

The Social Roots of High School Suicide Clusters

Anna S. Mueller, PhD MA
@ProcAnna

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National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-TALK any time

If you or someone you care about are in a crisis, call the lifeline



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Departments of Sociology &
Comparative Human Development

NOTE: THESE ARE THE SLIDES FOR MY KEYNOTE
ADDRESS FOR THE 2019 ANNUAL MEETINGS OF
THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF SUICIDOLOGY



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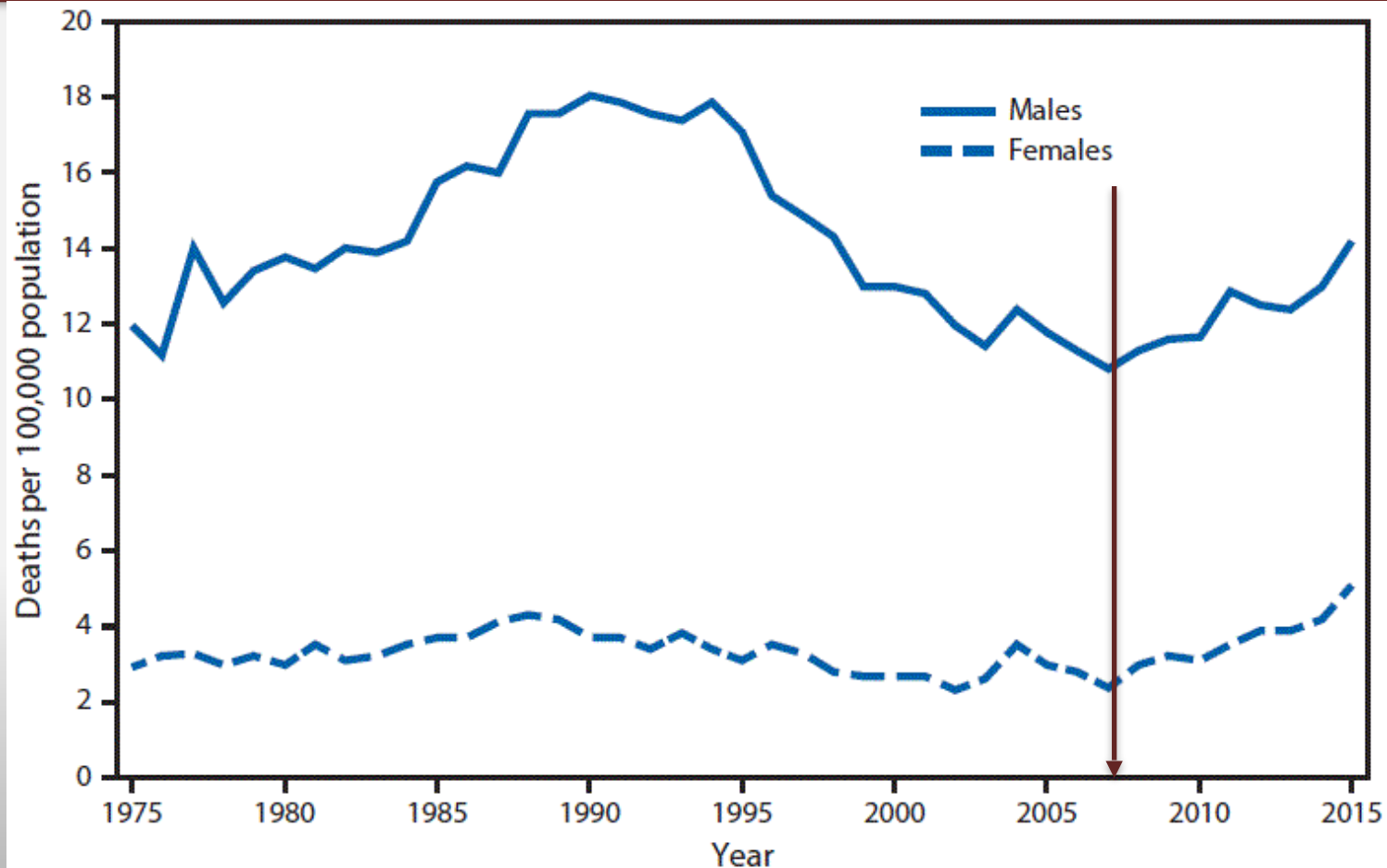
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BIO

Anna S. Mueller, PhD, is a tenured assistant professor in the Departments of Comparative Human Development, Sociology & the College at the University of Chicago. She received her BA from Wellesley College in 2002 and her PhD in sociology in 2011 from the University of Texas at Austin. Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, Mueller's research examines (1) the mechanisms that undergird suicide diffusion and suicide clusters; (2) the social roots of adolescent suicide; and (3) the experience of suicide bereavement in adolescence. Her research has won numerous awards for its contribution to knowledge, including the Eliot Friedson Outstanding Publication Award from the American Sociological Association. Her research can be read in the *American Sociological Review*, *Social Science & Medicine*, the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, the *American Journal of Public Health*, among others. For more information on Mueller, visit her website: www.annasmueller.com



Substantial Increases in Youth Suicide since 2007



QuickStats: Suicide Rates for Teens Aged 15–19 Years, by Sex — United States, 1975–2015. MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep 2017;66:816. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6630a6>

Exposure to Suicide

- Can trigger:
 - Suicide clusters
 - Suicide diffusion through personal relationships

Source: (Abrutyn and Mueller 2014)

Odds of Youth Reporting a Suicide Attempt by Exposure to a Friends' Suicide



** ROBUST FINDING **

- Using every causal modeling strategy possible with longitudinal nationally-representative random samples, researchers repeatedly find that exposure to suicide increases risk of suicide ideation or attempts
- Caveats:
 - Not necessarily suicide deaths
 - Data largely from the U.S.

What causes a single suicide to escalate to a cluster or diffuse through social relations?

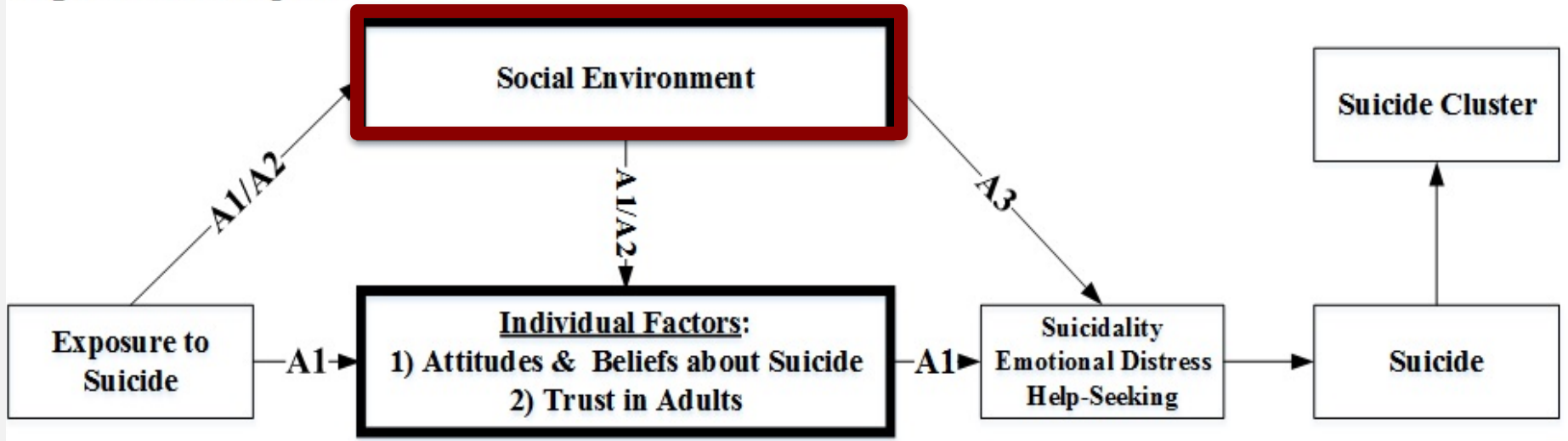
Why do some *places* but not others house disproportionate rate of youth suicide?

How Context Matters

- Social-contextual characteristics of communities can amplify or ameliorate individual risk factors
 - Thereby facilitating
 - clusters or diffusion
 - vulnerability to suicide

Conceptual Model

Figure 1: Conceptual Model



Some environments will more easily facilitate the escalation of a singleton suicide into a cluster.

Places where

- Youth struggle to have their psychological needs met
- Mental health safety systems are not sufficient
- Cultural values or social relationships thwart help-seeking

The Case of “Poplar Grove”

- Illustrate a case where ignoring the social roots of suicide has limited the efficacy of suicide prevention
 - Adolescents under Pressure in “Poplar Grove,”*
USA

**All names of people and places are pseudonyms*

In-Depth Case Study: Poplar Grove,* USA

- Affluent, educated, privileged community
 - Homogeneous population
 - Enduring suicide problem
- 2+ years of fieldwork
 - In Poplar Grove
 - ~100 interviews & focus groups
 - Participant observation
 - Youth, Parents, Mental Health Workers, Religious leaders, Teachers, etc.
 - » BROAD community approach to the research
 - With suicide bereaved individuals outside of Poplar Grove
 - ~50 interviews

**All names of people
and places are
pseudonyms*

In-Depth Case Study: Poplar Grove,* USA

- Community with a significant adolescent suicide problem
 - Widely recognized problem
 - 18 suicide deaths from 2000-2015
 - Focus on 2005-2015
 - 15 former or current PGHS have died by suicide since 2000
 - All under the age of 25
 - Significantly higher than what one would expect of a high school of this size given national and state suicide rate for ages 15-24 (11.0 per 100,000)
 - 3 youth died during our fieldwork
 - 4 confirmed and 1 additional probable suicide cluster
 - Where decedents had ties to each and died within a short period
 - Many of the deaths fit definitions of “echo-clusters”

RESULTS OVERVIEW

Suicide Clusters have *Social Roots*

1. Illustrate the social roots
2. Discuss their consequences
 - Discouraged helpseeking
 - Amplified adolescent distress
 - Facilitated the formation of unique beliefs about adolescent suicide that amplified youth's ability to see suicide as an option

First Social Root: Social Connectedness

- Everyone knows everyone
 - Social support!

- Jim, a father:

“Poplar Grove is a very tight-knit community... we have a community pool where we all hang out. Everybody knows everybody, so you feel like there's network, a safety net around you all the time.”

First Social Root: Social Connectedness

- Everyone knows everyone's business
 - Amplifies concern about keeping up appearances and what others think/know

First Social Root: Social Connectedness

- The downside:
- Margaret, a mother:

“So....I do not know this family very well, I only know what I’ve heard through the grapevine. Emmett who had committed suicide....he was in and out of a mental institution a couple times is what I understand. He was on medication. He had had counseling, supposedly he had threatened many times....His parents knew about it. The last fight that they had was ‘Emmett - you’re getting really bad again, I think it’s time for you to go back to the hospital’ and shortly after that he killed himself. That’s the rumor I heard. It’s qualified, but it’s still a rumor.”

Second Social Root: Narrow Ideals

- Culturally homogeneous
 - Homogeneous (and narrow) views of “ideal” kids or families
 - Culture of achievement

Second Social Root: Narrow Ideals

- **Elizabeth:** *Achievement is everything.* So, when we think of Poplar Grove, we think of achievement [in school and athletics]...
- **Tina [chimes in]:** I think that's pretty accurate. I think it's a wonderful community to raise a family in, and it's... great people, but it is very driven. It's exhausting. It's challenging...*It's hard to complain about it because we have a lot of opportunity here... So, it's kind of a blessing and a curse all at the same time.*

Third Social Root: 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

Third Social Root: Mental Health Stigma

- 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.**”

SERIOUS CONSEQUENCES FOR YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Consequence #1:
Suppressed help-seeking

- Kids were unwilling to seek help or be honest with parents or adults about their suffering
 - Only 32% of youth were willing to seek help
 - Compared to 67% in our comparison group
 - Scared people will find out
- Mental health workers reported parents were hard to partner with
 - 60% of mental health workers reported this
 - (11 out of 17)

Consequence #2: Stress, Anxiety, & Negative Emotions

- Centered around the idea of “failure”
 - Kids reported:
 - “Failure was not an option for any of us” (young-adult, woman)
 - “If you don’t succeed, you just fail and you feel terrible about it.” (teenager, woman)
 - Crying regularly because of homework
 - Hair falling out from stress

Consequence #3: Disconnection between Youth & Adults

- Schools seems unprepared to cope with suicide loss
 - School doesn't want to talk about suicide
 - Fear of causing a “ripple effect”
 - Postvention strategies were always problematic
 - No QPR; No Sources of Strength; No Youth Aware of Mental Health (YAMS); No Signs of Suicide
- BUT: Youth have known many classmates who have died by suicide or attempted suicide

Consequence #3:

Disconnection between Youth & Adults

- Kids can't forget or "sweep it under the rug"
 - Even if they weren't that close to the decedent
- **Shara (teen):**
 - I felt like a lot of adults didn't understand or... believe us when we said we're stressed out, when we said, '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** [by suicide].

Consequence #4: Passive Views of Suicide

- Youth were largely making sense of suicide on their own
 - Amongst themselves at school, over text, online after a suicide

Consequence #4: Passive Views of Suicide

- Suicide as something that can just “happen” to you

Consequence #4: Passive Views of Suicide

- 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.”

Consequence #4: Passive Views of Suicide

- There's a reason for Grace's confusion:
 - Many suicide decedents in Poplar Grove did not appear “mentally ill” or even emotionally distressed
 - Many were very popular, “perfect” youth
 - Pressure to avoid mental illness to explain suicide
 - Parents' of deceased children suppressed information about mental illness or psychological pain in their kids
 - Active work to craft a narrative that preserved the young suicide decedent's reputation

Consequence #5: 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.**”

Summary

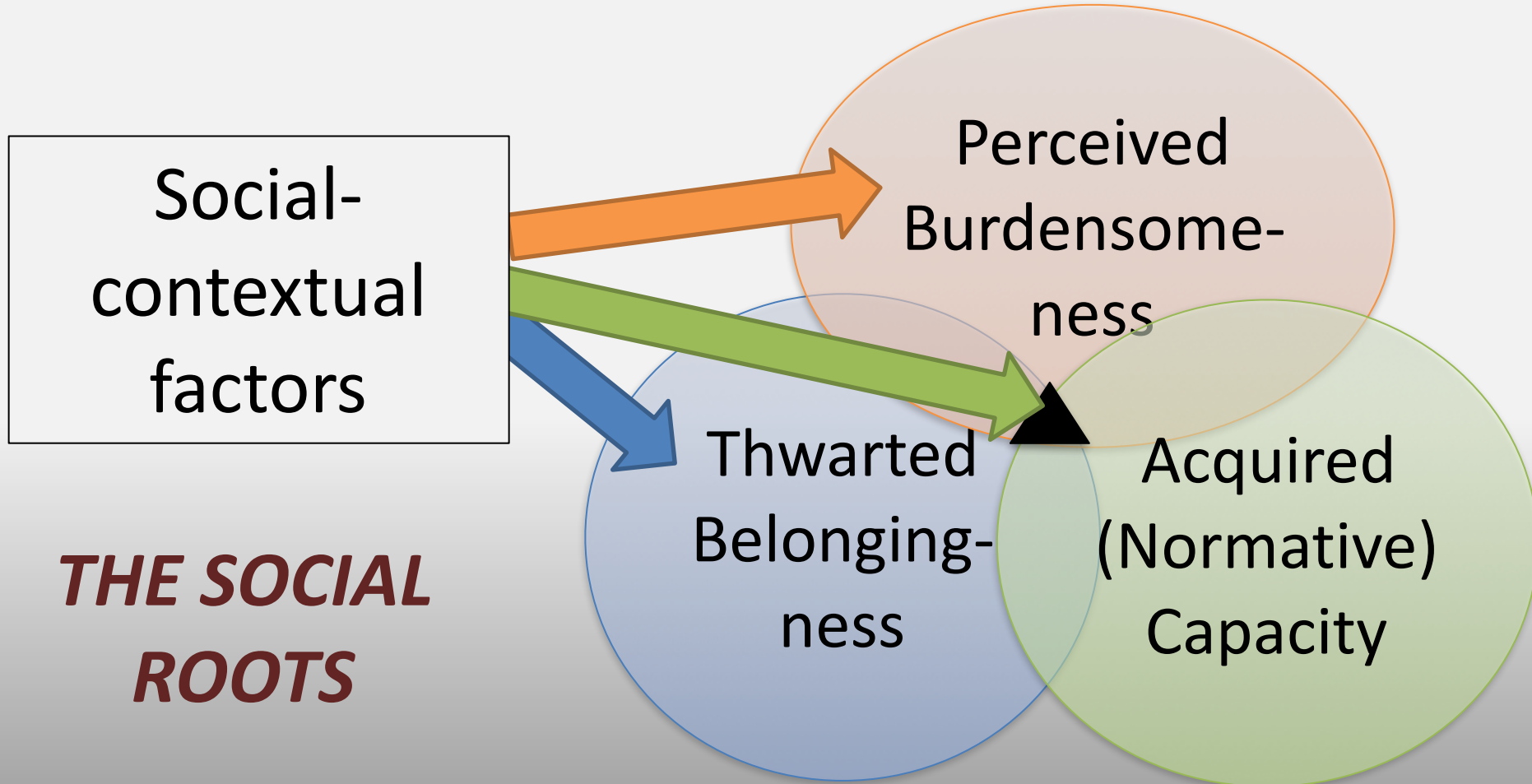
- The social connectedness and homogeneous and narrow culture in Poplar Grove generated additional stress & pressure for youth
- Resulted in
 - Increased emotional distress
 - Suppression of helpseeking
- Combined with exposure to suicide & lack of adequate postvention, amplified vulnerability to suicide

What do we do?

1. Recognize that suicide has social and cultural roots
 - Culture can be hard to shift...
 - But it is possible
 - Ignoring it leaves kids suffering under stressful conditions
2. Postvention is crucial
 - As a start, recognize that equipping youth with evidence-based information about suicide could help
3. We owe schools better science
 - Continue to empirically examine effective postvention strategies
 - Determine how and why suicide spreads through social contexts and social relationships

Improving our Understanding of Suicide

Interpersonal Theory of Suicide



THANK YOU!

Contact: AMueller@UChicago.edu

Collaborators

Seth Abrutyn, PhD



Sanja Miklin, MA
(ABD)



Melissa Osborne, MA
(ABD)



For more:

- www.AnnaSMueller.com
 - ** Has free copies of all articles ref in this talk (#openscience) **
- See especially:
 - Abrutyn & Mueller 2014; 2018
 - Abrutyn, Mueller, & Osborne 2019
 - Mueller 2017; 2019
 - Mueller & Abrutyn 2015; 2016
 - Miklin, Mueller, Abrutyn, & Orodenez Forthcoming