

New York Times weaponizes youth suicides to push for school reopenings

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1 February 2021

As the 2021 spring semester begins in the United States, the corporate press, spearheaded by the *New York Times*, is seeking to justify the criminal policy of school reopenings on the grounds that school closures are leading to an increase in student suicides. In so doing, the media is deliberately obscuring the true origins of the mental health crisis affecting young people, while at the same time providing a pseudo-moral justification for homicidal policies that have led and will continue to lead to countless infections and deaths from the coronavirus.

On January 24, the *Times* published an article highlighting the spike in youth suicides since the start of the pandemic. The article focused on Clark County, Nevada, the fifth largest school district in the US, encompassing Las Vegas, which saw 18 student suicides between March and December. By comparison, there were nine suicides in the district during the whole of 2019.

In one instance, 18-year-old Anthony Orr drove to a parking lot in August and shot himself in his car, just months after graduating. His mother, seeking to provide an explanation, told the *Times*, “Our kids are feeling hopeless. They’re feeling like there’s no future for them. I can’t see how there’s any other explanation.” The youngest suicide victim in the county was just nine years old.

The tragic experience of Clark County is mirrored throughout the country, in what has become an alarming trend. Baltimore County teen Michael Myronuk, Jr. was just 14 when he ended his life in October. His mother told WBFF Fox45 News: “He didn’t have any hope. He just gave up.” In another case, an 11-year-old Sacramento boy shot himself in December during his Zoom class.

The devastating increase in youth suicides and mental health issues is being utilized by the *Times* and other media outlets to serve as a justification for reopening the schools in the midst of the surging pandemic. Jesus Jara, the Clark County superintendent, told the *Times*: “When we started to see the uptick in children taking their lives, we knew it wasn’t just the COVID numbers we need to look at anymore. ... We have to find a way to put our hands on our kids, to see them, to look at them. They’ve got to start seeing some movement, some hope.” Jara subsequently took to Twitter to proclaim that

schools “must reopen to help all students.”

There can be no doubt that the mental health crisis in the US has worsened dramatically since the eruption of the pandemic, particularly among adolescents and youth, whose underdeveloped psyches are especially vulnerable to psychological stress. An August 2020 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that rates of depression and anxiety had tripled since the previous year. According to the same report, 26 percent of young adults ages 18–24 had thought about suicide during the previous month.

A November report based on data collected throughout the year in nationwide surveys found that October was even more devastating, with 47.7 percent of young adults reporting symptoms of depression, and 36.9 percent reporting thoughts of suicide or death. It is clear that the ravages of the COVID-19 pandemic include an epidemic of despair among young people.

There is a close connection between the *Times*’s cynical attempt to utilize the suicides of young people to justify the reopening of schools and the Biden administration’s repeated statements of support for the financial oligarchy’s back-to-school drive. The article was published just four days after Biden declared “there’s nothing we can do to change the trajectory of the pandemic in the next several months.”

Biden was signaling his intention to pursue the full reopening of the economy and de-facto continuation of Trump’s herd immunity policy, which has already resulted in hundreds of thousands of preventable deaths. The efforts of the *Times* and other bourgeois outlets to shore up support for this criminal policy now assumes the form of feigned concern for the youth, in this case by utilizing the suicides of youths to proclaim that reopening the schools is an urgent necessity.

However, the establishment mouthpieces that proclaim such concern for the mental well-being of youths fail to explain how students’ mental health will be improved by herding them into unsafe classrooms to witness their teachers, their peers and possibly themselves falling ill to a deadly pathogen, not to mention the risk that they might pass the virus on to their parents, grandparents or other loved ones.

Moreover, they ignore the fact that the refusal of the government and both big business parties to implement policies that would contain the virus and save lives, because these

policies—including the shutdown of non-essential production—would cut into the profits of the corporations and banks, is responsible for the uncontrolled spread of the pandemic, which makes the safe reopening of the schools impossible. It is the ruling class and its political servants that are responsible for the increasing mental anguish of young people, not teachers.

Now, under conditions where the pandemic has been allowed to spread exponentially, where serious scientific studies show that youth are susceptible to developing long-term complications from the virus, and where a deadlier and more contagious variant of the virus is known to be spreading, it is most certainly not in the best interests of students to be sent into schools with hundreds of other students, teachers and staff.

There is little doubt that the isolation imposed by the pandemic has had a negative impact on mental health, but it is far too simplistic to assert that the crisis is merely the result of loneliness caused by school closures. More to the point, this argument deliberately obscures the true causes of the epidemic of mental distress, which are deeply rooted and systemic in character.

Mental health in the US, especially among young people, has been steadily worsening for at least the past two decades. According to a 2019 report by the National Center for Health Statistics and the CDC, suicide rates among youth aged 10 to 24—which had been relatively stable between 2000 and 2007 at 6.8 deaths per 100,000—began steadily rising after 2007 to reach a rate of 10.6 deaths per 100,000 by 2017, an increase of 56 percent in just one decade. Suicide has been the second leading cause of death within that age bracket at least since 2017.

In this context, it is deeply misleading to state that the pandemic shutdowns are the cause of the spike in mental illnesses. Rather, the pandemic has accelerated a mental health catastrophe that has been long developing.

Mental health is a social phenomenon that cannot be considered apart from the broader political, economic and social structure of society.

The youth of the new millennium have come of age in an era of staggering social inequality. They've grown up in a nation that has been continuously at war for nearly three decades, with the youngest unable to remember a time when the United States was not engaged in armed conflict.

They have come to age in a society where school shootings and other outbreaks of homicidal violence are regular occurrences and are treated with indifference by the ruling class; a society in which suicide, drug overdoses, and other deaths of despair are tragically common; a country where the threat of brutal violence by the armed enforcers of the capitalist state—the police—always lies just beneath the surface; a culture that promotes the most backward values, such as greed and self-centeredness, as virtues.

Add to this the devastating impact of the pandemic, during which the most vulnerable members of society—the elderly, the

infirm and the poor—have been ruthlessly sacrificed to satisfy the insatiable greed of the financial oligarchy. Countless youth have undoubtedly seen loved ones die of the virus. They've witnessed their parents struggling to cope with the economic difficulties caused by the pandemic depression. Many are either facing or have already been evicted due to a cutoff or decline in family income.

The pandemic has revealed more sharply than ever the brutality, incompetence and moral depravity of modern capitalist society. Under these conditions, the growing despair and anguish of the youth comes as a surprise only to the bourgeois writers of the *New York Times* et al., who are both blind and deaf to the realities that face the working-class majority.

The bourgeois press presents workers and youth with a Catch-22: either reopen the schools for in-person learning in classrooms that are clearly unsafe, or have the youth stay home to wallow in loneliness and despair.

Meanwhile, the mega-fortunes of the Elon Musks and the Jeff Bezoses continue to soar, driven by a stock market fueled by endless supplies of free money from the Treasury and the Federal Reserve.

Socialists reject with contempt this false dichotomy. Under socialism, the resources of society would be rationally and scientifically organized to meet the social needs of the population.

Guided by humanity and reason, a socialist society would provide resources for the spiritual and cultural nourishment of the youth, along with the mobilization of all available technology to provide education and communication during the pandemic.

Mental health treatment and therapy would be available to all workers and their children to help them cope with isolation until the pandemic was brought under control. In the meantime, workers and their families would receive full compensation.

This is far from a utopian dream. The material resources exist to build a just and humane society. However, only the conscious struggle of the whole working class can bring about this transformation. We urge all workers and youth who agree with this perspective to contact us and take up the fight for socialism.



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