

# Youth suicides at a record high in the UK

Alice Summers  
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According to a study by the Institute of Public Policy Research (IPPR), 134 students committed suicide in the 2014-15 academic year. This figure, an all-time high, represents an increase of 79 percent since 2007, when 75 students took their own lives.

The IPPR's research findings come amid a worsening mental health crisis in the UK and worldwide, which is particularly affecting young people under the age of 25. Approximately one-in-four people in the UK suffer from a mental health condition each year, with around three-quarters of adults with a mental illness first experiencing symptoms before the age of 25, according to the report.

The proportion of 16-to-24-year-olds experiencing a mental health condition in England is rising, with 19 percent in this age group suffering from some form of mental health problem, up from 15 percent in 2003. Young women under 25 are hit hardest by the mental health crisis, with 28 percent affected.

In the past ten years, the number of students disclosing a mental health problem to their university has skyrocketed. In the 2015-16 academic year, 15,395 UK-domiciled first-year students reported a mental health condition, a fivefold increase since 2006-07.

Nearly all (94 percent) universities in the UK have reported an increase in the number of students seeking counselling, with 61 percent of campuses seeing a rise of more than 25 percent. At some institutions, as many as one-in-four students are using, or are on a waiting list for, mental health services.

Even these figures do not tell the whole story. Due to fear of being stigmatised or feeling that help or support would not be available, nearly half (48 percent) of students who have experienced mental health problems do not disclose it to their university.

Many students fear that admitting to a mental health problem would have a negative impact on their social relationships with peers or academic staff, or that it

would adversely affect their chances of getting a good job after they graduate.

The IPPR report stated that due to the lack of support and treatment "poor mental health can lead to increased risk of students dropping out of university, or in the most severe and tragic cases, death by suicide." Although suicide is intimately linked to mental health conditions, only 25 percent of people who die by suicide in the UK were in contact with mental health services in the year before their death.

While the rate of student suicide is increasing, it is in fact lower than the population as a whole. However, suicidal thoughts are prevalent within universities. The charity YouthSight and the National Union of Students report that the proportion of students thought to have experienced suicidal thoughts is between 8 and 13 percent respectively.

Young adults between the ages of 20 and 24 are the least likely of any age group to report high levels of well-being, the indicators of which are: life satisfaction, feeling that things done in life are worthwhile, happiness and low anxiety. Students experience lower rates of well-being than young adults as a whole—with less than one-in-five students reporting high levels in each of these four main well-being indicators in 2017.

Austerity cuts have reduced the capacity for prompt intervention to prevent mental health problems developing, and are a significant factor in the increased rates of mental illness and in the rise in demand for mental health services among young people. Students also experience specific risk factors that can lead to poorer mental health and well-being, according to the study, including academic demands and pressure to achieve high marks, social pressures and financial worries.

According to Ruth Caleb, a well-being consultant at Brunel University, the increase in students suffering from mental health problems could be attributed to the

fact that more students are now arriving at university already anxious and worried about their degree, as well as feeling anxious about the obscene levels of debt they will incur before even starting work.

With average debt at around £57,000, and with living costs spiralling upwards in most cities, worries about not having enough money are one of the factors causing students the most stress. According to a survey by education charity Teach First, 44 percent of students said this caused them stress in their first year.

Disadvantaged students are significantly more likely to drop out of university in their first year than their wealthier peers. According to the Office of Fair Access, in the 2014-15 academic year, 8.8 percent of full-time undergraduates below the age of 21 coming from disadvantaged backgrounds did not continue with their studies beyond their first year, compared to less than 5 percent of wealthier students.

Figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency published in May revealed the impact that poor mental health is having on student retention. A record 1,180 students dropped out of university in 2014-15 due to mental health problems such as anxiety. This has more than trebled since 2009-10—in the aftermath of the global financial crash—when 380 students were forced to leave university for this reason.

Pressure to achieve high marks also has more of an adverse effect on poorer students than on their wealthier peers, with nearly half (47 percent) saying that keeping up with academic work caused them stress.

Exam pressures and fears of not getting good grades are factors taking the highest tolls on youth mental health. They are some of the common reasons for suicide among young people, and not just those at university age.

According to a study by the University of Manchester, suicides among children and young people peak every year around exam season. In England and Wales, an average of 96 young people under the age of 25 take their own lives each year in April and May during the period when most exams are held. The next highest number of youth suicides takes place in September—the start of the academic year—when an average of 88 young people die by suicide every year.

The University of Manchester research revealed that 47 percent of the young people who took their own

lives in 2014-15 were experiencing “academic pressures overall” before their death. Nearly one-in-three (32 percent) either had exams at the time, would be sitting exams soon, or were waiting to receive exam results.

This appalling rise in mental health issues and youth suicides is not just a phenomenon affecting the UK, but can also be seen in the US, the wealthiest country in the world.

Suicide rates among young girls in the US have reached a 40-year high. Children between 10 and 14 in the US are now more likely to die by suicide than by car accidents.



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