

Youth suicides and mental health disorders on the rise amid pandemic depression

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Just three days before his 13th birthday, Hayden Hunstable died by suicide in his bedroom in Aledo, Texas. He died in April, in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Hayden's father attributed his son's death to the pandemic, which suddenly turned his life upside-down.

"This is a kid who loved life, was the life of the party," his father, Brad Hunstable, said of his son Hayden. Hunstable explained at the time that his son seemed happy and showed no previous signs of depression, but he was deeply affected by being separated from his friends and his routine.

Since Hayden's death, mental health issues, in the most severe cases leading to suicide, have risen dramatically among youth throughout the US.

Just last week, at a Corona-Norco school board meeting in southern California, newly appointed Superintendent Sam Buenrostro revealed the shocking news that five district students had killed themselves since the start of the crisis. He did not provide their names and ages.

New data from a nationwide survey of young Americans, ages 18-24, has shed further light on the scale of the unfolding mental health crisis. The survey, "The State of the Nation," examined depressive symptoms among these young adults, including thoughts of suicide, generalized anxiety and disruption in sleep.

Overall, across four national waves (in late May, late June, late August and mid-October), researchers found alarming rates of depression, with nearly half of this young adult population—47.3 percent—showing at least moderate depressive symptoms in October, the highest level since June.

This figure is close to 10 times the pre-pandemic rate, which was already staggering.

The source of this crisis is no mystery. The youthful years are meant to be a time filled with hope, optimism and idealism. For those coming of age in 2020, this time presents itself instead as a nightmare.

Young people have suffered immensely from isolation, not being able to see their friends and socialize in the way that is so necessary for healthy human development. Those who are a bit older have watched the death toll from the virus climb each day, in disbelief, as it now surpasses a quarter of a million people.

They have heard the stories, or know first-hand, of the social misery taking place—people dying alone in hospital beds without a loved one allowed in the room to say goodbye. Millions have themselves waited with their parents in the food lines that stretch for miles. Others have lost their homes, ruthlessly evicted even as millions more are added to the list of unemployed each month.

They have been violently shaken into adulthood watching their parents suffer from the anxiety, grief and depression brought on by the economic catastrophe sweeping the country.

There are millions of working-class parents and young people struggling to survive who are looking for answers to this immense crisis. They want what is best for their children and are willing to sacrifice whatever is necessary to secure for them a safe environment and hopeful future.

In this context, the Democratic and Republican parties, aided by their mouthpieces in the bourgeois media, are attempting to exploit the severe mental health crisis among youth, and the anxiety felt by parents, to force the reopening of schools on the basis that the "cure cannot be worse than the disease."

They claim that keeping children home will ultimately be worse for their health than sending them back to school where they may catch the virus and spread it others.

In fact, the Corona-Norco School Board, where these five student suicides occurred since the start of the pandemic, is using these tragedies to justify reopening the elementary schools in January. They make no attempt to explain how reopening the elementary schools will address the mental health crisis of those in the high schools. All five of this year's suicides were high school students.

Consider for a moment the options provided to working class families in 2020 in the most "advanced" capitalist country in the world: keep your child at home to suffer emotionally and socially while you struggle to keep your job to put food on the table, or send your child back to school, risking their lives, the lives of your family and the community at large.

These two "options" amount to no choice at all.

What will be the impact on young students if they lose a teacher? Or if they discover they have been turned into a vector for the disease and infected their parents or grandparents? What will be the impact on students' mental health to return to a

school where they can see their friends but are not allowed to interact in the same ways as before?

The fact of the matter is that there exists in society vast resources, science and technology to meet the widespread emotional, social and educational needs of youth, while keeping them safe from the virus.

Under a socioeconomic system guided by science and reason, that is, under socialism, workers would be compensated for staying at home to care for their children. Online learning would be well funded and rationally organized to prevent burnout and to account for the emotional and social toll taken on children.

The immense productive forces of the Tech Giants would be mobilized to provide children the necessary technology, including high speed internet, needed to participate in online schooling.

More fundamentally, a socialist system would take into account not only the bare minimum needed for teachers to teach and students to learn but the needs of the whole person. Cultural events such as plays, operas and other arts performances would be organized and live streamed free of charge to the public. The most advanced technology would be utilized to help families connect with loved ones whom they could not see in person; and regular conferences would be streamed to the public relaying the most up-to-date and reliable scientific findings on the virus, and how to stay safe.

Nothing of the sort is being prepared. Rather, the ruling elites, represented by both the Democratic and Republican parties, are engaged in a ruthless drive to reopen schools.

The main initiative of the ruling class after the onset of the pandemic in late February and early March was to secure a multitrillion-dollar bailout to Wall Street and the giant corporations. After this legislation was passed, with unanimous support, workers and their families were left to deal with the immense social fallout on an individual basis.

As for the \$1,200 so-called stimulus check, for most families this lasted about two weeks. The following months were filled with immense loss for workers: their loved ones, jobs, health insurance, homes, and for many, the ability to provide for their families and children.

This campaign is part of a broader strategy of the US ruling class to keep the economy open no matter what the cost.

Whether they admit it or not, capitalist governments around the world have adopted the policy of “herd immunity,” that is, allowing the virus to spread without restraint. Even conservative estimates say this policy will lead to more than 23 million deaths globally in the coming years. The ruling class is relentlessly pursuing this policy because it is the only way to ensure that profits continue to flow, unhindered.

The primary concern of the ruling class since the onset of the pandemic has not been the health and well-being of the population, but rather the health and well-being of the profits of Wall Street.

Marx wrote that the capitalist political economy regards the individual worker “like a horse” in that “he must receive enough to enable him to work. It does not consider him, during the time when he is not working, as a human being. It leaves this to criminal law, doctors, religion, statistical tables, politics, and the beadle.”

The capitalist system degrades and dehumanizes workers, no matter the personal suffering and loss. This degradation and dehumanization are all the more ruthless and blatant when the bourgeoisie confronts a crisis on the scale the world confronts today. And it is expressed in nearly every facet of life.

The staggering mental health crisis that workers and young people face today is a byproduct of an entire social system that is predicated on sacrificing lives for the sake of private profit and wealth.

The thousands of people who take their lives each year are the victims of a decayed social order defined by staggering levels of inequality, decades of the artificial suppression of the class struggle by the unions, 30 years of unending wars and police brutality and the degradation of social and cultural life.

Skyrocketing youth suicides speak volumes about the state of society. And no faction of the ruling class has anything close to an answer for such problems. The real answer, however, is emerging more openly and more forcefully every day.

While this generation is coming of age under incredibly difficult circumstances, they are also living in the midst of an immense resurgence of the class struggle all over the world.

They are seeing firsthand who is “essential” to society—that is, the doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers who have sacrificed so much for the betterment of society in these trying times. On the other hand, the parasites of society are also becoming clearer as giant corporations and the ultrarich continue to profit, to the tune of billions of dollars, off the social misery of the masses.

Leon Trotsky once noted that even under the most dire economic conditions, only a tiny percentage of the population would be driven to end their own lives. “But peoples never resort to suicide,” he pointed out. “When their burdens are intolerable they seek a way out through revolution.”



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