

CLASSIC

CONTEMPORARY

CROSS-CULTURAL

3 Teenage Wasteland

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The power of the sociological imagination lies in showing that even the most personal decision people might make have social causes. In this article, Donna Gaines explains how the 1987 suicide of four teenagers in Bergenfield, New Jersey, is the result of a society that provides many working-class young men and women with little meaning and little opportunity.

In Bergenfield, New Jersey, on the morning of March 11, 1987, the bodies of four teenagers were discovered inside a 1977 rust-colored Chevrolet Camaro. The car, which belonged to Thomas Olton, was parked in an unused garage in the Foster Village garden apartment complex, behind the Foster Village Shopping Center. Two sisters, Lisa and Cheryl Burrell, and their friends, Thomas Rizzo and Thomas Olton, had died of carbon monoxide poisoning.

Lisa was sixteen, Cheryl was seventeen, and the boys were nineteen—they were suburban teens, turnpike kids like the ones in the town I live in. And thinking about them made me remember how it felt being a teenager too. I was horrified that it had come to this. I believed I understood why they did it, although it wasn't a feeling I could have put into words.

You could tell from the newspapers that they were rock and roll kids. The police had found a

cassette tape cover of AC/DC's *If You Want Blood, You've Got It* near the bodies. Their friends were described as kids who listened to thrash metal, had shaggy haircuts, wore lots of black and leather. "Dropouts," "druggies," the papers called them. Teenage suburban rockers whose lives revolved around their favorite bands and their friends. Youths who barely got by in school and at home and who did not impress authority figures in any remarkable way. Except as fuck-ups.

My friends, most of whom were born in the 1950s, felt the same way about the kids everyone called "burnouts." On the weekend following the suicides, a friend's band, the Grinders, were playing at My Father's Place, a Long Island club. That night the guys dedicated a song, "The Kids in the Basement," to the four teens from Bergenfield—"This is for the suicide kids." In the weeks following the suicide pact, a number of bands in the tri-state area also dedicated songs to them. Their deaths had hit close to home. . . .

By the beginning of the 1980s, . . . I went back to school. I spent the next few years working on a

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doctorate in sociology, commuting a few days a week from my neighborhood to the State University of New York at Stony Brook, teaching, doing consulting work, and freelancing as a journalist. In my free time I stayed involved with the Grinders, but was now also interested in the West Coast–based hardcore bands like Black Flag, MDC, and Flipper. By 1987, the young people in my life were either my students, my neighbors, or people I met at shows.

A week or two after the suicide pact, *The Village Voice* assigned me to go to Bergenfield. . . . [My editor] knew my background—that I knew suburbia, that I could talk to kids. By now I fully embraced the sociologist’s ethical commitment to the “rights of the researched,” and the social worker’s vow of client confidentiality. As far as suicidal teenagers were concerned, I felt that if I couldn’t help them, I didn’t want to bother them.

But I was really pissed off at what I kept reading. How people in Bergenfield openly referred to the four kids as “troubled losers.” Even after they were dead, nobody cut them any slack. “Burnouts,” “druggies,” “dropouts.” Something was wrong. So I took the opportunity.

From the beginning, I believed that the Bergenfield suicides symbolized a tragic defeat for young people. Something was happening in the larger society that was not yet comprehended. Scholars spoke ominously of “the postmodern condition,” “societal upheaval,” “decay,” “anomie.” Meanwhile, American kids kept losing ground, showing all the symptoms of societal neglect. Many were left to fend for themselves, often with little success. The news got worse. Teenage suicides continued, and still nobody seemed to be getting the point.

Now, in trying to understand this event, I might have continued working within the established discourse on teenage suicide. I might have carried on the tradition of obscuring the bigger picture, psychologizing the Bergenfield suicide pact, interviewing the parents of the four youths, hounding their friends for the gory details. I might have spent my time probing school records, tracking

down their teachers and shrinks for insights, focusing on their personal histories and intimate relationships. I might have searched out the individual motivations behind the words left in the note written and signed by each youth on the brown paper bag found with their bodies on March 11. But I did not.

Because the world has changed for today’s kids. We also engaged in activities that adults called self-destructive. But for my generation, “doing it” meant having sex; for them, it means committing suicide.

“Teenage suicide” was a virtually nonexistent category prior to 1960. But between 1950 and 1980 it nearly tripled, and at the time of the Bergenfield suicide pact it was the second leading cause of death among America’s young people; “accidents” were the first. The actual suicide rate among people aged fifteen to twenty-four—the statistical category for teenage suicide—is estimated to be even higher, underreported because of social stigma. Then there are the murky numbers derived from drug overdoses and car crashes, recorded as accidents. To date, there are more than 5,000 teen suicides annually, accounting for 12 percent of youth mortalities. An estimated 400,000 adolescents attempt suicide each year. While youth suicide rates leveled off by 1980, by mid-decade they began to increase again. Although they remained lower than adult suicide rates, the acceleration at which youth suicide rates increased was alarming. By 1987, we had books and articles detailing “copycat” and “cluster” suicides. Teenage suicide was now described as an epidemic.

Authors, experts, and scholars compiled the lists of kids’ names, ages, dates, and possible motives. They generated predictive models: Rural and suburban white kids do it more often. Black kids in America’s urban teenage wastelands are more likely to kill each other. Increasingly, alcohol and drugs are involved. In some cases adults have tried to identify the instigating factor as a lyric or a song—Judas Priest, Ozzy Osbourne. Or else a popular film about the subject—the suicide of a celebrity; too much media attention or not enough.

Some kids do it violently: drowning, hanging, slashing, jumping, or crashing. Firearms are still the most popular. Others prefer to go out more peacefully, by gas or drug overdose. Boys do it more than girls, though girls try it more often than boys. And it does not seem to matter if kids are rich or poor.

Throughout the 1980s, teenage suicide clusters appeared across the country—six or seven deaths, sometimes more, in a short period of time in a single community. In the boomtown of Plano, Texas. The fading factory town of Leominster, Massachusetts. At Bryan High School in a white, working-class suburb of Omaha, Nebraska. A series of domino suicides among Arapaho Indian youths at the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. Six youth suicides in the county of Westchester, New York, in 1984; five in 1985 and seven in 1986.

Sometimes they were close friends who died together in pacts of two. In other cases, one followed shortly after the other, unable to survive apart. Then there were strangers who died alone, in separate incidents timed closely together.

The Bergenfield suicide pact of March 11 was alternately termed a “multiple-death pact,” a “quadruple suicide,” or simply a “pact,” depending on where you read about it. Some people actually called it a *mass* suicide because the Bergenfield case reminded them of Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978, where over nine hundred followers of Jim Jones poisoned themselves, fearing their community would be destroyed.

As experts speculated over the deaths in Bergenfield, none could recall a teenage suicide pact involving four people dying together; *it was historically unique*.

I wondered, did the “burnouts” see themselves as a community under siege? . . . Were the “burnouts” of Bergenfield choosing death over surrender? Surrender to what? Were they martyrs? If so, what was their common cause?

Because the suicide pact was a *collective act*, it warrants a social explanation—a portrait of the “burnouts” in Bergenfield as actors within a particular social landscape.

For a long time now, the discourse of teenage suicide has been dominated by atomizing psychological and medical models. And so the larger picture of American youth as members of a distinctive generation with a unique collective biography, emerging at a particular moment in history, has been lost.

The starting-off point for this [analysis] then, is a teenage suicide pact in an “upper-poor” white ethnic suburb in northern New Jersey. But, of course, the story did not begin and will not end in Bergenfield. . . .

This was a suicide pact that involved close friends who were by no accounts obsessed, star-crossed lovers. What would make four people want to die together? Why would they ask, in their collective suicide note, to be waked and buried together? Were they part of a suicide cult?

If not, what was the nature of the *social* bond that tied them so closely? What could be so intimately binding that in the early morning hours of March 11 not one of them could stop, step back from the pact they had made to say, “Wait, I can’t do this”? Who were these kids that everybody called “burnouts”? . . .

From the beginning, I decided I didn’t want to dwell too much on the negatives. I wanted to understand how alienated kids survived, as well as how they were defeated. How did they maintain their humanity against what I now felt were impossible odds? I wondered. What keeps young people together when the world they are told to trust no longer seems to work? What motivates them to be decent human beings when nobody seems to respect them or take them seriously? . . .

Somewhat like a nervous breakdown, burnout involves a change in your ability to function, to “perform.” You numb out, hoping to lower anxiety by shutting down, denying access to your feelings. The body, the organism, is overwhelmed. Burnout is a way of slipping out the back door with your body still present. You can still go through the motions of living, but you feel dead.

The burned-out individual protects the self for the moment, but in the long run the self is

estranged. The ability to relate in any way at all is compromised. You are living at half speed in a world you cannot handle—shut down, tuned out; you're gone.

This estrangement from feeling, this disowning and disengaging from feeling, is a form of *alienation*. According to Marx, in the process of laboring, human beings enjoy the creative activity of transforming the world. If the product of this pleasure is taken from you, alienated (as in the process of capitalist production), you experience deep loss. You become detached from your world because your connection to that world, your power to create and transform in that world *through your own efforts*, has been taken from you. So you are living in the world in a state of detachedness; you no longer feel viable.

Powerless, useless, ineffectual, you are only remotely connected to life around you. The most you can hope for is to get through the day—at home, at work, in school. Drugs and alcohol will help to kill the pain, protect you from things that would, if fully perceived, drive you crazy. But then you have to deal with the secondary effects of your anodyne solution. Either way, you know you're not well.

It is not surprising that the Alcoholics Anonymous doctrine advises never to let yourself get too hungry, too tired, or too lonely. Being emotionally strung out often leads to desperate self-medicating. The active alcoholic, overworked professional, and emotionally overwhelmed kid all appear to be wasted. Often, they are. Whether stressful life experiences or excessive drug taking has wasted you is unimportant—a burned-out soul feels empty, the spirit seems depleted.

For a bored, ignored, lonely kid, drug oblivion may offer immediate comfort; purpose and adventure in the place of everyday ennui. But soon it has a life of its own—at a psychic and a social level, the focus of your life becomes *getting high* (or *well* as some people describe it). Ironically, the whole miserable process often begins as a positive act of self-preservation. . . .

So they end up stranded in teenage wasteland. They devote their lives to their bands, to their friends, to partying; they live in the moment. They're going down in flames, taking literally the notion that "rust never sleeps," that it is "better to burn out than fade away."

Such wasted suburban kids are typically not politically "correct," nor do they constitute an identifiable segment of the industrial working class. They are not members of a specific racial or ethnic minority.

Small in numbers, isolated in decaying suburbs, they aren't visible on any national scale until they are involved in something that really horrifies us, like a suicide pact, or parricide, or incest, or "satanic" sacrifice. For the most part, burnouts and dirtbags are anomic small town white boys and girls, just trying to get through the day. Their way of fighting back is to have enough fun to kill themselves before everything else does.

CRITICAL-THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What is it about the society in which the four young people lived that contributed to their suicide?
2. Do you think teen suicide is an issue all across the United States? Explain your view.
3. What might be done to prevent deaths like this?