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Making Sense of the Suicidal Behavior of Students with Gifts and Talents

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I am having trouble deciding were [where] to kill myself. I can either do it here (home)

- when no one is home
- call the police before so they can clean up so my family won't have to discover me
- There is a chance the police would get there too soon and save me
- My family would probably have very bad memories if they knew I did it in one of our trees

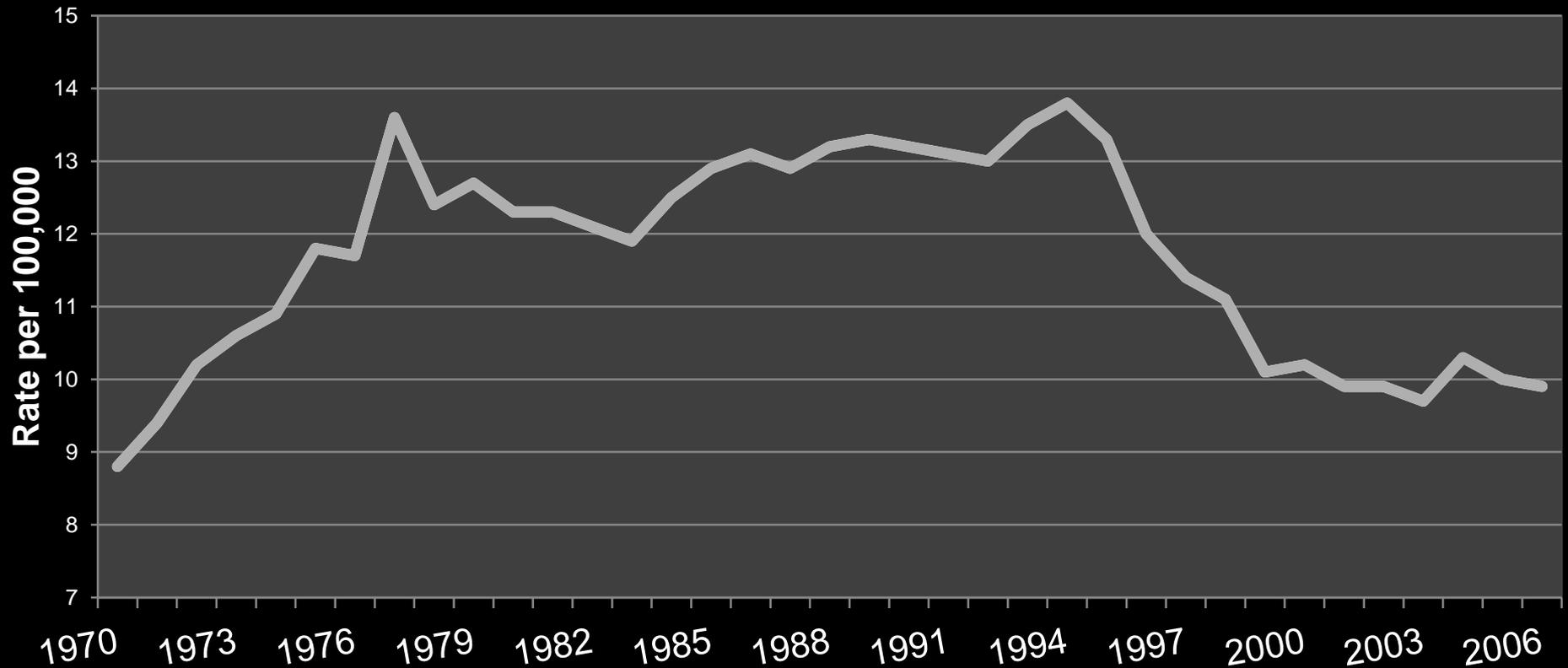
I can do it somewhere else

- someone would find me, call the police, my family would never see me
- This would receive more publicity which would be shitty for my parents and friends

Even though both are flawed I believe doing it somewhere else is the best option.

- Last journal entry of a gifted adolescent who completed suicide

U.S. Suicide Rate per 100,000 Age 15-24

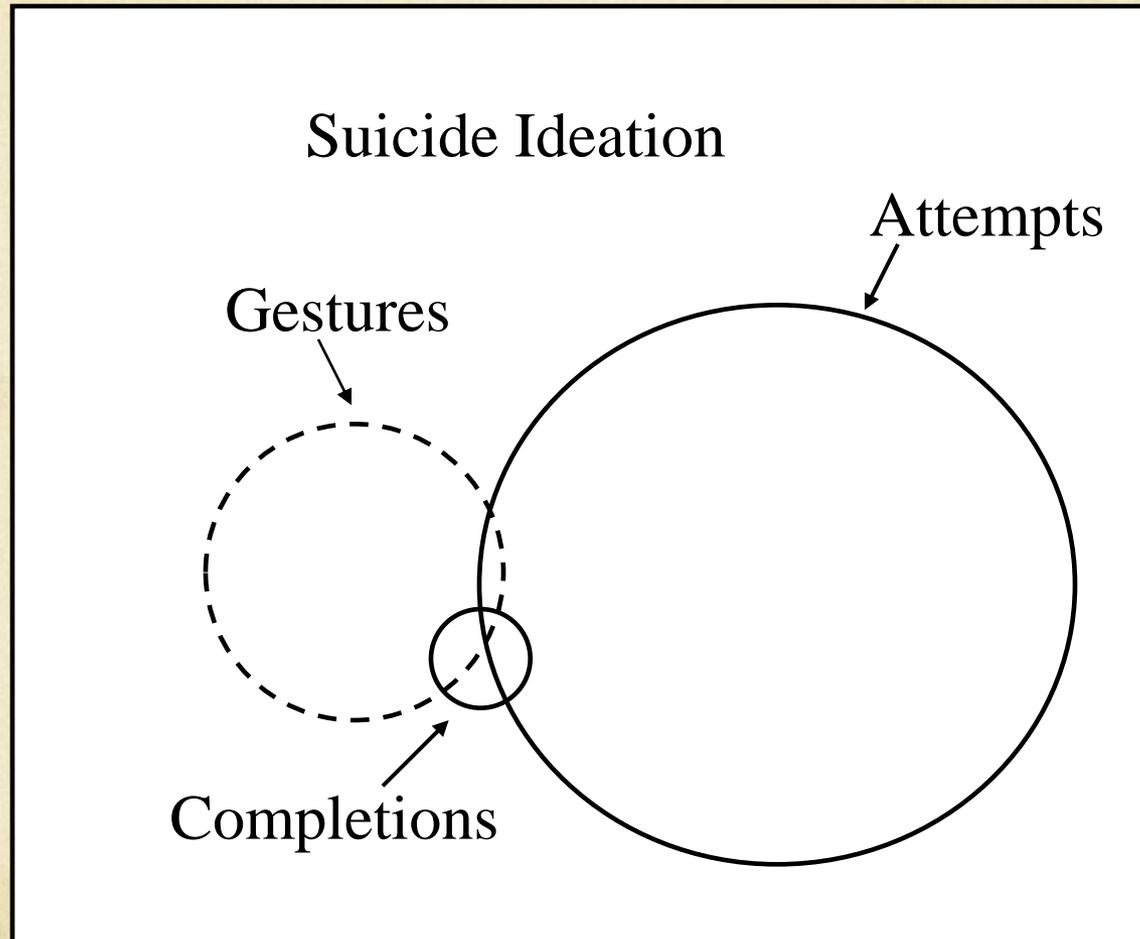


- Between 1955 and 1995, suicide rates increased more than 240% among those between the ages of 15 – 24
- There has been a decline in suicide rates since the mid-1990s
- Suicide is still the **third** leading cause of death among adolescents

What is Suicidal Behavior?

- Ideators – think about killing themselves
- Gesturers – make suicidal gestures but not serious efforts to end their lives
- Attempters – make attempts but fail to end their lives
- Completers – complete suicide

The Relationship of Suicidal Behaviors



Significant Risk Factors Associated with Adolescent Suicide

- Psychiatric disorders such as depression or anxiety
- Drug and alcohol abuse
- Genetic factors
- Family loss or disruption
- Friend or family member of suicide victim
- Homosexuality
- Rapid socio-cultural change
- Media emphasis on suicide
- Impulsiveness and aggressiveness
- Ready access to lethal methods

Davidson & Linnoila,
1991

Suicide Trajectory Model

- Four primary categories of risk factors:
 - Biological (e.g., depression, gender, genetics)
 - Psychological (e.g., self-esteem, depression, feelings of hopelessness)
 - Cognitive (e.g., poor problem solving, inflexible thinking, low coping strategies)
 - Environmental (e.g., family experiences, life events, presence of deadly weapons)
- The interactions of these factors is important

Suicide Research

- Females attempt suicide 3 times more often than males. (AAS, 2006)
- Males complete suicide at a rate 4 times higher than females. (AAS, 2006)
- 10% of all adolescents report they have attempted suicide (Evans, Hawton & Rodham, 2005)
- Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual twice as likely as heterosexual to attempt suicide (King, et al., 2008)
- Adolescent substance misusers 5 to 11 times more at risk for suicide than nonusers (Webb, 2009)
- Most adolescents who kill themselves meet criteria for diagnosable psychiatric disorders (King, et al., 2008)

Definitions of Giftedness

Ex Post
Facto

Has made an outstanding contribution to society

Measurable
IQ

High ability in reasoning and judgment

Achievement

General and specific academic achievement

Creativity

Able to do something new or novel in one's environment

Social Talent

Consistent high performance in a socially valued activity

Interaction of
Attributes

Interaction among various attributes

Percentage-
Type

Certain percentage of any group is considered gifted/talented

Development

Precocity in a valued area

Omnibus

Achievement, potential ability, or both in one or more specified areas

From Coleman & Cross, 2005

Who Are the Gifted?

- Early methods of identification
 - IQ \geq 130
- Movement towards multiple methods of identification
 - Ability/IQ testing
 - Achievement tests – top 1%, 2%, 5%, 10%, etc.
 - Portfolios of work samples
 - Performances
 - Referral – teacher, parent, peer, self

Are Gifted Students More Likely to Engage in Suicidal Behaviors Than Their Nongifted Peers?

- Problems in determining prevalence among gifted
 - No national data collected on giftedness of suicide completers
 - Varied definitions of giftedness complicate identification
 - Issues of confidentiality limit access to data
 - More adolescents than preadolescents complete suicide, but identification of giftedness is more likely at elementary ages

Are Gifted Students More Likely to Engage in Suicidal Behaviors Than Their Nongifted Peers?

- Characteristics that may put gifted students at increased risk
 - Depression
 - Rates are not higher and may be lower than general population (Neihart, 1999)
 - Perfectionism
 - No evidence that levels are higher than nongifted (Chan, 2010)
 - Bullying
 - 67% of gifted 8th graders (N=432) reported being a victim of bullying (Peterson & Ray, 2006) compared to 13% of general population (www.safeyouth.org)
 - Speculation that highly gifted more vulnerable to

Literature on Gifted Students and Suicide

- Three patterns in the literature
 - Claims not supported by research
 - Speculation treated as concrete evidence
 - Aimed at protecting image of gifted children

- Cross, 1996

Empirical Research on Gifted Student Suicide

- Among Terman's sample of "geniuses" (IQ \geq 140) followed in a longitudinal study from the 1920's, 28 of the 1,528 (or 1/55) had completed suicide by 1970 (Shneidman, 1971).
- Hayes & Sloat (1990) – 8 out of 42 reports of "suicide-related occurrences" were among gifted students (in 69 schools, total population 40,805)
- Seiden (1966) found 10 of the 12 (91%) suicides among UC Berkeley undergraduates in a 10-year period had above average GPA.
- Difficulty in comparisons
 - GPA vs. IQ
 - Completed suicides vs. "suicide related occurrences"

Empirical Research on Gifted Student Suicide

- Baker (1995) – Incidence rate of depression and suicide ideation was found to be similar for both gifted and average adolescents (Exceptionally gifted n=32; gifted n=58; average n=56)
- Cross, Cassady, & Miller (2006) – Gifted adolescents were shown to have average levels of suicidal thoughts (N=152 gifted 11th & 12th graders)
- Cross, Cross & Gong (2009) – Honors college students had mean suicidal ideation scores equivalent to that of the norms (N=334)
- No compelling evidence to suggest a difference in suicidal behaviors between gifted and nongifted students

Empirical Qualitative Research on Gifted Student Suicide

- Willings & Arseneault, 1986 – 16 out of 24 creatively gifted high school graduates had contemplated suicide and devised a means to kill themselves. Of the 16, 8 had attempted suicide.
- Case studies
 - Gifted high school female attempter (Peterson, 1993)
 - Gifted high school male with learning disability attempter (Johnson, 1994)
 - Gifted French high school female completer (Willings, 1994)

Psychological Autopsies

- A type of case study and includes
 - interviews of family members, friends or significant others
 - reviews of records from school, physician, psychologist/psychiatrist
 - cataloging and analysis of books read, music listened to, video games played

Psychological Autopsies

- Cross, Cook & Dixon, 1994 – Three gifted high school male completers
- Similarities of suicide completions:
 - Incidences of depression were noted
 - Minimal prosocial outlets, experienced unwanted intense emotions & peer ridicule and rejection
 - Engaged in discussion of suicide as an honorable or viable solution and maintained hierarchical, polarized, egocentric value systems

Psychological Autopsies

- Cross, Gust-Brey & Ball, 2002 – Researchers working together with his mother evaluated the suicide of Reed Ball, a gifted 21-year-old, using six different psychological theories of suicide.
 - Suicidal ideation was present for 8+ years
 - >12 attempts at self-harm
 - History of mood swings from age 7
 - Interpersonal difficulties with peers
 - Low self-esteem
 - Periods of extreme depression

Qualitative Differences in Gifted Student Suicide

- Cross, Cassady & Miller (2006) – gifted adolescents differ in psychological type profiles as measured by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (N=152 gifted 11th & 12th graders in a residential school)
 - Strong preference for Introversions-Perception Profiles
 - 67% Introversions vs. 25%-30% of general population
 - 59% Perception vs. 35%-50% of general population
 - 18% of the variance associated with **suicidal ideation** was predicted by gender, Extraversion/Introversions, and Judging/Perceiving types

Qualitative Differences in Gifted Student Suicide

- Cassady & Cross (2006) – Differences in factorial representation of suicidal ideation (N=334 gifted 11th & 12th graders in a residential school)
 - Four factors
 - Suicidal pragmatics
 - Morbid fixation
 - Social isolation
 - Social impact
 - Norm found three factors
 - Wishes and plans
 - Focus on responses and aspects of others
 - Morbid ideation

Qualitative Differences in Gifted Student Suicide

- Cross, Cross & Gong (2009) – Differences in factorial representation of suicidal ideation for male and female honors college students (N=296)
 - **Males** – Four factors
 - Suicide as a solution “Killing myself would solve my problems”
 - Death and consequences “Thought about how people would feel if I killed myself.”
 - Interpersonal concerns “Thought about telling people I plan to kill myself”
 - Existential/Other orientation “People would be happier if I was not around”

Qualitative Differences in Gifted Student Suicide

- Cross, Cross & Gong (2009) – Differences in factorial representation of suicidal ideation for male and female honors college students (N=296)
 - **Females** – Three factors
 - Suicide as an option “Thought about killing myself, but would not do it”
 - Existential/Self-pity “I wished that I had never been born”
 - Killing oneself “Thought if things did not get better I would kill myself”

Current Research

- Honors College sample (N=323)
- Preliminary analysis using structural equation modeling
 - Exploring effect of goal orientation on suicidal ideation
 - Performance goal orientation has a direct positive effect on suicidal ideation
 - Exploring effect of Big Five and creativity on suicidal ideation
 - Neuroticism and artistic orientation, particularly with high levels of energy, have significant positive (meaning higher suicidal ideation) effects on suicidal ideation
 - Conscientiousness have a significant negative (meaning lower suicidal ideation) effect on

Challenging Myths About Suicide and Gifted Students

○ Myths

- Gifted students will be immune to depression/suicidal ideation
- Gifted students will be more vulnerable to depression/suicidal ideation
- Gifted students are unusual – depressive behavior is normal

○ Facts

- Gifted students are similar to their nongifted peers in vulnerability to and incidence of suicidal ideation
- Gifted students are subject to the same risk factors as their nongifted peers

Two Decades of Research

- Gifted children and young adults engage in suicidal behaviors: ideation, gesturing, attempts, completions
- Claims in the literature about prevalence rates are speculative at best
- The actual prevalence rates are not known at this time
- There has yet to be any substantial evidence provided that gifted students are more prone to suicidal behaviors than their nongifted counterparts
- Gifted students may engage in the same rates of suicidal ideation as their nongifted peers, but

Conclusion

- Correlates of suicide (e.g., depression, access to lethal means, homosexuality, psychological maladies) are our best means of identifying students in distress
- Best practices at this time for assisting potentially suicidal students with gifts and talents is to treat them in the same manner as their nongifted counterparts who are at risk for suicide

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