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Suicide rate among US teenage girls hit all-time high in 2015

By Kate Randall

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A new analysis reveals that the suicide rate among teenage girls in the United States reached a 40-year high in 2015. Statistics from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) show that between 2007 and 2015 the suicide rate among girls aged 15-19 doubled, while it tripled for younger girls, aged 12-14. The analysis was based on government records kept since 1975.

The rate of young women aged 15-19 taking their own lives was recorded at 2.9 in every 100,000 girls in 1975. While this rate increased to 3.7 by 1990, by 2007 it showed a decline, to 2.4. By 2015, however, it had doubled, reaching 5.1.

While not showing as dramatic an increase, the suicide rate among teenage boys rose by 30 percent between 2007 and 2015, according to the CDC. However, the rate of suicide among teenage boys has been historically much higher than among teenage girls. The rate of young men aged 15-19 stood at 18.1 in every 100,000 people in 2015, compared to 10.8 percent in 2007.

Suicide is the third leading cause of death for adolescents aged 15-19, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). In 2015, half of suicides of people of all ages were committed with firearms. The other leading methods were suffocation, including hanging, at 26.8 percent, and poisoning, 15.4 percent.

Behind these figures stand thousands of fractured families struggling to deal with the tragic deaths of their young family members. Teenagers committing suicide are likely to have a history of depression, a previous suicide attempt and a family history of psychiatric disorders. They are frequently suffering from substance abuse.

However, the reasons teenagers take the desperate action of suicide cannot simply be reduced to these very real mental health struggles. Factors driving young people to take their own lives must also be traced to the growing social and economic tensions in 21st century America.

The most obvious catalyst for the uptick in teen suicide between 2007 and 2015 was the global financial crisis that peaked in 2008. Tom Simon, an author of the CDC report, told CNN: “One of the factors that people have talked about as a potential contributor to the trend is the economic downturn that we saw in 2007-2009. As economic problems go up, suicide rates go up.”

The financial crisis, which the Obama administration declared over by mid-2009, has inflicted economic hardships on millions of US families that persist to this day. The effects on teenagers and their family members have been myriad: unemployment, poverty and hunger, student debt, unpaid medical bills, homelessness. These economic pressures are major factors contributing to mental distress among teens.

In the CDC’s suicide policy guidelines, violence is also regarded as one of the major factors leading to teen suicide: “Exposure to violence (e.g., child abuse and neglect, bullying, peer violence, dating violence, sexual violence, and intimate partner violence) is associated with increased risk of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, suicide, and suicide attempts. Women exposed to partner violence are nearly five times more likely to attempt suicide as women not exposed to partner violence.”

While social media is pointed to by suicide prevention advocates as a vehicle for promoting bullying, prompting suicide and other self-harm, what young people post on Facebook, Snapchat and other social media outlets is itself often a reflection of the brutal realities confronting youth today. As the CDC points out, social media could be used as a tool to fight bullying, and would be used in this way under different social conditions.

The violence of the US ruling elite must also be included in the experience of teenagers. Teens aged 12-19 today have never lived in a world when the US was not prosecuting a war of aggression. The list of countries the US was at war in between 2007 and 2015 include Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen. If the actions of the US political establishment and its two big business parties are to serve as a model for US youth, the outlook is bleak indeed.

There is also the example of the thousands of young people who have been gunned down by police during this period. And there is the massive US prison system that incarcerates 2.4 million people, overwhelmingly poor and working class. From 2007 to 2015, the US states that continue to practice the death penalty have executed 365 death row prisoners.

AAP notes that psychosocial problems and stresses, “such as conflicts with parents, breakup of a relationship, school difficulties or failure, legal difficulties, social isolation, and physical ailments ... commonly are reported or observed in young people who attempt suicide.” Gay, bisexual and transgendered adolescents also exhibit high rates of depression and “have been reported to have rates of suicidal ideation and attempts three times higher than other adolescents.”

Teenagers living through these problems will receive nothing but scorn and ridicule from the fascistic, misogynist psychopaths that currently occupy the White House. Treatment for young people suffering from mental illness is also woefully underfunded, while hundreds of billions are squandered on war. The CDC estimates that only 10 percent of those needing mental illness and substance abuse treatment receive it.

The staggering new figures on teen suicide must be viewed alongside declining life expectancy, rising infant and maternal mortality, epidemic levels of opioid addiction and other societal ills as an expression of the inability of the capitalist system to meet the social and economic needs of young people and workers in the United States.