

Social connectedness can increase suicide risk

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Community characteristics play an important role in perpetuating teen suicide clusters and thwarting prevention efforts, according to a new study by sociologists at the University of Chicago and University of Memphis who examined clusters in a single town.

The study, published in the *American Sociological Review*, illustrates how the homogeneous culture and high degree of [social connectedness](#) of a community can increase [suicide](#) risk, particularly among teenagers. Such conditions contribute to clusters in which a series of suicides happen around the same time and in close proximity.

While news outlets have repeatedly documented the emergence of clusters, little is understood about why they happen and how to stop them. In the new study, Anna S. Mueller, an assistant professor in Comparative Human Development at UChicago, and Seth Abrutyn, an assistant professor at the University of Memphis, examined a suburban, upper-middle-class community that had experienced at least four clusters over the last 15 years.

Researchers found intense pressure to succeed, coupled with narrowly defined ideals about what youths should be, namely academically and athletically exceptional. Fears of not living up to such ideals combined with the ease with which private information became public, due to social connectedness, left teens and their parents unwilling to seek help for [mental health problems](#). Such conditions rendered youths who were already struggling particularly vulnerable to suicide, despite having social connections within the community.

"Perhaps one of the most interesting findings of this study is that it highlights the downside to social connectedness, something that is usually touted as a key tool for [suicide prevention](#)," Mueller said. "It also helps explain why some schools with intense academic pressure have problems with suicide while others do not. It's not just the pressure: It's the pressure combined with certain community factors that can make asking for help harder to do."

The findings provide new insight for suicide prevention, which has focused traditionally on the downsides of social isolation and the role of mental illness. The researchers demonstrate how community needs to be considered when assessing vulnerabilities, and why prevention organizations should no longer view social connectedness exclusively as a positive force in measuring [suicide risk](#).

In the study, Mueller and Abrutyn started with the seminal work *Suicide* by French sociologist Émile Durkheim, published in 1897. While his assertion that a socially isolated individual is more prone to suicide remains a cornerstone of prevention, much less attention has been given to his discussion of how high levels of integration in society also can create risk.

Mueller and Abrutyn then turned their focus to a single community, in which 19 students or recent graduates of the local high school had committed suicide between 2000 and 2015. Their field research included interviews and focus groups involving a total of 110 people. The study does not name the town because of confidentiality agreements tied to the research.

In their findings, Mueller and Abrutyn recommend the creation of programming to help students navigate perceived failure and academic stresses. Additionally, they caution that suicide prevention strategies should take into consideration that social connectedness is not always a

good thing. The authors suggest more sociologists focus on suicide, seeing a growing role for the field to understand and prevent it.

"Since Durkheim's important work, sociology has contributed surprisingly little to understanding and preventing suicide, particularly compared to psychology and epidemiology," Mueller said. "This is unfortunate since sociologists have the theoretical and empirical tools necessary to examine some fundamental unanswered questions about suicide, one of the most important being: 'How do we stop suicide clusters from happening?'"

More information: A. S. Mueller et al, Adolescents under Pressure: A New Durkheimian Framework for Understanding Adolescent Suicide in a Cohesive Community, *American Sociological Review* (2016). [DOI: 10.1177/0003122416663464](https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122416663464)

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