Wave of youth suicides in Oklahoma town

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Four young people have killed themselves in the small town of Anadarko, Oklahoma in the past two months. Ranging in age from 22 to just 11 years old, all took their lives with guns.

"It has brought us to our knees," Anadarko Police Chief Jason Smith told the media. "They've been violent and they've really shook the community to the core."

The first was Jaidon DuBois, a 16-year-old sophomore at Anadarko High School. His father, who spoke to local television station News 9, said his son was being treated for depression and was meeting with a counselor, but suffered from "an inner depression that he just could not overcome."

The suicides of a 21-year-old and a 22-year-old followed. On January 19, an 11-year-old boy killed himself.

On January 20, police took a child into custody at the school because staff thought he was trying to harm himself.

"It's been difficult for my police department and my firefighters who are the ones who have to arrive on the scene," Anadarko city manager Kenneth Corn told news station Fox 25. "To see an 11-year-old is very difficult."

There are no obvious connections between the tragedies. "If we could put it under a category, like bullying, we'd put our resources toward addressing bullying," Smith said. "That's the problem right now. There are so many causes. Suicide is a feeling of helplessness and that there's nothing you feel you can do about it."

Smith added that while the police were investigating the spate of suicides, "it's not so easy to put a finger on it and say 'this person was bullied.' It is just not that easy."

Town officials have sought to prevent further suicides, opening training centers and "care stations" with assistance from the state's Department of Mental Health. City manager Corn told the media that many young people grew up in the area suffering a sense of hopelessness. "We have a lot of young people here who feel they don't have any hope. We need to make sure that they know we're here and we care about them and we want to help them."

"I knew every single one of them," former educator and pastor Lynn Bellamy told the media. "I taught every single one of them or I was their principal and all of them are loved and they didn't have to choose the course."

"Just seems to be like it's spreading and kids are feeling like this is a way to make it better," Bellamy said. "You have young people who are hurt and they feel hopeless, helpless, but there are people who love them."

What is the social context of these tragedies?

Anadarko is a town of 6,700 about an hour south of Oklahoma City. Half the population is American Indian, according to the Census Bureau, and more than one in three residents live in poverty. Per capita income for 2014 stood at $14,500.

In many respects, Anadarko is a typical town in rural America. Unemployment, drug addiction, poor health and lack of medical care—and all other manner of isolation and brutality are rife. Good-paying jobs are scarce, and working families struggle to survive.

Young people have few economic or social options. In small towns and rural areas across the country, the population is aging as youth leave to pursue educational and job opportunities in urban centers.

All of America is beset with the impact of a deep social inequality and decades of attacks on the living conditions of the working class.

In fact, a leading factor in suicides internationally is the economic crisis, and particularly lack of job prospects and unemployment. From New Zealand, to

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China, to Italy, suicides express a sickness of the social order, which considers huge numbers of people unnecessary and expendable to the capitalist system. Young people just entering the job market or education are forced into desperate, alienating situations, and the most vulnerable sometimes see no way out but through death.

In the United States, the political establishment has long declared a state of economic recovery. Meanwhile, living conditions have worsened precipitously, especially for youth. An individual's educational opportunities are predicated on tens of thousands of dollars in student debt. Basic medical care is out of reach, and mental health care resources are woefully scarce. Millions of people are living one car breakdown or medical emergency away from financial ruin. Youth unemployment is pervasive and long-term, resulting in a growing section of the population that is socially unattached.

Ignorance, crime, addiction, mental illness, homelessness, disease, hunger … all are inevitable consequences of such a state of affairs. Among young people, drug overdoses have driven a drastic rise in mortality rates, particularly in the period of the so-called recovery after 2010.

Like these other indices of social breakdown, youth suicides have also risen dramatically in the past decade and a half. For young whites, the suicide rate has risen from 15 per 100,000 in 1999 to 19.5 in 2014.

Suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the US. In 2013, 41,149 Americans took their own lives.

The Centers for Disease Control keeps no complete count of suicide attempts, but CDC-aggregated hospital data indicates that Americans made a staggering 836,000 visits to a hospital emergency room for "injuries due to self-harm behavior." This suggests that for every suicide in the US, 19 other people may be considering taking their own lives.

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