

## THE SOCIAL ROOTS OF HIGH SCHOOL SUICIDE CLUSTERS

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### Abstract

Though many scholars acknowledge that the causes of suicide are complex, suicidology and suicide prevention focus disproportionately (1) on individual risk and protective factors rather than social-contextual factors and (2) on crisis intervention rather than up-stream prevention strategies. This presentation will illustrate why neglecting social-contextual risk factors and up-stream solutions is problematic by presenting empirical evidence from an in-depth qualitative case study of a community with a significant adolescent suicide problem (including youth suicide clusters). While adolescence can be a challenging developmental stage known for its heightened vulnerability to suicide, youth in this community have to contend with additional social-contextual stressors. For example, the community is highly connected with cohesive social networks that facilitate gossip, the monitoring of behaviors, and the sanctioning of deviations from expectations. Additionally, the community is home to a broadly shared set of narrow cultural beliefs about what ideal kids (and parents) should be: namely, academically and athletically excellent. The presentation also outlines how these contextual conditions matter to youth mental health and offers suggestions for additional intervention points for suicide prevention. After this presentation attendees will have a better understanding of (1) why social-contextual and upstream factors matter to suicide and (2) how neglecting them can undermine prevention efforts. Finally, attendees will be able to discuss (3) the social-contextual issues that schools, communities, parents, and mental health workers must consider when managing a context with a disproportionate number of youth suicides or suicide attempts and (4) articulate why youth must be included as partners in suicide prevention.

### References

Most of my research articles and essays are available for free on my website: [www.annasmueller.com](http://www.annasmueller.com)  
If a particular article is not yet available for free, please email me and I will send you a copy.

### This research draws on the following studies:

- Mueller, Anna S. and Seth Abrutyn. 2016. "Adolescents under Pressure: A New Durkheimian Framework for Understanding Adolescent Suicide in a Cohesive Community." *American Sociological Review* 81(5):877-99. doi: 10.1177/0003122416663464.
- Mueller, Anna S. 2017. "Does the Media Matter to Suicide?: Examining the Social Dynamics Surrounding Media Reporting on Suicide in a Suicide-Prone Community." *Social Science & Medicine* 180:152-59. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2017.03.019>.
- Abrutyn, Seth, and Anna S. Mueller. 2018. "Towards a Cultural-Structural Theory of Suicide: Examining Excessive Regulation and its Discontents." *Sociological Theory* 36(1): 48-66. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0735275118759150>

**Dr. Mueller's blogs on related topics:**

2017. "13 Reasons Why and the Pressing Need for a Sociology of Suicide." June 28, 2017. *Contexts: Understanding People in their Social Worlds* Blog. (<https://contexts.org/blog/13-reasons-why/>)
2016. "Why Community Matters to Suicide: Examining the Social Roots of Adolescent Suicide Clusters." November 3, 2016. National Institute of Health's *Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research (OBSSR) Connector*. (<https://obssr.od.nih.gov/why-community-matters-to-suicide-examining-the-social-roots-of-adolescent-suicide-clusters/>)
2015. "To talk or not to talk? The dilemma of suicide contagion." *The Conversation*, U.S. Edition. Published online December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2015. (<https://theconversation.com/to-talk-or-not-to-talk-the-dilemma-of-suicide-contagion-46434>)
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**Evidence that it is safe to talk about suicide**

- Cha, Christine B., Jeffrey J. Glenn, Charlene A. Deming, Eugene J. D'Angelo, Jill M. Hooley, Bethany A. Teachman and Matthew K. Nock. 2016. "Examining Potential Iatrogenic Effects of Viewing Suicide and Self-Injury Stimuli." *Psychological Assessment*: No Pagination Specified. doi: 10.1037/pas0000280.
- Gould, Madelyn S, Frank A Marrocco, Marjorie Kleinman, John Graham Thomas, Katherine Mostkoff, Jean Cote and Mark Davies. 2005. "Evaluating Iatrogenic Risk of Youth Suicide Screening Programs: A Randomized Controlled Trial." *JAMA* 293(13):1635-43.
- Joiner, Thomas. 2010. *Myths About Suicide*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

**Selected Additional Publications by Dr. Mueller:**

- Abrutyn, Seth and Anna S. Mueller. 2014. "Are Suicidal Behaviors Contagious? Using Longitudinal Data to Examine Suicide Suggestion." *American Sociological Review* 79(2):211-27.
- Mueller, Anna S., Seth Abrutyn and Cynthia Stockton. 2014. "Can Social Ties Be Harmful? Examining the Spread of Suicide in Early Adulthood." *Sociological Perspectives*. doi: 10.1177/0731121414556544.
- Mueller, Anna S. and Seth Abrutyn. 2015. "Suicidal Disclosures among Friends: Using Social Network Data to Understand Suicide Suggestion." *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 56(1):131-48.
- Mueller, Anna S, Wesley James, Seth Abrutyn and Martin L Levin. 2015. "Suicide Ideation and Bullying among Us Adolescents: Examining the Intersections of Sexual Orientation, Gender, and Race/Ethnicity." *American Journal of Public Health* 105(5):980-85.

**Bio**

**Anna S. Mueller, PhD**, is an assistant professor in the Department of Comparative Human Development at the University of Chicago. She is also a member of the American Association of Suicidology. She received her BA from Wellesley College in 2002 and her PhD in sociology in 2011 from the University of Texas at Austin. Using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies, Mueller's research examines (1) the social roots of adolescent suicide; (2) the mechanisms that undergird suicide contagion; and (3) the experience of suicide bereavement in adolescence. Her research on suicide in adolescence has won numerous awards for its contribution to knowledge, including the Eliot Friedson Outstanding Publication Award from the American Sociological Association. Her research can be read in the *American Sociological Review*, *Social Science & Medicine*, the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, the *American Journal of Public Health*, among others. For more information on Mueller, visit her website: [www.annasmueller.com](http://www.annasmueller.com)