

Youth mental health problems and suicides rising sharply in UK

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12 July 2018

The number of suicides among young people in London more than doubled in the three years up to 2016, according to research by the Brent Centre for Young People.

Twenty-nine Londoners between the ages of ten and 19 years took their own lives in 2015-16, compared to 14 in 2013-14—an increase of 107 percent.

This increase is more than four times the national rate. The number of youth suicide deaths in England and Wales rose by 24 percent in the same period, from 148 to 184.

The research, compiled through a Freedom of Information request to the Office for National Statistics (ONS), showed that the discrepancy between suicide rates in London and the rest of the country was particularly marked among the 19 to 24 age group. The number of suicides of young people in this age bracket increased by 76 percent in the Greater London region, compared to a five percent increase in the same time period in England and Wales as a whole.

Across the country, 518 young people between ten and 24 years old took their own lives in the 2015-16 period.

The Brent Centre for Young People explained that lack of educational and work prospects, stress and deprivation were significant factors in this devastating and avoidable loss of life.

“People are much more over-pressured here than they are in other parts of the UK,” Dr. Maxim de Sauma, chief executive of the centre stated. “Parents are less able to prioritise difficulties because they are under a lot of stress. It goes on from one generation to another, so the damage is continuous.”

Valentina Levi, an adolescent psychotherapist at the centre, added, “Many young people from more deprived neighbourhoods really feel they have no hope

in terms of the future they are facing – in terms of education and jobs. They don’t feel they have any hope of getting anywhere.”

The Brent Centre for Young People stated that it had been “flooded” with cases of young people suffering from mental illnesses over the last few years, with the number of referrals in the North London area increasing by 59 percent between 2014 and 2017.

Among young people, university students are some of the most likely to report low levels of mental wellbeing, with feelings of happiness and worth declining over the last few years.

According to a study of more than 14,000 students conducted by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and Advance HE, only 17 percent of students said that their lives were highly worthwhile, compared to 22 percent of students two years ago.

The same proportion of students aged 20 to 24 years (17 percent) reported that they were happy in their lives, a figure that has declined from 21 percent in 2016. This compares to a happiness rate of a third (33 percent) among all young people of the same age.

Only 18 percent of students report low levels of anxiety, roughly half the proportion of young people in general. Students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or other (LGBT+) are among the least likely to report high levels of wellbeing. Only one in ten of these students said that their anxiety levels were low.

Contributing to low levels of mental wellbeing at universities are high tuition fees. Only two fifths (38 percent) of students felt like their university education was value for money, the study found. More than half (57 percent) of students said they would like their tuition fees—which at many universities are now £9,250 a year—to go towards improved student support and mental health services.

According to the Department of Education, one in four students are either using or waiting to use the inadequate and underfunded mental health services at universities.

The consequences of the intolerable burdens of stress, debt and lack of future prospects, combined with poor access to mental health treatment, can be shown in the high numbers of student suicides. Figures from the ONS found that in the year up to July 2017, 95 higher education students took their own lives.

With students now leaving university saddled with an average debt of more than £50,000, other studies have indicated that students not only suffer from mental health problems during university, but their high levels of debt also leave them with lower levels of wellbeing for many years to come.

Researchers from the Centre for Global Higher Education, based at the UCL Institute of Education and the University of Michigan, discovered that large quantities of student debt adversely affect graduates who are just starting out their adult lives, making them more likely to delay buying a house and negatively impacting upon their career decisions. High student debt levels also appeared to negatively affect the health—and in particular mental health—of graduates, both during and after leaving university.

In response to this mental health crisis, Conservative Universities Minister, Sam Gyimah, disingenuously warned that universities risk “failing an entire generation of students” if they do not significantly improve their mental health support services. Gyimah asserted to the *London Times*, “Mental health is much bigger [than tuition fees] if you’re talking to students.”

Rather than tuition fees being a non-issue in comparison to mental health services, mental health conditions among students are often intimately linked to the financial burdens imposed upon them. Gyimah ignores many of the factors contributing to the low levels of mental wellbeing among students—such as debt, deprivation and poor job prospects—that are the direct results the years of cuts and attacks on the working class and youth carried out by successive Conservative and Labour governments. These have led to declining living standards, rising tuition fees and lack of access to mental health services.

The WSWs noted in a recent article, “[Mental] health problems are not a simple aggregate of single issues but

a product of the general and worsening inability of capitalism to provide fulfilling, secure lives. The toll of daily life in some cases produces and in others intensifies mental health problems, which grinds down people’s mental and emotional resilience. Support networks are ripped apart, both personal and state-provided, as the result of relentless budget cutting of essential mental health services.”

This crisis of youth mental health does not just affect university-age young people, but is present at all educational and age levels.

Javed Khan, chief executive of children’s charity Barnardo’s, declared earlier this year that resources for young children were so overstretched that children’s mental health was at the worst it had ever been in the charity’s 152-year history. Lack of government investment in children’s wellbeing meant that charities and local authorities were having to abandon vital services, he said.

Khan’s statement comes after a study of over 850,000 children revealed that nearly a fifth of seven to 14-year olds are at risk of suffering from mental health issues later in life. These children showed signs of low self-worth and doubt in their learning ability, which new research suggests are strong indicators of risk to a child’s mental wellbeing.

Similarly, over half (56 percent) of leading staff at further education institutes reported that they had seen a “significant increase” in the number of 16 to 18-year olds with disclosed mental health conditions in the past year, according to the annual Association of Colleges and Times Educational Supplement survey of college leaders. Almost two-thirds of colleges said that they were seeing significant numbers of other students with mental health difficulties who had not formally disclosed them.

These studies show that the mental health of an entire generation of young people is being destroyed by capitalism’s relentless pursuit of profit at the expense of human lives.



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