

# The Impact of Suicidal Content in Popular Media on the Attitudes and Behaviors of Adolescents

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## Abstract

*The rising rate of suicide is a relevant topic in the field of social work, as are the implications of media influence on the rate and frequency of suicide. The suicide rate among adolescents is approaching epidemic proportions and there remains inadequate conclusive data on many of the factors that contribute to suicide attempts among this group. By reviewing the literature surrounding the impact of media portrayals of suicidal content on the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents, we may better understand the complex relationship between these two phenomena. Although there has been a large amount of research in recent decades dedicated to understanding why adolescents are attempting suicide at higher rates, there remains a need for more careful and conclusive research on this topic. It is hoped that the literature reviewed will stimulate and encourage an interest in this topic and open a much-needed conversation among educators, parents, mental health professionals, and those responsible for the production of television directed at adolescents. This may assist in preventing adolescent suicide from becoming more problematic than it already is. Implications and recommendations for prevention and advocacy among social workers are provided.*

## Introduction

The topic of suicide has gained an increasing amount of attention in mass media over the last few decades. In the past, suicide was considered to be a very taboo subject, rarely discussed with friends and family and almost never addressed in the media. Recently, suicide has become a common topic of discussion and a popular theme in TV, movies, and the news. It has become a particularly common topic in media directed towards adolescents. Meanwhile, the rate of suicide is rising faster among adolescents than any other age group as suicide has grown to be the third leading cause of death for this population (Johnson, Krug, & Potter, 2000). It is the hope of the authors that, through a review of the literature surrounding the impact of media portrayals of suicidal content on the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents, we can better understand the complex relationship between these two phenomena. Such an understanding may assist in preventing

adolescent suicide from becoming even more common and may provide direction for social workers and other mental health professionals to engage in prevention efforts and advocacy.

## Background

The relationship between the portrayal of suicide in the media and suicide attempts and gestures among young people is one that has existed for centuries. In Goethe's 1774 novel, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, the lovelorn romantic hero Werther commits suicide. The depiction of his fictional death reportedly led to a series of copycat suicides among the young European romantics of the time. Phillips (1974) coined the term "Werther Effect" to refer to modeling or contagion effects of fictional or non-fictional presentations of suicide. In his seminal study, Phillips found a 12% increase in the U.S. suicide rate following the death by suicide of actress Marilyn Monroe, illustrating the contagious nature of suicide. The idea behind the Werther Effect has been gaining an increasing amount of attention in recent literature on suicide and suicide attempts, as has the concern over the increase in violence, including suicidal violence, in popular media.

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the possible influences popular media has on the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents regarding suicide. There are a number of reasons for undertaking such an exploration. First, although the highest rate of suicide occurs in the elderly population, the suicide rate of adolescents is increasing faster than any other age group (Johnson, Krug, & Potter, 2000). Second, while popular media is an important source of information and influence on most Americans, adolescents generally digest more media and are more susceptible to its influences than any other age group (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 1999). Finally, one of the areas of media in which suicide has gained the largest amount of attention is that directed towards adolescents (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 1999). Past literature on the subject, although extensive, has largely focused on the effects of general media violence and the "Werther Effect" as it pertains to news media coverage of suicide. There is little comprehensive evidence that adequately shows the effects of the suicidal content,

fictional and non-fictional, in popular media consumed by today's adolescents.

With the popularity of stations like MTV, VH1, Fox, and the WB among adolescent viewers, it should create concern that many of the shows on these stations regularly portray suicide deaths, attempts, and gestures. Although little if any research has explored the amount or type of suicidal content in such media, many would argue that the topic of suicide is common and often portrayed irresponsibly, without discussion of the permanency of suicide or the mental and emotional implications for survivors and families. In most cases, these shows do not provide adequate support and discussion to debrief adolescent viewers. The strong influence popular television has on the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of adolescents has already been established, but the degree this influence has on youths' perceptions of suicide remains unclear. By engaging in this literature review, perhaps one aspect of this tragedy of epidemic proportions can be understood and addressed at various levels so as to prevent it from becoming any more prevalent than it already is.

### Rate of Suicide Among Teens

Suicide has consistently been the second or third leading cause of death among adolescents (13 to 18 years-old). It "is the driving force behind increases in the overall suicide rate, and rates are rising fast" (Bloch, 1999, p. 26). Between 1950 and 1995, the incidence of suicide among adolescents in the United States nearly tripled, while rates among adults declined (Johnson, Krug, & Potter, 2000). Almost five thousand youth committed suicide in the U.S. alone in 1995 and data indicates that for every successful suicide attempt, five unsuccessful attempts were made (Johnson, Krug, & Potter, 2000). One study estimated that five to eight percent of adolescents attempt suicide, representing approximately one million teenagers, of whom nearly 700,000 receive medical attention for their attempt (Gould, Greenberg, Velting, & Shaffer, 2003). Although the statistics provided seem alarming, they are most likely understatements of the actual rate of suicide and suicide attempts among adolescents. Many completed suicides are recorded as accidental deaths, often to provide cover for the families who feel shame, embarrassment, and fear of the destruction of their son or daughter's good name (Robbins, 1998).

An increasing amount of research in recent decades has been dedicated to understanding why

adolescents are attempting suicide at higher rates. One popular view deals with the influence that suicide of a peer has on the suicidal thoughts and gestures of youth in the community. The contagion hypothesis suggests that an adolescent suicide may trigger a cluster of subsequent suicides among peers. Gould, Wallenstein, and Kleinman (1990) found supporting evidence of this contagion hypothesis, finding trends of suicide clusters, or outbreaks of suicide-related behavior in far excess of the expected frequency within localized geographic areas. Gutierrez, King, and Ghaziuddin (1996) found similar results, citing that exposure to an attempted suicide resulted in attitudes indicating a stronger attraction to death and repulsion by life. Such results beg the question: is the contagion hypothesis limited to real-life suicide exposure?

Thomson and Holland (2002) studied the ways in which young people negotiate moral authority and their perceptions of social change. Through questionnaires, group discussions, individual interviews, and research assignments, they found that many young people look toward media, particularly media violence, as a source of moral authority (Thomson & Holland, 2002). The results of this study suggest that the content in popular media consumed by adolescents may have very serious implications on their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors. Curran (1987) provides a number of studies indicating that adolescents are indeed susceptible to media influence of non-fictional suicides and its contagious effects. Phillips (1974), in a study of major importance, demonstrated that "(a) the national level of suicides increases significantly for a brief period after a suicide story is nationally published by newspapers; (b) this increase in suicides occurs *after* the suicide story is published; (c) the more publicity given to the story, the more the national level of suicides increases; (d) the increase in suicides occurs only in the geographic areas where the suicide story is published" (Curran, 1987, p. 105). Also, the Werther Effect, as it applies to news coverage of suicide, is far more potent with adolescents than adults. There have been reports of an increase of 6.9% in teenage suicides, but only 0.5% in adult suicides after TV news coverage of suicide (Goldney, 2001). Given the research supporting the contagion hypothesis, and the belief that teens may be as easily influenced by media as they are by peers, the literature and implications presented in this paper naturally follow.

## Influence of Television Media among Adolescents and Incidence of Violent Content

A recent national study reported that consuming media is a full-time job for the average American child, who spends about 40 hours per week in front of the television. At 10 a.m. on any Saturday morning more than 60% of all youth in America are watching TV (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Few studies have looked into the incidence and effect of suicidal content in media directed at youth, but if the incidence and impact of violence in such media is any indication, this society may be in trouble. According to Strasburger and Donnerstein (1999), more than half of 15 and 16 year olds have seen recent, popular R-rated movies. In examining nearly 10,000 hours of television programming, it was found that 61% contained violence. More than 20% of Music Television videos portrayed overt violence and 25% depicted weapon carrying. Of all of the media genres studied, children and youth programming was the most violent (Strasburger & Donnerstein, 1999). With regard to suicidal content on television, Mishara (2003) indicates that half of the 5 to 7 year old children who were studied reported seeing at least one suicide on television, and all of the older children reported viewing one or more suicidal deaths on television programs. This study concluded that the primary sources of information on suicide for youth of all ages are conversations with their peers and television depictions of suicide.

There is extensive empirical research on the negative psychological impact on adolescents of viewing films, listening to music, and playing video games with themes of violence, sexual aggression, and misogynistic attitudes (Rustad, Small, Jobes, Saver, & Peterson, 2003). These studies have found that exposure to media violence increases aggressive behaviors while decreasing pro-social behaviors for various reasons including: "emotional arousal; activation of aggressive thoughts, emotions, expectations, and memories; weakening inhibitions against aggressive behavior; desensitizing reactions to violence; reducing empathy toward victims; and providing models of specific techniques" (Rustad et al., 2003, p. 121). One possible reason for the interest in a link between media violence and actual violence and aggression is that violence in the United States began to increase dramatically in 1965, exactly when the first generation of children raised with TV began to reach prime ages for committing violent crimes. Indeed, studies of violent crime rates before and after the introduction of television have shown

similar effects in several countries (Bushman & Anderson, 2001).

Results of studies that examine the relationship between media violence and youth aggression and violence are alarming and naturally lead to concern that suicidal content in media would have similar effects on adolescents' attitudes and behaviors regarding suicide. In July 2000, six major professional societies (the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Family Physicians, and the American Psychiatric Association) signed a joint statement on the hazards of exposing children to media violence, noting that "at this time, well over 1,000 studies ... point overwhelmingly to a causal connection between media violence and aggressive behavior in some children" (Bushman & Anderson, 2001). Research on the influence of media portrayals of suicide is far less exhaustive and conclusive and therefore, has become a critical area for future study.

## Effects of Suicidal Content in Television and Music

The majority of research on the Werther Effect and suicide rates following the media portrayal or coverage of suicide concentrates on news reports of the suicidal death of popular figures. While this is only a small component of the relationship being studied within this review, it provides a great deal of insight into the influence of media on suicidal thoughts and behaviors. A potent example is the suicide death of Marilyn Monroe in 1962 and the 12% increase in the U.S. suicide rate that followed (Curran, 1987). Many point to the suicidal death of Kurt Cobain and the resulting suicidality of many of his young fans as an example of the Werther Effect. Jobes and his colleagues (1996) analyzed data on the Seattle King County area where Cobain lived and died and found no significant increase in the number of attempted and completed suicide attempts in the area. In fact, only one suicide was linked to Cobain's death and that involved a fan that had a history of depression and substance abuse. There were, however, more crisis calls made of a suicidal nature. The lack of Werther Effect in response to Cobain's death was linked to the professional and responsible manner in which the media handled the news of the suicide, and the use of crisis centers to handle the response.

National data has been difficult to gather but implications suggest that the media has a good deal of responsibility when it comes to the subject and coverage of suicide (Jobes et al., 1996). According to Stack (1996), "There is largely a consensus that publicized stories on individual suicides tend to increase the social suicide rate" (p. 140). In Japan, where people are generally less critical of those who commit or attempt suicide, the trend is the same. Stack's study indicated that in both the U.S. and in Japan, the imitative effect is restricted to stories concerning individuals of the same racial/ethnic background. A disturbing example of this occurred following the death of the Japanese teen singing idol, Yukiko Okada, who was discovered and rescued after a failed suicide attempt only to jump to her death from the top of a seven-story building hours later. In the seventeen days following the singer's suicide, 33 young Japanese youth killed themselves by similar methods (Robbins, 1998, p. 87). Identification with the victim is obviously a large component in the power of media to create a Werther Effect. This leads to research on another influential type of media: music and music videos.

Music is arguably one of the most potent forms of media influence. Fans not only identify with the lyrics and content of music and music videos, but also with the artists. Heavy Metal, Rock, and Rap music are some genres that have received research attention for their controversial content but virtually all types of music may contain suicidal themes. The themes in heavy metal music include individual mental troubles such as depression, social isolation, and loneliness. Also included are the themes of failed personal relationships and even domestic violence. In many cases, no solution is offered to these problems, as they are portrayed as an immutable part of the human condition, and, sometimes, there is reference to suicide as a solution or coping mechanism (Stack, 1998). A song that has received publicity in recent years is "Suicide Solution" by Ozzy Osbourne. It contains the following lyrics: "Breaking laws, locking doors, but there is no one at home. Make your bed, rest your head, but you lie there and moan. Where to hide? Suicide is the only way out. Don't you know what it's really about?" The song has been linked to a number of adolescent suicides, including a California teenager who listened to it for five hours before shooting himself (Poland, 1989). Since music is targeted to and consumed by adolescents more than any other group, there remains a concern that some youth may be highly influenced by the messages some music genres

generate. This may also reinforce the connection between adolescents' attitudes and behaviors and media influence.

### **Suicidal Content in Fictional Media**

While the data provided thus far would indicate concern regarding the influence popular media may have on the suicidal attitudes and behaviors of adolescents, research on the effects of fictional portrayals is perhaps the most concerning. Though there has been considerably less data on the influence of this form of media versus non-fictional news coverage, the data that does exist indicates that fictional media may also have a large influence on adolescents. The most accessible and, therefore, studied form of fictional portrayals of suicide are made-for-TV movies, which became popular in the early 1980's. Poland (1989) found that suicide and suicide attempts increased significantly during the two-week period following several television movies about suicide. They focused on four made-for-TV movies shown during the 1984-1985 school year, all of which involved high school students attempting or committing suicide. All four films utilized professional advisors in assisting with production and were accompanied by educational and prevention materials. The first three films were followed by an increase in suicide and suicide attempts in the areas in which the films were shown (Poland, 1989). The fourth, which provided the most extensive resources (including hotline numbers, teacher's guides, and a follow-up television message) was not related to an increase in suicide (Guetzloe, 1989). Today's television contains suicidal themes far more frequently than it did twenty years ago and it is not limited to made-for-TV movies. Although the purpose of such television is not to suggest suicide, educational and preventative material is infrequently and inadequately provided. Yet, given the research following the 1984-1985 school year, fictional portrayals are likely to cause a disproportionate rise in suicide rates among adolescents regardless of the context surrounding the suicidal material.

### **Adolescent Attitudes Toward Death and Suicide**

The influence of media on the thoughts, behaviors, and attitudes of adolescents is a particularly important phenomenon to study when one considers the possibility that adolescents are naturally more accepting of suicidal behavior than adults. Curran (1987) asserts that, "some adolescents may misread societal or peer values and attitudes

regarding suicidal behavior due to faulty reality testing or a romanticized image of what suicide is suppose to mean to one's self and others" (p. 108). Curran (1987) cites research from Boldt, indicating that while only 22.5% of adults believed that those who commit suicide would go to heaven, 42.5% of adolescents share this belief. Patros (1988) offered a comprehensive exploration into adolescents' views and attitudes toward death, stating, "Adolescents, as well as children, often see death glamorized by television, movies, books, and magazines. In many cases adolescents romanticize death and the way it will affect loved ones as well as people in general" (p. 43). The author goes on to list some of the views adolescents may have toward death, including: a peaceful sleep that will make everything better, a means of punishing someone, a way of forcing someone to express their love for them, a way of being reunited with a deceased other, a way of expressing great love, and an escape from feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. The author uses research supporting the fact that only 20% of adolescents ages 13 to 16 accept death as total cessation of life, adding, "It is not unusual for adolescents to... enjoy a sense of power over death in that they feel they can control the time and place it will happen" (Patros, 1988, p. 43). In comparison to adults, adolescents seemingly have a more accepting attitude toward death and suicide. This may explain the findings that they are more susceptible to media influences supporting such attitudes. While a more acceptable image of suicide does not necessarily lead to suicide attempts, it would be difficult to argue that the two are unrelated.

## Limitations

Most of the research on the influence of suicidal content in media with adolescents has been mixed and inconclusive, primarily because of methodological flaws and the laboratory effect on the potency of media content in most experimental research studies (Rustad et al., 2003). A number of compounding factors, such as the nature of the fictional portrayal, the degree of realism, and the depiction of the consequences of suicide may alter the likelihood of an imitation effect (Gould et al., 2003). In addition there are findings that the influence of a media suicide portrayal may be location-specific, method-specific, or age/gender-specific. This suggests that further work is needed to elucidate the characteristics of the model and the observer that may, in combination, increase the likelihood of an imitation effect occurring. Indeed, one major limitation of

the research presented is the lack of consideration and specificity given to the populations of adolescents studied.

Population demographics may have a significant impact on a youth's susceptibility to suicidal thoughts and behaviors. For example, while females attempt suicide three times as often as males, males are twice as likely to be successful in their attempt due to their use of more lethal methods (Gould et al., 2003). Also, youth suicide is more common among Whites than African Americans in the United States, although the rates are highest among Native Americans and generally the lowest among Asian/Pacific Islanders. African-American students were significantly less likely (13.3%) than white or Latino students (19.7% and 19.4%, respectively) to have considered suicide or to have made a specific plan. Latino students (12.1%) were significantly more likely than either African-American or white students to have made a suicide attempt (8.8% and 7.9%, respectively) (Gould et al., 2003). Individual and family histories of suicide and psychopathology also have significant implications for a youth's suicide risk. Between one quarter and one third of youth suicide victims have made a prior suicide attempt, more than 90% have had at least one major psychiatric disorder, and there is a high prevalence of comorbidity between affective and substance abuse disorders in this population (Gould et al., 2003). In addition, suicide victims are more likely to come from non-intact families of origin, have impaired parent-child relationships, and have poor interpersonal problem-solving abilities. An increased risk for suicide is also associated with youth facing certain life stressors, such as loss, legal or disciplinary problems, and physical or sexual abuse (Gould et al., 2003). Such compounding factors make it almost impossible to assert a causal relationship between an individual's media viewership and his or her risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors.

Compounding societal factors also create a problem for establishing causality between increasing suicide portrayal in media directed at adolescents and increases in adolescent suicidal behavior. For example, increased alcohol use and availability of firearms among teens are societal trends and have been noted to be significant risk factors for an increase in suicide rates (Gould et al., 2003). Also, recent cross-sectional and longitudinal studies found a significant two- to six-fold increased risk of suicidal behavior for homosexual and bisexual youths, a population which is expanding exponentially in this society (Gould et al., 2003). Without

adjusting for these individual and societal factors affecting the rate of suicide and suicide attempts among youth, causality cannot be established and findings remain limited.

### Implications and Recommendations

Clearly, the impact of media violence varies considerably based on an individual's unique characteristics and situation and, therefore, media portrayals of suicide will have a much stronger effect on some adolescents than it will on others. Javier, Herron, and Primavera (1998) offer a comprehensive perspective on the role that media can play in the expression of violence. They report that, while the nature of the impact media violence has on an individual can only be understood in the context of the multiple dimensions of that individual and his or her personal psychology, it is nonetheless important that carefully designed interventions be implemented in the home, school, and societal sectors. Therefore, it is not the authors' intent for this review of the literature to imply that a "one size fits all" approach exists to deal with the many compounding aspects of adolescent mental health. Instead, the authors believe the literature indicates the need for a preventative support network that addresses the adolescents' needs on many levels. This network should be composed of families, school personnel, and other individuals that seek to influence children of all ages and backgrounds, particularly social workers.

Parents, teachers, social workers, and other adults hold the responsibility to pick up where many television networks have left off by providing the necessary support, education, and intervention strategies to ensure the safety of children and adolescents. Despite this, programs that offer prevention and post-vention education in the form of classroom education and support groups are few and far between. In schools, a forum for education on youth suicide can equip students and adults with the necessary tools that they may need in dealing with a suicidal person. A similar prevention program was developed and presented by the authors of this review to a group of high school students who would have otherwise not received much information on this critical topic. Not only did this program provide education, but it also acted as a lifeline to several students who otherwise may not have sought help. Such educational and prevention programs offer education and support to both suicidal youth and their primary level of defense, their peers, and should be considered by school social workers. In addition, Gould, et al. (2003) recommend skills

training programs for at-risk youth, emphasizing the development of problem solving, coping, and cognitive skills, as suicidal youths have deficits in these areas. The authors also recommend school-wide screenings, involving multistage assessments, focused on depression, substance abuse problems, recent and frequent suicidal ideation, and past suicide attempts.

A number of implications of existing research are worth addressing, such as the responsibility television networks have to be more responsible in their portrayal of suicidal content and to put forth positive messages in programming directed at teens either during or after the programs. While the media is not solely responsible for the behaviors, thoughts, and attitudes of those who view it, its producers do need to portray violent and suicidal material responsibly. Following the implementation of media guidelines in Austria, suicide rates declined 7% in the first year, nearly 20% in the four-year follow-up period, and subway suicides (a particular focus of the media guidelines) decreased by 75% (Pirkis & Blood, 2001). Given the substantial evidence for suicide contagion, a recommended suicide prevention strategy involves educating media professionals about contagion, in order to yield stories that minimize harm. Moreover, the media's positive role in educating the public about risks for suicide and shaping attitudes about suicide should be encouraged (Goldney, 2004). Even if action is not taken on a policy level, the research presented provides insight to the parents of adolescents as they make choices about the media material they allow their children to consume. When the topic of suicide is addressed, accompanying messages of education and prevention could better protect those predisposed to suicide or holding acceptable attitudes toward it.

### Conclusion

Past research has been unable to adequately link suicide among adolescents to media influence, mostly because of the fact that compounding factors make it almost impossible to establish a causal relationship. Yet, by reviewing the literature surrounding the impact of media portrayals of suicidal content on the attitudes and behaviors of adolescents we can, at a minimum, better understand the complex relationship between these two phenomena. Although there is little that can be concluded from existing research, the literature presented should raise awareness of the seriousness of suicide among adolescents and the need for conclusive evidence regarding the factors

contributing to adolescent suicide. The existing research concerning the presence of violent and suicidal content in popular media directed at adolescents, the susceptibility of adolescents to media influence, and the rising suicide rate among this group calls for more research on the relationship between media influence and adolescent attitudes and behaviors surrounding suicide. Conclusions and recommendations provided here are meant to initiate a growth in the amount of research that is done in the area of suicide. It is also hoped that the contributions provided here will stimulate and encourage an interest in this topic, and open a much-needed conversation among educators, parents, mental health professionals, and those responsible for the production of television directed at adolescents.

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