

The Contagion Effect as it Relates to Public Mass Shootings and Suicides

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Abstract

This article demonstrates the impact of media on public mass shootings and suicides with special attention to sensationalized media coverage such as the Columbine attack, Virginia Tech, and Mandalay Bay shootings, as well as the Netflix series, *Thirteen Reasons Why*. The authors provide relevant research and advice to assist Behavioral Intervention Teams (BITs) toward reducing the risk of copycat public mass shootings and suicides by being more intentional regarding communication and coverage related to these events. Experts in the field of threat assessment have long understood the effect of media attention on high fatality mass shootings. These highly publicized, greatly sensationalized shootings often inspire and motivate at-risk individuals to perpetrate similar acts to achieve greater notoriety. Such shootings and suicides that include graphic details by media sources increase the likelihood of similar violence. Just as media details of a public mass shooting provide a recipe for a copycat incident, so do sensationalized details of suicide. High-profile celebrity suicides and graphic fictional suicides have been a trigger for copycat suicides for decades. Predicting and/or reducing copycat incidents is a central focus of Behavioral Intervention Teams (BITs). Research and guidance in this article serves to assist members in understanding what should be avoided to reduce contagion effects and copycat behavior.

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Introduction

Human nature, at its core, is full of curiosity and a desire to understand the unique and unknown. Imagine that a close friend experiences the death of a spouse. Following an expression of empathy and caring, the natural desire to know the details of the death is part of what is hard-wired into our biology. Perhaps Gottschall (as cited in O'Connor, 2015) is right:

We all say we hate violence. But we are still shoveling it in our faces, consuming a huge diet of violent entertainment through movies and video games and sports, and so I think we should just admit it: something in us likes violence. This curiosity and voyeurism often serves our survival instinct; the more we know about an adverse action or threat, the better we can prepare to avoid the same fate.

However, with the growth of an insatiable 24-hour news cycle, social media, reality TV and a culture that thrives on instantaneous access to information, it is no wonder there has been a symbiotic, metastatic growth of the consumer/producer dynamic that feeds into the worst parts of our nature. The more content produced, the more content we consume. While *Jerry Springer*, *Big Brother*, *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, and *The Bachelor* can be partially excused as questionable entertainment that satiates this need for curiosity and voyeurism, the same cannot be said of media coverage related to public mass shootings and suicide.

At the heart of this concern is the long and well-established link that media contagion and copycat effects create an increase in the likelihood of a public mass shooting or suicide within approximately two weeks of a highly publicized incident (see Gould, 2001 for review). The exceptions to this are the Columbine and Sandy Hook incidents, which have continued beyond this two-week threshold to act as models to others. The most recent Columbine-inspired copycat incident occurred Sept. 5, 2017 in Russia, where a young male began his attack with a meat cleaver (Lapin, 2017). It is no coincidence he had changed his name to Klebold on social media sites and emulated the most highly publicized news story of 1999 (Pew Research Center, 1999).

While media contagion initially was discovered in relation to sensationalized public reporting and sharing around suicide, the phenomenon has grown to include public mass shootings that are occurring all too often in recent years. In regard to suicide, media coverage of celebrity suicide was found to increase suicide rates in the immediate and near future of the incident (Phillips, 1980). Subsequent research findings indicate that, in addition to celebrity suicides, excessive media coverage of fictional suicides leads to contagion as well (e.g., Fowler, 1986; Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Gould, Shaffer, & Kleinman, 1988).

To better understand how watching footage of a mass public shooting can lead to carrying out a version of the act, we only need to understand how we learn. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) offers an explanation for media contagion and copycat shootings. Simply stated, behavior is learned from the environment through the lens of social context. No direct experience is needed for an individual to pick up a mass shooting-related term (e.g., trench coat mafia) heard at school or a new behavior (e.g., using high-powered weapons from the thirty-second floor of a high rise) described in the media.

The aforementioned change in knowledge or behavior takes place via observational learning. Sensationalized media coverage serves as a model, and the vulnerable viewer or reader engages in observational learning, increasing the risk of subsequently reproducing similar behavior. This media contagion brought forth via observational learning has plagued threat assessment and mental health experts due to the difficulty in predicting and/or reducing its effect.

Towers, Gomez-Leivano, Khan, and Castillo-Chavez (2015) further solidify this process by reviewing the role of media contagion in relation to public mass and school shootings. *Media contagion* is a phenomenon based on sensationalism or glorification of the perpetrators within the news coverage, which leads the next shooter to devise a plan that will result in far greater fatalities than the previous perpetrator (O'Toole et al., 2014). Every 12.5 days, a mass shooting takes place in the United States (Towers et al., 2015), with at least one new occurrence for every three mass shootings. Every 31.6 days, our nation endures a school shooting (Towers et al.) Another shooting is likely to follow every four or five previously occurring incidents. Of significance in the Tower et al. results is the fact that public mass shooting incidents with three or fewer fatalities are not subject to the media contagion effect because only those incidents with more than three deaths are thought to gain significant media attention and sensationalism (Towers et al.). Essentially, this echoes the idea of the bigger the event and resulting curiosity and voyeurism, the higher the likelihood of the contagion effect.

Media contagion is also a concern with regard to highly publicized, highly sensationalized celebrity suicides and graphic depictions of fictional suicide and heroic suicidal individuals within film, television programs, and other forms of popular media. Sisask and Varnik (2012) present support for copycat suicides. By extension, the authors suggest that media reports that glorify extreme, graphic means of suicide present the highest risk of leading to a similar method of suicide.

Media contagion and copycat public mass shootings and suicides are well-established in the literature and present a case for better media

reporting guidelines for high-fatality public mass shootings, as well as celebrity and fictional suicides. It is essential that those in higher education across student conduct, counseling, law enforcement, case management, and behavioral intervention push back on salacious and sensationalized coverage of suicides and mass shootings, and focus rather on helping those impacted grieve, celebrating the lives that have been lost, and finding ways to support each other through the power of the community.

Defining a Public Mass Shooting

Prior to 2013, a shooting was designated as a “mass shooting” when three or more victims were fatally wounded in a fairly public location. Today’s experts agree with Bjelopera, Bagalman, Caldwell, Finklea, and McCallion (2013), who added the term, “public,” to “mass shootings” in reference to incidents such as those that occurred in Las Vegas (Mandalay Bay), Orlando (Pulse Nightclub), Aurora (Century 16 Multiplex), Blacksburg (Virginia Tech), and Littleton (Columbine). “Public” was added to distinguish between drug-related mass shootings, family murder-suicides, and other incidents that differ in terms of perpetrator and motive characteristics. As such, Bjelopera et al. (2013) define “public mass shootings” as “incidents occurring in relatively public places, involving four or more deaths — not including the shooter(s) — and gunmen who select victims somewhat indiscriminately” (p. 4). These incidents have an end goal that has been cognitively processed and planned for a significant period of time. As stated by Van Brunt, Sokolow, Lewis, Schuster, and Swinton (2014), such incidents are planned, strategic, and focused.

As many as 25 students and possibly teachers were feared dead at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo., said Jefferson County Sheriff John Stone. It was the fifth recent massacre at a U.S. high school, and if the death toll goes that high, it will be the deadliest ever... Student William Beck said the gunmen “were out to get revenge on the school for being mistreated.” Many slain students were found riddled with bullets in the school library, near the bomb-ringed bodies of the two suspects, Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, both 18-year-old seniors. “There was a girl crouched beneath a desk, and the guy came over and said, ‘Peekaboo!’ and shot her in the neck,” said sophomore Bryon Kirland, 15. “They were having the best time of their lives,” said Aaron Cohn, a 17-year-old junior. “They were laughing, hooting and hollering.”... “You could hear them laughing,” [a student] said, adding that she begged for her life. “Everyone around me got shot... Another student said one of the shooters entered a room saying, ‘If there are any jocks in here, they’re dead.’”... “They walked down the stairs, and they started shooting people and throwing grenades and stuff, Janine said. “We didn’t think it was real, and then we saw blood” (Kennedy, 1999).

As a reader, what you just experienced was an account of the Columbine massacre, carefully written with graphic words and phrases. Terms such as “massacre,” “death toll,” “deadliest ever,” “get revenge,” “riddled with bullets,” “laughing,” “jocks,” and “blood” were selected intentionally in a host of written and televised coverage of Columbine (e.g., *The Guardian*, *Denver Post*, *CNN*, and *People Magazine*). Media outlets are known to employ a process known as headline-grabbing, which refers to sensational wording aimed at attracting attention and publicity (Kipfer & Chapman, 2007).

Headline-grabbing has been a concern for quite some time due to its tendency to lead to media contagion (Sisask & Varnik, 2012). In addition to sensationalized 24/7 traditional media coverage, today’s youth are privy to instantaneous access to multiple types of sensationalized information. *Netflix* binge-watching of emotionally charged programming is commonplace (McManama O’Brien, Knight, & Harris, 2017). The authors (McManama et al.) support the notion that binge-watching immerses the viewer into an emotionally charged scenario, with youth being most susceptible to its influence.

The Impact of Sensationalization

Media contagion as it applies to public mass shootings (Gould, 1980; Johnston & Joy, 2016) refers to the high likelihood of sensationalized coverage of a violent act, such as the Columbine, Sandy Hook, Mandalay Bay, or Virginia Tech incidents, often leading to a similar incident within the first 14 days. (Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015). Cantor, Sheehan, Allpers, and Mullen (1999) found evidence of media contagion occurring after coverage of *mass* murders only. That is, single-victim murders were found to be an unlikely source of contagion. Copycat public mass shooters tend to emulate high-profile incidents with an excess of four fatally wounded victims.

Media Contagion of Public Mass Shootings

An important distinction is that between a copycat effect and media contagion. A copycat effect is the act carried out, whereas media contagion is analogous to a virus that led to an act. Think about stereotypes concerning a group and the resulting discrimination that may occur in employment decisions. A copycat effect of media contagion would be a shooting that takes place after an initial, highly publicized and sensationalized incident in which the shooter reproduces the same scenario as the initial incident (Johnston & Joy, 2016). For example, a recent investigation of high school shootings suggests the Columbine incident was the “model” across 30 states and 74 sophisticated plots with those planning the attacks attempting to replicate Columbine, but often with a higher number of fatalities. Follman and Andrews state (2016, para 10):

The data we have compiled reveals some disturbing patterns. In at least 14 cases, the Columbine copycats aimed to

attack on the anniversary of the original massacre. Individuals in 13 cases indicated that their goal was to outdo the Columbine body count. In at least 10 cases, the suspects and attackers referred to the pair who struck in 1999, Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, as heroes, idols, martyrs, or God. And at least three plotters made pilgrimages to Columbine High School from other states.

The aforementioned statement supports Van Brunt et al.'s (2014) statement in regard to planning and preparation. High-profile, sensationalized incidents are those in which the media identifies the shooter by name, provides detailed coverage, interviews distraught witnesses and survivors, and shares gruesome photos and videos. Schildkraut and Elsass (2014) found a link between media reporting details of such incidents and higher ratings. In addition, they demonstrate a connection between media coverage of mass shootings and an increase in viewers. Major news channels and social media sites provide viewers with highly sought-after information. As exemplified in the Columbine news coverage discussed earlier in the article, within hours, reporters provided the individual or individuals' name(s), place of residence, names of family members, grade or occupation, types of weaponry, the specific location of the shooter in relation to the victims, and a detailed timeline. As stated by Larkin (2009, p. 1322):

In the postmodern world, news has become entertainment. Tragedy has been converted to sensation and sensation is operationalized into viewership, Nielsen points, and market share, which is then materialized in advertising revenues.... The sensationalism of a rampage shooting can provide headlines for three days of news cycles; Columbine was still headline news three weeks after the shootings, primarily because of copycat phenomena (Muschert, 2002 in Larkin).

The Problem of Fame-Seeking

The majority of contagion-based incidents are perpetrated by those seeking fame and notoriety (Lankford, 2014, 2015; Meloy, Sheridan, & Hoffman, 2008). These individuals seek to gain attention by engaging in a copycat shooting in which they reproduce the actions of a previous high-profile shooter. In addition to fame and notoriety, Fox and Delateur, 2013, Fox and Levin, 2013, and Meloy, 2014 discovered the follow-up shooter's desire to get revenge against those who wronged him. As stated by Keller (2016):

We've witnessed the collision of the media's mass murder fixation and the fame-seeking of would-be perpetrators: the Columbine shooters' desire "to leave a lasting impression on the world"; Jared Lee Loughner's pre-Tucson proclamation that he'd "see you on national TV"; Umpqua Community

College shooter Chris Harper Mercer's belief that "it seems the more people you kill, the more you're in the limelight."

Mother Jones (in Follman & Andrews, 2015) examined law enforcement records, witness statements, and other key documents to discover that, of 74 copycat shooter plots, 53 were thwarted by law enforcement, while 21 shootings were carried through to fruition. The human toll was 89 dead, 126 injured, and nine shooter suicides. As stated previously, when a highly sensationalized shooting occurs, experts in the field (Towers, Gomez-Leviano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015) know what is likely to follow: another incident within 13 days or, in the event of an extremely publicized and sensationalized incident (e.g., Columbine or Sandy Hook), the possibility of a copycat shooting in the distant future. Towers et al. found that an estimated 20 percent to 30 percent of mass shootings are the result of imitating recent high-profile incidents.

The Nature of Suicide in the United States

According to the Centers for Disease Control (2016), suicide is "death caused by self-injurious behavior with intent to die as a result of the behavior." Though not commonly referred to as such, suicide is a form of intrapersonal violence with the end goal directed toward oneself rather than others (the exception is when an individual is perpetrating a murder-suicide).

As of Oct. 6, 2017, it is estimated that one million Americans attempt suicide each year, with over 40,000 dying by suicide. To put it simply, there is a suicide every 12.9 minutes, resulting in approximately 121 suicides per day (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2015). Historically, males die by suicide at higher rates than females due to the use of more lethal means, although the intention is the same. Overall, suicide is the tenth leading cause of death in the United States and the second leading cause among 10- to 24-year-olds (Drapeau & McIntosh, 2016).

There was a threefold increase in suicide among 10- to 14-year-old non-Hispanic white females between 1999 and 2014 (Curtin, Warner, & Hedegaard, 2016). Further, among those in the 15- to 24-year age range, non-Hispanic white females died by suicide at a rate 60 percent higher within the aforementioned time frame, while native Alaskan females or non-Hispanic American Indians did so at a 90 percent higher rate. Young males are affected greatly by suicide as well. In fact, males are four times as likely to die by suicide than their female counterparts in these same categories. Van Orman and Jarosz, (2016) summarized gender differences as:

The suicide rate for teenage boys was three times the rate for teenage girls in 2014. However, the rise in the overall teenage suicide rate between 1999 and 2014

was driven by the 56 percent increase in the suicide rate among teen girls — from 2.7 deaths per 100,000 to 4.2 deaths per 100,000. (p. 1)

Media Contagion of Suicide

According to the CDC, media contagion of suicide is a reality impacting primarily those previously at-risk who identify with the individual who died by suicide. Phillips (1974) coined the term “Werther effect,” from Goethe’s novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, to describe an increase in suicides after a sensationalized depiction of suicide in the media. According to Sisask and Varnik (2012), “irresponsible media reports can provoke suicidal behaviors” (p. 123).

To date, our nation has avoided mass media flooding after a suicide with the exception of post-celebrity suicide coverage. *Thirteen Reasons Why*, recently released as a Netflix series, is the suicide equivalent of sensationalism surrounding mass shootings. It is likely we will see an increase in copycat suicides due to this series. The producers say that it is geared toward individuals 15–17+ years of age, a group for which suicide is the second leading cause of death. The show is poised for its second season, raising concern to those viewers with existing risk factors for suicide with few protective factors to prevent suicidal actions. Of great concern is the previously described Werther effect (Phillips, 1974). Like media contagion of mass shootings, it is likely the Werther effect will manifest itself in connection to the series. According to Sisask and Varnik (2012, p. 124),

Although the media is only one feature of the social environment in which suicidal behaviors can be learned and the effect is probably smaller than that of other psychosocial risk factors for suicide, it is a significant agent in social construction of reality, especially for vulnerable persons.

Over a decade ago, Gould (2001) and Gould, Jamieson, and Romer (2003) aimed to determine if there truly is a Werther effect. The authors (Gould; Gould, Jamieson & Romer) sought to examine if a connection exists between media coverage and suicide contagion. Their findings support the premise, as they demonstrated media-related suicide contagion regardless of whether the sensationalized suicides were actual cases or fictional depictions or descriptions.

Gould (2001) and Gould et al. (2003) are not the only researchers to demonstrate the existence of the Werther effect. By extension, there exists additional research support for the phenomenon as it applies to widely publicized *celebrity* suicides (Cheng, Hawton, Chen, Yen, Chen, Chen, & Teng, 2007; Fu and C. Chan, 2013; Fu & Yip, 2007). Media outlets focus predominantly on suicides carried out by extreme means (e.g., burning, jumping in front of subway or railway trains, or shooting) rather than those carried out via

poisoning, hanging, suffocation or other statistically prevalent means (Pirkis, Burgess, Blood, & Francis, 2007). As with coverage of public mass shootings, only the most graphic and disturbing cases are “worthy” of attention in the media.

In a review of 56 research articles examining the impact of media coverage of suicide, Sisask and Varnik (2012) found a strong association between media coverage and suicidality. Only four of 56 studies failed to demonstrate an association, while five of 56 studies were inconclusive. Sisask and Varnik found, in their analysis, that those at highest risk of being impacted by media coverage are close in age to the individual depicted in the media accounts. Their data also suggest the strongest links are between media reports that glorify extreme means and similar suicides.

One need only read a handful of headlines after celebrity suicides to detect the media’s effort to draw the reader into the story with descriptive details. Headline-grabbing, discussed previously, is commonplace, as is evident in the media’s decision to cover primarily high-profile celebrity suicides. As an example, subsequent to the 2015 suicide death of Robin Williams, *CBS This Morning* (2016) published: “Robin Williams’ widow on his fight against the ‘terrorist inside his brain,’” while all major news channels wrote and spoke in detail for close to a year about why and how Williams completed the act. While it would be fair to assume increasing suicide rates in its viewership is not the media’s goal, the risk here is this becomes an unintended secondary outcome of such headline-grabbing.

Proponents of a different effect, the “Papageno” effect (Niederkerntaler, Voracek, Herberth, Till, Strauss, Etzersdorfer, Eisenwort, & Sonneck, 2010), named for a character in the opera “The Magic Flute,” dismiss the Werther effect and instead suggest that media coverage of celebrity suicides *reduces* the likelihood of copycat suicides. The Papageno effect is not supported by the literature, as suicides highlighted in the media are those connected to celebrities and/or those with extreme means of suicide completion (Pirkis, Burgess, Blood, & Francis, 2007), which have been proven to *increase* rather than decrease the likelihood of copycat suicides. As mentioned previously (Cheng et al., 2007; Fu & Chan, 2013; Fu & Yip, 2007; Gould, 2001; Gould, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003), celebrity suicides and suicide details are associated with suicide contagion.

Another Example of the Sensationalization of Suicides

On May 18, 2017, Chris Cornell, lead singer of Soundgarden, died by suicide. Shortly thereafter, the police report with crime scene details was leaked. Details of the moments leading up to his suicide were released in timeline fashion. Major publications rushed to publish

the vivid details and photographs. The entertainment program, *TMZ*, ran the headline-grabbing story, “Chris Cornell Used Exercise Band and Sturdy Clip Device to Hang Himself.” Any reader could learn that Cornell:

1. Took two Ativan pills;
2. Spoke to his wife on the phone and admitted, while slurring, to taking “an extra Ativan or two;”
3. In the same phone call stated, “I’m just tired;”
4. Was found “laying on the bathroom floor” while bleeding from the mouth after hanging himself from the door that separated the hotel bathroom and bedroom;
5. Had an exercise band wrapped around his neck, which he had fastened to a carabiner; and
6. Was pronounced dead at the scene at 1:30A a.m.

The Werther effect shortly thereafter manifested itself in the death of Chester Bennington, best friend of Cornell, who knew the details of Cornell’s death and died on what would have been Cornell’s fifty-third birthday. Bennington died via suicide, with the method being hanging near a bottle of pills on the door separating his home’s bedroom and bathroom. It is likely the suicide of Cornell triggered Bennington’s previous struggles. In addition to a situational trigger, the details reported on Cornell provided detailed knowledge of a method.

***Thirteen Reasons Why* is a Reason for Concern**

Thirteen Reasons Why broke a Netflix record upon its release. According to the research firm, *Fizziology*, the show beat all previous Netflix series to become the most tweeted about series in its first week of streaming (in DeMaria, 2017). Viewers of *Thirteen Reasons Why* are exposed to detailed descriptions of incidents that the protagonist, Hannah, perceives as contributors to her suicide. The audience follows Hannah’s thoughts and feelings as she unfolds the story of her suicide in a series of audiotapes strategically left behind.

The tapes, in order of presentation in the series, consist of Hannah describing an individual’s behavior and the turmoil she faced as a result. She describes relational and other forms of bullying, physical assault, an infatuated classmate, alienation, isolation, a male classmate who would not allow other classmates to compliment her, a male who sexually assaulted her, and her school counselor’s failure to help her through her struggles.

These are incredibly heavy topics for the young audience that becomes infatuated with Hannah and her revenge suicide, which is portrayed in detail. Each episode is followed by reference to the National Suicide Lifeline. In addition, the series is followed by a handful of experts speaking on suicide. However, the production team cannot

guarantee the follow-up information is being watched or absorbed. While the series takes some steps to reduce the risk of inspiring a copycat suicide through the use of expert interviews following the main content, it is unlikely that young viewers will take the time to listen to long, drawn-out information in a world in which peers are of greatest importance. The series has led the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2017) to release a consideration for educators document, which is a warning regarding vulnerable youth. By extension, vulnerable youth are discouraged from viewing the series. These youth are struggling with mental health issues and suicidal ideation. Though they do not use the term, the Werther effect is implied in the NASP document in the following statement: “Research shows that exposure to another person’s suicide, or to graphic or sensationalized accounts of death, can be one of the many risk factors that youth struggling with mental health conditions cite as a reason they contemplate or attempt suicide” (NASP, 2017).

In addition to the series bringing serious topics to the forefront while linking them to suicide, limited resources are offered to the viewer. Perhaps of greatest concern is the suicide completion scene, which is visually graphic, consisting of a close-up of Hannah sawing at, and eventually severing, her veins and her radial artery.

As educators and mental health staff, we understand that it is important to discuss suicide to reduce the stigma of the event. The more we discuss mental health with children, adolescents, and young adults, the greater the likelihood that they will ask for help. The creative team behind *Thirteen Reasons Why* believes the film leads to increased discussion of the topic. Unfortunately, many children, adolescents, and young adults have watched the series alone — without discussing it with parents, caregivers, or school/campus personnel. There are many young people spending the majority of their day alone, whether it is at home, in a residence hall, or an apartment, which increases the likelihood of the film triggering pre-existing or current suicidal ideation. As stated in the NASP document (2017):

We do not recommend that vulnerable youth, especially those who have any degree of suicidal ideation, watch this series. Its powerful storytelling may lead impressionable viewers to romanticize the choices made by the characters and/or develop revenge fantasies. They may easily identify with the experiences portrayed and recognize both the intentional and unintentional effects on the central character. Unfortunately, adult characters in the show, including the second school counselor who inadequately addresses Hannah’s pleas for help, do not inspire a sense of trust or ability to help.

Long before *Thirteen Reasons Why* was produced, a group of suicide prevention and intervention organizations worked collectively with

the Centers of Disease Control toward educating the media on proper and improper ways to describe and discuss suicide. These agencies created *Reporting on Suicide* (n.d.), a document aimed at preventing suicide contagion. *Reporting on Suicide* stresses to media the importance of: 1) avoiding the sensationalizing of a celebrity or non-celebrity suicide; 2) withholding details (e.g., photos and videos) on the method; and 3) refraining from sharing details of a suicide note.

Thirteen Reasons Why sensationalizes suicide and, in addition, provides graphic video of the method. The fact that the series is getting critical acclaim is concerning. An independent series (such as *Thirteen Reasons Why*) may not use the news/media guidelines to reduce suicide contagion. It may be the case that, since they are not reporting on actual events but rather telling a fictional sensationalized story, they do not realize the contagion and related copycat (i.e., Werther effect) suicides likely to be caused by the series.

Just as mass public shooting sympathizers identify with Harris, Klebold, Cho and other highly publicized perpetrators (Gould, 1980; Johnston & Joy, 2016), it is likely we will see an increase in suicide based on the *Thirteen Reasons Why* portrayal of suicide as a way to end emotional pain and a way to get revenge (NASP 2017).

If media does not refrain from sensationalizing the series, the end result will be: a) contagion; b) horrific survival guilt for youth and mental health personnel who may feel as though they have contributed to a classmate's or student's suicide; c) vulnerable youth acting impulsively and attempting suicide; and d) rising suicide attempts and deaths among a population whose suicide rates are already skyrocketing (Drapeau & McIntosh, 2016).

A letter released by Palm Springs Superintendent, Robert M. Avossa, Ed.D., demonstrates the potential impact of the series. On April 28, 2017, Avossa (in Strauss, 2017) wrote:

As a father of a teenager and tween, I am very concerned about a dangerous trend we have observed in our schools in recent days. School District personnel have observed an increase in youth at-risk behavior at the elementary and middle school levels to include self-mutilation, threats of suicide, and multiple Baker Act incidents [this is the innovative commitment statute in Florida]. Students involved in the recent incidents have articulated associations of their at-risk behavior to the *Thirteen Reasons Why* Netflix series... We do not recommend that vulnerable youth, especially those who have any degree of suicidal ideation, watch this series. Its powerful storytelling may lead impressionable viewers to romanticize the choices made by the characters and/or

develop revenge fantasies. They may easily identify with the experiences portrayed and recognize both the intentional and unintentional effects on the central character. (p. 1)

Avossa then goes on to refer parents and guardians to the aforementioned document released by NASP, in which the organization firmly discourages viewing of the film among those who are vulnerable, struggling, or isolated. In addition, NASP contributors describe the Werther effect as a reality for youth.

Knowing the series is readily available to the vulnerable and there is a sequel on the horizon, where do we go from here? We must discuss suicide in a responsible fashion, even though many will tell you suicide is an "uncomfortable" topic. It is important to look to the experts and offer accurate information while continuously stressing to media the importance of ending the glorification of targeted violence and suicide.

Suicide is now the number two killer of our youth, and the age of those completing suicide continues to drop. We must be ever vigilant on the role the media plays in increased suicide rates (K. Epling, personal communication, July 14, 2017). Unlike some communicable conditions, suicide contagion is always fatal. Thanks to *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the vulnerable are at greater risk. A detailed depiction of suicide completion is exactly what we should NEVER show others because we are observational learners and it increases contagion.

National prevention organizations laid out guidelines on what not to do. The series does just about everything recommended against. It is theorized that the skyrocketing suicide attempts and completions among 10- to 14-year-old females is due, in part, to the increased presence of social media forums. Pressure to look like a celebrity, exceed friends' "likes," and friends/followers is detrimental to well being at a time in life comprised of the importance of peers, self-consciousness, and bodily changes. The stressors are significant enough to trigger mental health issues. *Thirteen Reasons Why* further adds to the risk. College-aged students are also at risk of suicide contagion due to increased responsibility, distance from a familiar support network, academic pressures, relationship issues, and the stigma of visiting the campus counseling center. The Center for Collegiate Mental Health released a report (2016) that revealed that one in five college students struggles with a mental health concern. Viewing the *Thirteen Reasons Why* series in an unfamiliar setting without necessary support is of great concern.

Given that contagion is a phenomenon among those who internalize and externalize their experiences, it is important to look at their shared traits and address what puts them at risk. According to a recent FBI report (2016), feelings of resentment, emptiness, loneliness,

and isolation lead to a copycat shooting when the individual feels no control over these factors. The report then goes on to state that “a student’s personal crisis or underachievement may trigger impulsive or violent acts” (p. 8) and that “students act on feelings of isolation, alienation, disenfranchisement, sense of belonging, adventure, glory, or thrill seeking” (p. 9). One could argue the same factors lead to copycat suicides.

Behavioral Intervention Teams (BITs) have played a central role in identifying, assessing, and managing students of concern. Despite this, there is a phenomenon working against BITs in the fight to prevent public mass shootings and suicides. The present manuscript has established that media contagion is brought forth by glorification of public mass shooters and celebrity and fictional suicides. The glory impacts the vulnerable and drives them toward a copycat shooting or suicide, especially if they are exposed to detailed accounts of the incidents (Cantor, Sheehan, Allpers, and Mullen 1999; Towers, Gomez-Lievano, Khan, Mubayi, & Castillo-Chavez, 2015).

Due primarily to resources put forth through the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association (NaBITA) and the National Center for Higher Education Risk Management (NCHERM), Institutions of higher education (IHEs) are seeing an increase in situationally aware students, faculty, and staff doing their part to thwart public mass shootings and suicides. In addition, BITs are getting better and better due to the advent of tools such as the Structured Interview for Risk Assessment (SIVRA-35) (Van Brunt, 2012) as well as the VRAW² (Van Brunt, 2015) and other resources that make threat assessment more accurate and data driven. It is time to provide resources to BITs that will assist members in protecting at-risk students from sensationalized media reports.

Recommendations for Reporting on Mass Shootings

Several agencies came together to create an informational document for media reporting of mass shootings (*save.org*). The experts acknowledge that media contagion leads to copycat mass shootings, and as such, there are suggestions for responsible reporting due to their likelihood of reducing future incidents. In addition to stressing the importance of responsible reporting, *save.org* describes the outcome of “harmful reporting.” The information provided stresses the fact that the vulnerable see past perpetrators as heroes, as was described herein. In addition, harmful reporting is a deterrent to those who would benefit from seeking help. In contrast to harmful reporting is “helpful reporting.” *Save.org* describes this type of reporting as assisting others in learning to identify behaviors of concern and, upon doing so, increasing their knowledge of how to respond to those who pose a possible threat.

General guidelines (*save.org*) can be summarized as: 1) lessen reporting on perpetrators; 2) never show victim and perpetrator photos together; 3) limit photos of the shooter; 4) do not stigmatize mental illness but associate it with mass shooters; 5) do not sensationalize or glorify a shooting; 6) be sensitive when interviewing survivors and their families; 7) show how the community is coming together to get through the difficult period; and 8) do not place blame on those targeted (if there are specific targets) or their school or community.

Recommendations for Reporting on Suicides

As with mass shootings, there is good information available on reporting on suicides. Available on *ReportingOnSuicide.org* are important points, as well as the dos and don’ts of reporting. The suggestions describe copycat suicides and media’s contribution thereof. The agency discourages sensationalizing a celebrity death and avoiding dramatic headlines that draw attention. A further suggestion is to avoid the use of such terms as, “skyrocketing,” “successful” or “unsuccessful” (suicide), or a “failed attempt. Media is also discouraged from interviewing emergency response personnel and reporting as though suicide is a crime.

General guidelines can be summarized as: 1) provide general information rather than sensationalizing; 2) use concrete headlines; 3) if a photo is shown, be sure it is from work, school, or family; 4) provide suicide prevention hotlines and text/cell phone-based resources; 5) describe suicide as a public health issue; 6) always share information on warning signs/risk factors; 7) use less sensationalized verbiage and accurate data; and 8) have a suicide expert share correct information regarding warning signs, resources, and best practice.

Discussion

We have provided information on media contagion as it applies to copycat public mass shootings and suicides. BITs should come to understand the greater the sensationalizing, the more attention-grabbing the headline, the more likely we are to see a copycat shooter seeking fame and notoriety. Observational learning is powerful and leads some to imitation. In terms of suicide, sensationalized celebrity suicides and graphic, detailed depictions of fictional character suicides, are likely to lead to copycat suicides. Encouraging media, both private and on-campus sources, to limit sensationalizing mass public shootings and suicides is a necessary form of copycat prevention. Our nation’s most recent public mass shooting took place at the Mandalay Bay Hotel in Las Vegas, Nevada on Oct. 1, 2017. Many of us are holding our breath out of fear we will see a copycat public mass shooting due to the extensive, sensationalized coverage of the incident. It is our hope that this information provides guidance to those in positions of power and authority on college campuses as they have opportunity to influence emails, student publications, and websites following a tragic event.

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