

Inside Isolation: COVID's Effects on Mental Health

Brandon Magalassi Memorial Scholarship

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## Introduction

The tragic act of suicide is an event that showcases horror and loss quarreled by little else. In recent years, suicide rates—especially for teenagers—have continued to climb despite the many programs and prevention hotlines available for the public. The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) documented that, for people aged 10-24, suicide rates “increased [by] 56% between 2007 and 2017,” with a 7% average annual increase between 2013 and 2017.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, Suicide was the third highest cause of death for people in the 10-24 age range.<sup>2</sup> However, by 2017, death by suicide in the 10-24 range surpassed that of homicide, making suicide the second leading cause of death for adolescents.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the already increasing teenage suicide rates, the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened the mental health crises for America's youth. Now more than ever, suicide prevention and awareness must be addressed across the nation through widespread education for parents and students, in order to most effectively protect our nation's youth from taking arms against themselves.

## Isolation Effects

Long-term Isolation has proven to have adverse reactions on mental health. According to a psychological study on the health effects of isolation, it was found that “actual and perceived social isolation are both associated with increased risk of early mortality.”<sup>4</sup> This can be seen in other psychological studies, such as the German studies that found that prisoners in “solitary

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<sup>1</sup> Sally C. Curtin & Melonie Heron. “Death Rates Due to Suicide and Homicide Among Persons Aged 10–24: United States, 2000–2017.” *National Center for Health Statistics*. Data Brief, Number 352. October 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db352-h.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> JAMA Staff. “Widening Rural-Urban Disparities in Youth Suicides, United States, 1996-2010.” *Journal of the American Medical Association*. May 1, 2016. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4551430/#R1>

<sup>3</sup> Curtin, C. Sally & Heron, Melonie. “Death Rates Due to Suicide and Homicide Among Persons Aged 10–24: United States, 2000–2017.” *National Center for Health Statistics*. Data Brief, Number 352. October 2019. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db352-h.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> “Loneliness and Social Isolation as Risk Factors for Mortality: A Meta-Analytic Review.” *Association for Psychological Science*. March 11, 2015. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1745691614568352>

confinement [became] clinically insane within two years.”<sup>5</sup> While this was because of a “lack of sensory stimulation,” those surveyed were found to go through “anxiety [that] prepared the way for visual and auditory hallucinations” that then became a “clouding of consciousness.”<sup>6</sup> This trail to mental decline was similar in other examples of isolation, such as the “repeated hallucinations” experienced by Geoff Workman during his isolated 105 day underground work<sup>7</sup> that display the degradation of mental health when people are socially alone.

The pattern of mental instability due to social isolation can—to an extent—also be seen as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which whole communities have had to self-quarantine for weeks at a time. In addition, social normalities and large-scale gatherings such as athletics, concerts, and dances have been postponed or outright canceled. During the spring of 2020, people around the world had to put their lives on hold and self-isolate inside their homes to combat the spread of a new coronavirus that can infect humans. In many places, the only time people could leave their house was to get food. Kids around the world could no longer visit with their friends, attend social gatherings, or even attend in person schooling. Many experts have discussed the negative ramifications for the kids due to the lack of social interaction during their development as adolescents. As a nation, we must be careful in monitoring the mental health of our youth during this pandemic, as suicide rates—that have already been exponentially increasing during the past 15 years—could potentially inflate at an even greater pace due to the isolation practices employed to counter the virus.

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<sup>5</sup> Antonio Melechi. “The Sound of Blood Rushing: Exploring the Experimental Science of Isolation.” *The Times Literary Supplement*. July 3, 2020. <https://www.thetls.co.uk/articles/exploring-the-experimental-science-of-isolation-essay-antonio-melechi/>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Before the COVID pandemic, exponential suicide rates have already been observed in rural areas for many years due to the geographical spread of the people. The Journal of the American Medical Association, a peer-reviewed journal dedicated to “promot[ing] the art and science of medicine and the betterment of public health,”<sup>8</sup> conducted a study on youth suicide rates in rural versus urban settings and discovered that “rural suicide rates were nearly double those of urban areas.”<sup>9</sup> One could predict this trend in rural areas of America would have parallels with the quarantine practices seen across the nation because of the lack of social interaction felt by the youth. The Center for Disease Control recorded a 31% increase in mental health emergency visits for children aged 11-17 between 2019 and 2020.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the non-profit news outlet, National Public Radio, interviewed hospitals at seven states—which all reported that “more suicidal children are coming to their hospitals.”<sup>11</sup> As an increasing number of America’s youth are attempting suicide due to social restrictions, now more than ever, there is a presenting necessity for suicide awareness.

### **Taking Action**

Many families don’t know about the signs and symptoms of suicide until it is too late. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) describes the signs of depression—which often correlates with suicide—as changes in mood, actions, or from external factors that can cause stress. Another emotion that predominantly leads to suicide is that of the feeling of hopelessness,

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> JAMA Staff. “Widening Rural-Urban Disparities in Youth Suicides, United States, 1996-2010.” *Journal of the American Medical Association*. May 1, 2016. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4551430/#R1>

<sup>10</sup> CDC Staff. “Mental Health Related Emergency Department Visits Among Children Aged <18 Years During the COVID-19 Pandemic—United States, January 1-October 17, 2020.” *Center for Disease Control and Prevention*. November 13, 2020. <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6945a3.htm>

<sup>11</sup> Rhitu Chatterjee. “Child Psychiatrists Warn that the Pandemic May be Driving Up Kids’ Suicide Risk.” *National Public Radio*. February 2, 2021.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/health-shots/2021/02/02/962060105/child-psychiatrists-warn-that-the-pandemic-may-be-driving-up-kids-suicide-risk>

as one feels they cannot escape their situation except by death. One of the best preventative measures against suicide is to openly talk with professionals and loved ones about problems and encouraging people that there is light at the end of the tunnel.<sup>12</sup> The NIMH also encourages exercise to reduce levels of depression.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps one of the possible benefits of the Covid-19 pandemic is that people have an increased awareness of depression and suicide, as they have felt a long-term feeling of emptiness from not socializing with those they love. However, America's youth could benefit from a more nationwide uniform push for suicide prevention, such as those seen by the national suicide prevention week in September, yet parents could easily be educated in school settings to spread awareness before it is too late.

### **Conclusion**

The unfortunate event of suicide is a tragedy that leaves thousands of American families wondering what they could have done differently to save their loved one. Widespread education for parents and students in academic schooling is perhaps the best way to spread awareness for how to spot the signs of suicide and what the actions they can take to ensure that it does not happen to any more families.

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<sup>12</sup> SAVE Staff. "Warning Signs of Suicide." *Suicide Awareness Voices of Education*.  
<https://save.org/about-suicide/warning-signs-risk-factors-protective-factors/>

<sup>13</sup> NIMH Staff. "Depression." *National Institute of Mental Health*.  
<https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/depression/index.shtml>

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