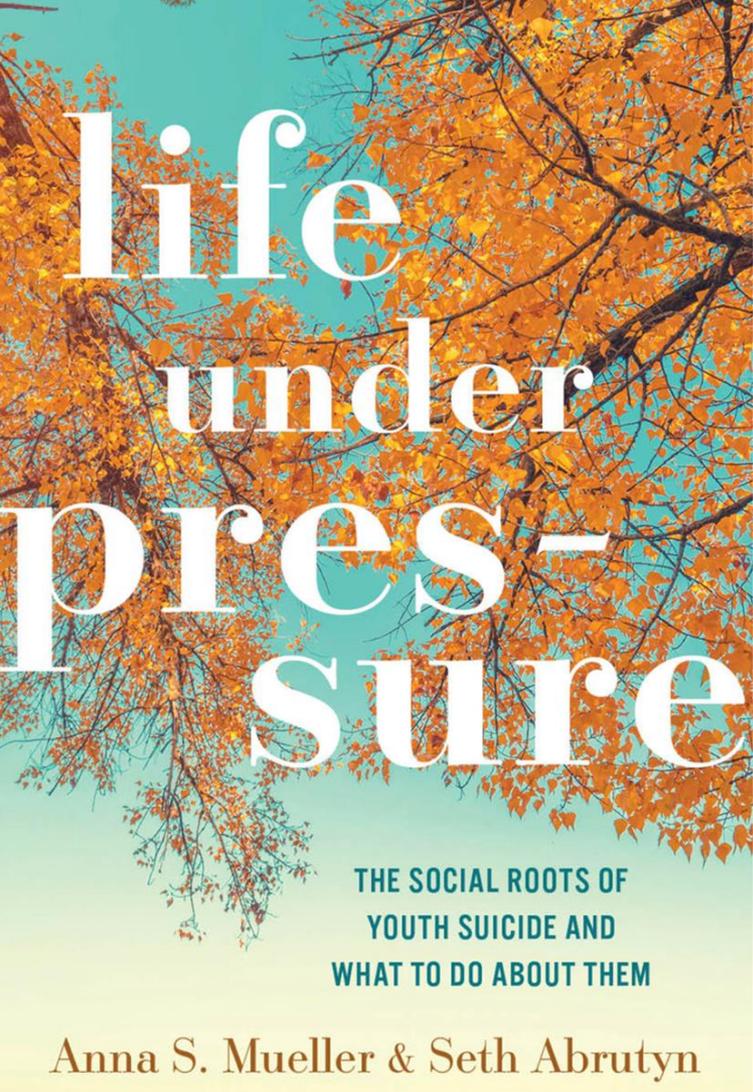


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