

# TEEN SUICIDE: BREAKING THE SILENCE

## VI What Do We Know?

**Did you know . . .**  
In 2007, 218 Canadian young people (10-19) committed suicide.

### Reading Prompt

As you read this section, try to identify the types of people who are most likely to be at risk of suicide and the warning signs that indicate they are at risk.

In recent years an extensive amount of research has been done to explore the causes and consequences of suicide. As a result, researchers are beginning to draw significant conclusions about those who are more likely to commit suicide.

### A Statistical Breakdown

- An average of 48 Canadians per day are admitted to hospital for treatment of what the medical profession calls “self-injury.” This category includes both attempted suicide and self-mutilation. Note that the category includes only those treated in hospital.
- The most likely people to self-mutilate are young women, aged 15-19.
- In 2007 (the most recent year for which statistics are available), there were 3 578 suicides in Canada: 2 709 men and 869 women.
- The most common form of self-injury is poisoning at 85 per cent (this figure includes drug overdoses). Next is cutting or piercing (10 per cent), then strangulation (2 per cent).
- Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds, and among girls between 10 and 14.
- Girls attempt suicide more often than boys, but boys commit suicide more often. The suicide rate for boys is twice that for girls.
- In a major U.S. study, 20 per cent of gay, lesbian and bisexual teens admitted to having attempted suicide. In comparison, four per cent of straight teens surveyed said they had made an attempt.

- The picture is grim world-wide. According to the World Health Organization, suicide rates have increased 60 per cent in the last five decades. About one million people die each year by their own hand, and 20 times that number attempt to kill themselves. As it is in Canada, around the world suicide is the second leading cause of death for the 10-24 age group.
- Compared with those of other nations, Canada’s suicide rate falls in about the middle. But its youth suicide rate per capita is about three times that of the United States.

### Those Most at Risk

Darcy Santor, a psychologist at the University of Ottawa, believes that at least 91 per cent of suicide victims have some form of mental illness at the time of their deaths. In many cases this illness will never have been diagnosed (*The Globe and Mail*, September 24, 2011). The more risk factors that are present—depression, anxiety, alcohol abuse, bullying, social isolation, learning disabilities and shame—the greater the danger that the person will attempt suicide. Young victims of sexual abuse are also at higher risk.

Studies consistently find that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth (LGBT youth) fall into the highest risk category for suicide. Adolescence is a stressful time for all teenagers, but the added stress that comes from dealing with sexual orientation issues results in high levels of anxiety and depression. In addition, LGBT youth are much more

### Further Research

To download a valuable pamphlet—“After a Suicide: A Practical and Personal Guide for Survivors”—go to the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention (CASP) website at [www.suicideprevention.ca/survivor-support/](http://www.suicideprevention.ca/survivor-support/).

likely to be the targets of bullies.

In Canada, suicide has been a particularly difficult problem in remote northern Native communities. In 2009, 13 teenagers living in communities along the James Bay and Hudson Bay coasts committed suicide, and another 80 attempted to do so. The suicide rate among First Nations youth is estimated at five to six times that of non-aboriginal youth.

### Warning Signs

It is good to be aware of some of the warning signs of suicide, but it is important to remember that everyone feels one or more of these symptoms at one time or another—and this does not mean they are going to attempt suicide. The list below is provided by The Jack Project ([www.thejackproject.org](http://www.thejackproject.org)), a mental health project founded by Eric Windeler following the suicide of his son Jack. Some or all of them may be demonstrated by a subject at risk.

- Feelings of hopelessness or worthlessness, depressed mood, poor self-esteem, or guilt
- Withdrawal from friends, family, and activities that used to be fun
- Changes in eating or sleeping patterns . . . feeling tired or exhausted all of the time
- Trouble concentrating, struggling in school, rapid drop in grades
- Restless, irritated, agitated or anxious movements or behaviours
- Heightened emotions, or regular crying.
- Neglect of personal care
- Reckless or impulsive behaviours
- Persistent physical symptoms such as headaches or other chronic pain

### Follow-up Activity

Go to the CASP website and locate the organizations for your province or territory that provide assistance to survivors of suicide. If the organization has a website visit it and list the services it provides that would be most useful to suicide survivors.

- Thoughts or talking about death or suicide.

Being aware of some of the warning signs is important, but often a person decides to kill themselves quite quickly, and it is not always possible to intervene. In one study in 2001, for example, researchers found that of the 153 young people who had attempted suicide in their study, 70 per cent of the teens who decided they wanted to die actually attempted suicide within an hour of their decision (*The Globe and Mail*, September 24, 2011).

### Those Left Behind

For those friends and relatives who were close to a suicide victim, coping with the loss is an extremely intense process. It is a highly emotional time when people are dealing with grief at the loss of a loved one, anger at the victim, and guilt over not having somehow prevented the suicide. Families and friends of suicide victims need a great deal of support and time to heal.

Those who attempt suicide but survive need a lot of support as well. In the past, suicide survivors were seen as “crazy” and often felt isolated because suicide was such a taboo topic. In some cases, families and friends of survivors pretended it hadn’t happened and were afraid to talk about it. But times have changed, and the situation is improving. There are now many organizations that can help to assist someone who has attempted suicide or the family of someone who has committed suicide. A full list of Canadian organizations is available on the CASP website, at the address in the sidebar.