

Questions remain surrounding Nex Benedict's death following release of autopsy summary

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The Office of the Chief Medical Examiner in Oklahoma has released a single-page autopsy summary report that says Nex Benedict, 16, died by suicide. Nex, a non-binary teen who according to their dating partner identified as transgender, passed away on February 8, a day after being brutally beaten in an Owasso, Oklahoma high school bathroom. The police said the full autopsy report will be released 10 business days after the summary report was released, or around March 27.

Under the "Significant observations and injury documentations" section it merely says, "The decedent was 16-year-old with diphenhydramine and fluoxetine combined toxicity." Diphenhydramine is a common over-the-counter antihistamine medicine typically used for allergy relief, found in brand names like Sudafed and Benadryl. Fluoxetine is a selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor (SSRI) often used to treat depression known under brand names like Prozac and Rapiflux. The probable cause of death is listed as "DIPHENHYDRAMINE AND FLUOXETINE COMBINED TOXICITY," with the manner of death being marked as suicide.

According to two experts interviewed by *Advocate*, an LGBT magazine, it is "very, very uncommon" for this sort of drug interaction to lead to death. Dr. Joshua King, medical director of the Maryland Poison Center at the University of Maryland School of Pharmacy, said that "in general, in therapeutic use, meaning taking it as prescribed or directed, death, while not an impossibility, would be very, very uncommon" and that "the vast majority [of overdoses] do not lead to death."

"Death again is very rare from these poisons, but we would say, in the case of an overdose, general complications can lead to seizures and aspiration." Benedict's mother observed them suffering a seizure according to released 911 records.

According to a CDC report on suspected suicides among children and young adults ages 10-19 for 2020-2022, these substances were some of the most commonly used in suicides, along with acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and sertraline. As King explained, "people will generally overdose on what they have available."

King warned against discontinuing anti-depressants because of concerns generated by individual cases, saying "it would be more dangerous if someone were prescribed this medication for depression and heard about this case and said, 'This is dangerous.'

I'm going to stop taking it,' and then ended up having a complication due to untreated depression."

Another significant trend noted in the CDC report was that suicides increased during school months, with a sharp increase in September, and declined when school wasn't in session during the summer months and winter breaks, and during the SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) lockdowns in April-May 2020.

Despite Benedict suffering head trauma where they reported to police they "blacked out," not a single mention of head injuries appears in the summary. Benedict's family, who were allowed to view the full autopsy, released a statement reading "rather than allow incomplete accounts to take hold and spread any further, the Benedict family feel compelled to provide a summary of those findings which have not yet been released by the Medical Examiner's office, particularly those that contradict allegations of the assault on Nex being insignificant."

The quoted sections, while documenting "no lethal trauma," report multiple injuries testifying to the severity of the assault. Nex's head and neck sustained two contusions (bruises) to the right orbital (i.e., the eye socket), right scleral (white of eye) hemorrhage, two lacerations on the right cheek and right ear, two abrasions to the right ear and left cheek, and scalp and subgaleal hemorrhages. "Scattered asynchronous abrasions and contusions" were observed on their extremities as well. The only non-violence-related injuries were those sustained to the torso while CPR was being administered.

Nex suffered bullying since the start of their sophomore year at Owasso High School West. The girls who gave Nex the beating the day before their death barely knew Nex, which speaks to the character of the beating not as a mere inter-personal conflict, but an event that has social causes. The external causes have been discussed in previous articles on the WSWS, but it is worth briefly reviewing the far-right campaign being waged at the highest levels of the Republican Party promoting anti-trans bigotry.

Chaya Raichik, who is behind the anti-LGBTQ+ X (formerly Twitter) account "Liberals of Tik Tok," was on the Oklahoma Department of Education's Library Media Advisory Committee and featured as a speaker at the 2023 Conservative Political Action Conference for her outspoken bigotry. A legislator called LGBTQ+ people "filth" when asked about Benedict's death. The school itself did not report the beating of Nex to the authorities,

and the Department of Education has opened an investigation into the school in response to allegations that Benedict suffered gender-based discrimination at the school, in response to a request by the Human Rights Campaign.

It is a matter of course that police routinely lie. The questions surrounding the autopsy report, and concerns that the investigation may have been tainted with political interests, are entirely legitimate. Even if one were to assume suicide is the cause of death, it would raise the question of what drove Nex to suicide. To put it simply, had Benedict not been bullied and beaten, had there not been such a climate of hatred cultivated by ruling class and its political representatives, would they still be with us here today?

According to the US Department of Education, about 20 percent of students ages 12-18 experienced bullying nationwide in 2017, falling from 29 percent in 2005. The National Crime Victimization Survey for the 2021-2022 school year puts the total proportion bullied at 19.2 percent. While overall bullying seems to have fallen over the past 20 years, at least in part because of public campaigns against such abuse, the number of LGBTQ+ students bullied, and in particular trans students, has increased significantly.

Overall drug overdoses from 2016 to 2022 have increased by around 31 percent, from about 80,000 to 105,000, far outstripping population increase.

Oklahoma was in the top 10 of states with the biggest bullying problems according to Wallethub, coming in at number 9 out of the 47 states examined, and ranking fifth for bullying prevalence. The state had the 10th highest rate of youth suicide in the country between 2012 and 2016, the most recent data available from the Oklahoma State Department of Health. The 2021 Youth Risk Survey by the Oklahoma State Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services reported that almost a quarter, or 23 percent of respondents, contemplated suicide, while 10 percent actually attempted to commit suicide. Suicide was the ninth-leading cause of death in the state for 2021 when adjusted for age.

Oklahoma children are among the most traumatized according to a 2018-19 National Survey of Children, suffering the third highest number of “adverse childhood experiences,” which include nine metrics, the vast majority of which are tied with socioeconomic class, including if it has often been difficult for children’s households to acquire food or housing, having a parent or guardian die, divorce, living with anyone with a problem with alcohol or drugs, seeing or hearing domestic violence in the home, etc. Oklahoma ranked number eight for childhood poverty in 2021.

Suicides in Oklahoma as of 2020 were 65 percent higher than the national average. In Tulsa County where Owasso High School is located, the rate was 23.16 deaths per 100,000 people, nearly double the national average of 13.53.

The text of the letter sent by the HRC to the DOE documented a high level of bullying of LGBTQ+ students in Oklahoma. It pointed to the 85 pieces of anti-LGBTQ+ legislation considered in the state, as well as the seven that passed, as preparing the way for the bullying. As the letter explains, “Nex’s family recently noted that Nex had first begun being bullied after Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt signed the bill into law that forbids trans and gender expansive youth to access restrooms consistent with their gender identity.”

According to data from the HRC and the University of Connecticut’s 2023 LGBTQ+ Youth Report, which surveyed nearly 13,000 LGBTQ+ youth ages 13–18 nationwide in 2022, “LGBTQ+ youth—and trans and gender-expansive youth in particular—face bullying, harassment, and violence in school at alarming rates... Two-thirds (62.6%) of trans and gender-expansive youth had been teased or bullied at school at least once in the prior year—over half (55.6%) of whom were teased specifically for their LGBTQ+ identity—and a fifth (20%) had been hit, pushed, or experienced other forms of physical violence at school in just the 30 days prior to the survey. Yet, against this backdrop, schools have largely been unresponsive: only a quarter of trans youth respondents who were victimized at school were able to report this to a teacher or staff member, and of those who did, half reported that staff helped only a little—or not at all.”

The Biden administration released a three-paragraph statement more than a month after the death of Nex, claiming to be “heartbroken,” sending “prayers” to the family, and stating that “to all LGBTQ+ Americans for whom this tragedy feels so personal, know this: I will always have your back.”

Nowhere in the statement was the role of the Republicans in the death pointed to, though this is not surprising given the fact that Biden has systematically worked to politically legitimize the same Republican Party that shares responsibility for the death. He has embraced the far-right anti-immigrant politics of the Republicans and called on them to “join me” in the war on immigrants in order to acquire funding for the US-NATO war with Russia in Ukraine and the Gaza genocide.

Biden and the Democratic Party as a whole have worked to whitewash the January 6, 2021 coup attempt by Donald Trump and the majority of the Republican Party. (Chaya Raichik was present at the attack on the Capitol). All three members of the Democratic Party-aligned minority on the US Supreme Court voted to allow the coup-plotter Trump to appear on the ballot. In other words, the Democrats are just as complicit as the Republicans in fostering the social and political conditions that led to the death of Nex Benedict.



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