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## **Mental illness? Yes, but also homophobia**

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Is teen suicide contagious?

Recent media coverage surrounding the seeming rise in youth suicides has suggested as much, working hard to warn us against a veritable epidemic of mental illnesses thought to be mysteriously infecting Canadian teenagers. But arguing that mentally ill youth are both more susceptible to, and the root cause of, suicidal ideation endorses a cultural passivity surrounding suicide. This lacklustre approach also enables each of us to overlook our responsibility in creating a culture that accepts teen suicide as inevitable and as an enigma beyond the scope of our comprehension or accountability.

Bloated with uncertainties and obscure opinions about the unknown psychological problems of our youth, much of the coverage of teen suicide firmly places the onus of suicidal thoughts on the teens themselves. By suggesting suicidal youth would benefit from more professional care and “psychiatric beds,” this prognosis not only exonerates each of us from our social responsibility to create safe spaces, policies and programs for our teens but strategically overlooks the evidence that there are other risk factors that go beyond mental illness.

The media, for instance, have habitually avoided the relationship between youth suicide and queer sexuality. This omission is glaring, given that studies have

overwhelmingly cited lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) youth as one of the most at-risk groups for suicide (with a 32-per-cent rate of attempt, compared with the cited 7 per cent for heterosexual teens).

In Quebec, studies have shown that gay and bisexual youth are six to 16 times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual teens. In B.C., studies have reported that 18 per cent to 42 per cent of the LGBTQ persons assessed described attempts on their own lives. In Alberta, it was found that 28 per cent of completed suicides were carried out by LGBTQ youth (38 per cent of queer teens also reported being physically or emotionally affected by blatant homophobia). In Ontario, 77 per cent of trans youth have admitted to contemplating suicide, and 43 per cent have tried. Terrifyingly, the [Trevor Project](#)'s statistics concerning queer youth suicide are much higher.

So why are the media so determined to link youth suicide to mental illness? I'm not suggesting queer teens are the only ones at risk for suicide; this is simply untrue. I'm also not saying depression and anxiety are not contributing factors to suicidal ideation. But omitting triggers such as homophobia, racism, sexism, classism and gender oppression is doing youth and the goal of media investigations and interventions on suicide a dangerous disservice. Pointing out that some youth are depressed, anxious, lonely and drinking is a valuable step. But the larger question remains: Why? What are we as a community not addressing?

What a well-rounded argument makes clear is that outside factors such as hatred, ignorance and violence are conditioned by adults and placing vulnerable teens in harm's way. Suicide is not just a personal problem; it's also a socially supported act we each need to seriously address, with *all* facts on the table.

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