

Britain: Nineteen young suicides in South Wales

Dave O'Sullivan
5 June 2008

The death of 23-year-old Christopher Jones from Nantymoel on May 5 is the latest in a series of tragic suicides of young people in and around the South Wales town of Bridgend. In the last 12 months, 19 young people under the age of 27, many of them in their teens, have committed suicide in the area. The latest death is the 34th since 2006.

The deaths have generated a media furore, with astonishment and confusion being expressed by the political establishment as to the cause.

Officially, however, an inquest into five of the deaths, held on March 19, said that the deaths were not related.

Allyn Price, a 24-year-old man from Maesteg whose death was investigated at the inquest, was described as “happy go lucky,” with no overt signs of depression. Similar accounts were given of cousins Nathaniel Pritchard, 15, and Kelly Stephenson, 20. A relative told the press, “We just don’t know what is going on in Bridgend. Kelly and Nathaniel were both brilliant kids with good futures ahead of them. We would never have thought in a million years that they were capable of anything like this. None of this makes sense.”

In 2007 Dale Crole, 18, was found hanged in an abandoned warehouse. His friend David Dilling, 19, took police to the scene. Dilling was also found hanged little more than a month later.

It also emerged that Kelly Stephenson knew two other young men who died last year, prompting media speculation of “copycat suicides.” Some of the other suicides were friends, some distant acquaintances; many knew each other through social networking sites. It is reported that seven of the dead are believed to have frequently used the social networking site Bebo, for example. Angelina Fuller, the 14th suicide, had her memorial site posted by her partner on MySpace.

Consequently, the media have blamed such sites for the suicides, claiming that online memorials, which

supposedly gave the victims some “prestige,” were triggering the tragedies. With each new suicide inspiring more memorial pages, the louder become the calls for these sites to be controlled and censored.

Madeleine Moon, Labour MP for Bridgend, said, “If you are a young and vulnerable person who sees nothing in life ahead of you, if you are feeling in despair and you can see no way you are ever going to make anything of yourself, having your photograph and your way of dying splashed all over the national media is perhaps one way of gaining fame; a very sad way of getting it but one that certainly some of this coverage is exploring and exploiting.”

The Ministry of Justice, with the departments of Health, Culture, and Children, is currently reviewing laws to censor or shut down sites that give information regarding suicide as an acceptable option. Many users of such sites are not in fact youth, but older people suffering from illnesses for which no palliative care is available.

The police have set up a task force investigating the computers of the youth, as well as the social networking sites.

In fact social networking sites have become hugely popular, particularly among youth, precisely because they offer a limited possibility of expressing both feelings and broader social concerns that have no other outlet—particularly under conditions where young people are deeply alienated from existing forms of political expression.

The calls for censorship of social networking both shift attention from the more fundamental issues giving rise to suicides amongst young people, and prevent discussion at the point when it is vitally necessary to talk to young people about how they feel and what they think. Equally it is not enough to blame media coverage for the suicides, even when it is as shallow and sensationalist as is suggested by lurid headlines about “Death Town” and

“Suicide Valley.”

After all, figures from the Office of National Statistics show a death rate from suicides of 19.4 per 100,000 of the population for Welsh men, and 6.3 per 100,000 for women. This is the highest in Britain, which overall has a disturbing rate of 17.4 per 100,000 men, and 5.3 per 100,000 women. Most of these tragic cases never make the pages of the media and the victims do not regularly use social networking sites.

In any case, what is necessary is to ask just why it might be, if Madeleine Moon’s suggestion is true, that some young people are so vulnerable, and see “nothing in life” ahead of them and no way of ever “making anything of themselves,” that suicide could be seen as a way of “gaining fame.” And even if one rejects such a claim, the issue remains of why some young people are so filled with despair.

As a letter to the *Times* from a writer in Pontypool in South Wales pointed out, would young people stop being depressed if the sites were censored?

The writer went on to call for an examination of the reasons for “such a depressive state of mind,” and suggested it had more to do with “the fact that they are priced out of higher education, have little or no chance of affording a house of their own. And that their only option is to work in a poorly paid job simply to continue their existence ... Even when things were bleak in the 70s and 80s, young people had a voice, and often protested passionately against their circumstances. Sadly, those in authority seem to have silenced today’s youngsters, and here we see the logical reaction.”

The fact that the cluster of suicides centres on the former industrial town of Bridgend underscores the necessity to probe these questions more fully. Tens of thousands in the area were employed in mining, or in the steel industry in nearby Port Talbot. Today this has all but disappeared. The major employers now are call centres.

The betrayal of the miners strike of 1984-85 by the trade unions and the Labour Party began the devastation of the area. The closure of pits led not just to a loss of jobs and declining wages, but the break-up of entire communities.

Accompanying this, vast amounts of wealth have been transferred from the poor to the very rich, who have demanded ever greater attacks on the social conditions of working people by the very party that once claimed to represent labour against capital.

For most young people, good job prospects are a thing of the past, and buying a house is impossible. And in the areas of health, social work and mental health, that would

once have identified and helped treat those in most need financially and emotionally, cut after cut has been made based on the claim that overcrowded, understaffed and under-funded schools can provide an adequate “joined-up” substitute—using the services of unqualified support staff.

The government’s own official education body, OFSTED, describes 10 percent of state schools as “inadequate.” Class sizes are among the highest in Europe. Meanwhile there are diminishing welfare facilities, long waiting list for counsellors, social workers with dozens of “clients” and a system in breakdown.

The victims of this onslaught on social provision are in turn vilified, demonised and criminalised. Today young people are often regarded as a problem, not as society’s greatest asset and its future. Figures on British youth crime, drunkenness, pregnancy and violence are at their highest and dominate the press. *Time* magazine led a recent issue with the cover story, “Unhappy, Unloved and out of Control: An epidemic of violence, crime and drunkenness has made Britain scared of its young.” Britain has the highest population of children behind bars in Europe, with almost 3,000 children now in custody, an 8 percent rise since 2005, compared to Germany with 1,422 and France with 646.

This situation must inevitably produce a deep social malaise that affects significant layers of young people. But it also creates opposing sentiments: a sense of anger, a critical attitude to the existing social set-up and an often profound desire for change. This response is far more widespread than is ever acknowledged by the media. Those within the establishment who have plunged Britain’s youth into such dire straits have no answer to the social despair this generates and are bitterly hostile to and threatened by the inevitable growth of a more forward looking and universalist desire for a better society.



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