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One Teenager Killed Himself. Six More Followed.

Beneath a rise in suicides nationwide is the vexing phenomenon of deaths clustering in the same town, at the same school, on the same block

By Ian Lovett | Photographs by Max Whittaker for The Wall Street Journal
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HERRIMAN, Utah—Eight months to the day after his only son, Chandler, killed himself, Kurt Voutaz was in his kitchen eating lunch.

He and his wife, Catherine, had long since ripped the blood-soaked carpet out of Chandler's bedroom and cleaned the walls and ceiling. It was warm for February, and they had taken the snow tires off the car. They were hoping winter was over.

Suddenly, a police car sped across a footpath in the park behind their house. A couple of teenagers were standing nearby, shouting.

Mr. Voutaz stepped outside to see what was going on. He quickly wished he hadn't. Just a few yards from his house, a body was lying on the ground. It was Chandler's friend, Cooper Nagy. Like Chandler, he had shot himself.

Cooper was the fourth high-school student from Herriman to die by suicide since Chandler's death in June of 2017. Two more would kill themselves by May of 2018, bringing the total to six in less than a year, plus at least one recent graduate.

The country's rising suicide rate, part of an increase in what has been dubbed "deaths of despair," is hitting the youngest Americans hard. The overall suicide rate rose 26% between 2007 and 2017, the most recent year for government data, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. For children ages 10 to 17, over the same period, the rate more than doubled.

The most painful and perplexing cases sometimes happen in the same town, at the same school, on the same block.

Suicide clusters, which involve multiple deaths in a small geographic area and time frame, hit roughly five U.S. communities each year. They almost always involve adolescents.

> Experts have struggled to explain why some teen suicides lead to clusters, while most remain isolated tragedies. Some researchers say the same factors that contribute to suicide more broadly—such as untreated mental-health problems and access to firearms—are the primary cause. Others believe local culture plays a role, making some places more susceptible than others.

Though clusters account for only a fraction of youth suicides each year, they prompt deep examinations that individual cases do not, as residents ask, “Why here?”

A suicide cluster in Palo Alto in 2014 and 2015 sparked an exploration of the academic pressure put on high-schoolers in affluent communities. In southern Ohio, doctors found that a sharp rise in youth suicides in 2016 went hand-in-hand with opioid overdoses.

In Parkland, Fla., two students from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School died by apparent suicide in March, spurring questions about the trauma sustained by survivors of mass shootings.

Few places have been hit harder than Utah, where the youth suicide rate has more than tripled over the past decade. The state consistently ranks in the top three in suicide among 10 to 17-year-olds, the CDC says. Suicide is now the leading cause of death in Utah for that age group.

When the string of suicides in Herriman began, few in the community seemed to want to touch the subject. The school, initially, made the decision not to publicly address the first deaths. District officials feared open discussion could make another death more likely, a common concern among school administrators.

> Herriman parents saw another explanation: A deeply entrenched aversion in the community to discussing mental-health problems or seeking help.

“A lot of people don’t want to admit they have a child who isn’t OK,” said Brianna Godfrey, president of the parent-teacher-student association at Herriman High School. “There’s a lot of strain to be perfect, to keep up appearances.”

Utah is among the most religious states in the country, and most people there belong to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or LDS church. Residents say everyone in faithful towns like Herriman is shaped by the church’s influence, whether they worship on Sundays or not.

For decades, LDS leaders had labeled suicide a serious sin. Now, church officials say it is possible for those who die by suicide to go to the celestial kingdom, the highest realm after death in the Mormon faith.

In Herriman, residents say the stigma remains powerful, quashing discussion of mental health and deterring those who are struggling from seeking help.

“It’s ubiquitous in Utah whether you’re Mormon or not—we don’t talk about the hard stuff,” said Erin Preston, parent of a Herriman High junior, who grew up Mormon but is no longer active in the church.



A view of Herriman, which sprang up out of farmland into a burgeoning suburb of more than 35,000 people.

Tucked into the hills southwest of Salt Lake City, Herriman is in many respects a microcosm of Utah. Residents are overwhelmingly white and predominantly Mormon, with so many Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints chapels that visitors sometimes end up a few blocks away at the wrong one. Polygamists—who defy the LDS church’s 1890 ban on multiple wives—live in the canyons at the edge of town; one ran for mayor two years ago and won 12% of the vote.

Over the past 15 years, as the state’s population exploded, Herriman sprang up out of farmland into a burgeoning suburb of over 35,000 people.

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How should families, schools and clergy talk to teenagers about the growing problem of youth suicide? Join the conversation below.

Herriman High is now overflowing with more than 3,000 students. Between classes, the

hallways are crammed with teenagers walking shoulder-to-shoulder.

Students say they feel both watched and invisible. They complain it is impossible to get teachers' attention when they need help. A number of students eat lunch in their cars rather than be seen alone in the cafeteria.



Ryan Cherry, 17, founded the local chapter of the Golden Gate Club, a group designed to promote a more positive social atmosphere at Herriman High School.

"People just kind of get lost in the mix," said Ryan Cherry, a senior and LDS church member, who has struggled emotionally since starting at the school.

Students also describe a divide between those who are devoutly Mormon, walking back and forth throughout the school day to the LDS seminary next door, and those who aren't.

Chandler Voutaz was in the latter group.

Two days after he died, more than 100 people gathered for a candlelight vigil in the park behind his house. His friend Cooper Nagy was there, although he and Chandler hadn't been as close the previous few years as they had been in middle school.

Hanging over the gathering was a question: Why? No one seemed to have a clue.

Heading into his senior year, Chandler had a 3.7 GPA and worked part time at McDonald's . Friends often dropped by his house to play videogames or go "hammocking" in the canyons, where they would hike into the woods and lay around. He brought "beer-ade"—Gatorade mixed with beer—to parties and smoked marijuana, though no more than many others at Herriman High, friends said.



Catherine Voutaz, Chandler's mother, at her home in Herriman, Utah.

"I just thought he was being a normal teenager," said his mother, Ms. Voutaz.

The night before he died, Chandler went to dinner with his parents, where he told them he was excited for a trip to Spain. Then he went to a pool party with a friend. Ms. Voutaz went to bed.

She found Chandler dead in his bedroom the next morning. He had stolen a key from her, taken the gun from the family safe and shot himself.

After Chandler, another student who would have been a sophomore at Herriman High also killed herself that summer.

At least one Herriman student made a suicide attempt after school started in the fall. In December, 2017, Chris Van Eperen, a 19-year-old who graduated from the school the previous year, took his own life. James Dodds, a junior, died by suicide in January.

By that point, Cooper was clearly struggling. In the months after Chandler died, Cooper told his parents he hated Herriman High and didn't want to go back to school. His grades slipped. He got caught with marijuana, ended up in legal trouble and eventually set up a schedule to attend school just three days a week.

His social-media presence took a dark turn near the end of January: "It kinda sucks but nice knowing everyone would be good if i wasnt around," he posted on Twitter .

On February 2, Cooper's father asked his son if he was suicidal. "You wouldn't do that to your family, right?" Abel Nagy said.

Cooper's counselor told Mr. Nagy he wasn't suicidal. Cooper said the same.

The next day, when his parents were out, Cooper broke into the family's gun safe. He posted a video on Snapchat of himself chugging a beer, along with a cryptic goodbye. Then, as police, friends and his parents searched for him, he shot himself outside Chandler Voutaz's house.

The news immediately whipped among Herriman teenagers. Within minutes, one of Cooper's former hockey teammates and closest friends, Bryson Settle, showed up at the Nagys' house, distraught.

At a hockey game a few days later, Mr. Nagy went to the locker room to speak to the team. Bryson met him outside, put his arm around Cooper's dad, and walked him in.

"You guys got to talk to each other," Mr. Nagy recalled telling the team.

Bryson also had members of the team sign pucks for the Nagys.

In March, Bryson shot himself with a gun stolen from a cousin's home. His parents delivered the signed pucks to the Nagys after he died.

Anna Mueller, a sociologist at the University of Chicago, has spent years studying one affluent U.S. community that has endured multiple suicide clusters, hoping to understand the context of the deaths, if not necessarily their cause.

In her work, which doesn't name the community, she found a homogeneous culture, with "very rigid views of what's good and what's bad, what an ideal kid is and what a disappointing kid is," she said. Those who don't meet that idea of a good child often feel ashamed, which deters them from getting help.

Around Herriman, residents—Mormon and not—say they feel pressure to present a certain

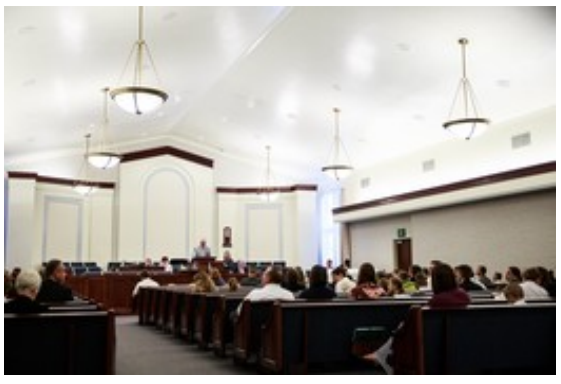


The park behind the Voutaz home where Chandler's friend Cooper Nagy killed himself.

image to the outside world.

Homes are a source of pride in the town, where the median household income is almost $95,000, compared with $61,000 nationally. Christmas lights are a must. Hair is kept tidy (and often blond). Beards are rare. The dress code at Herriman High bans "conspicuous, extreme, odd" hair colors or styles as well as any clothing that is "mutilated, cut off or immodest," unusual for a public school.

"You want to make sure your family looks perfect," said Emily Kroff, a junior at Herriman High and member of the LDS church. When people are struggling, she said, "Everyone thinks they're kind of alone, and no one feels the same way. I think that's a contributor to this."



An LDS church service in Herriman.

The LDS church forbids tobacco, alcohol, coffee, premarital sex, pornography and any same-sex sexual contact. Many parents expect their children to do overseas missionary work, and it is common for seniors at Herriman who receive their "mission calls" to throw lavish parties to celebrate. Photos of the parties are "all over Instagram," said Erica Plummer, a teacher at Herriman High and Mormon youth leader.

Some students post photos every time they go to a Mormon temple, a place of honor not all members get to visit. The posts leave many Mormon girls feeling deficient, Ms. Plummer said.

"They'll say, 'This girl, she's doing everything. She's earned all her medallions, goes to temple all the time, always looks beautiful, and I'm not as spiritual as her.' "

At the same time as Utah's suicide rate has skyrocketed, the LDS church has begun to address the hazards of perfectionism.

"I hear many struggle with this issue—'I'm just not good enough,' " Elder Jeffrey R. Holland said at the faith's general conference in 2017. "I would hope we could pursue personal

improvement in a way that doesn't include...feeling depressed or demolishing self-esteem."



Kyndel Marcroft, a licensed clinical social worker, began sounding the alarm about 'toxic perfectionism' after the fifth youth suicide hit Herriman.

After the fifth suicide, Kyndel Marcroft, a licensed clinical social worker in Herriman, began giving presentations at Mormon chapels in town about teen suicide and "toxic perfectionism."

Ms. Marcroft's oldest child, Quinn, graduated from Herriman High a year early, in 2016, hoping to escape a culture in which she felt unable to be openly transgender. She subsequently made several suicide attempts. She now says she's glad they failed.

"I always felt guilty for being trans, and there was a lot of self-hatred around that," Quinn Marcroft said. "The LDS church definitely plays a huge part in that."

In a sign of change, the church last week reversed a policy that declared same-sex couples apostates. "Those who are attracted to others of the same sex face particular challenges and pressures" with regard to suicide "both inside and outside the Church," said Eric Hawkins, a spokesman for the LDS church. "Each congregation should welcome everyone."

At one of Kyndel Marcroft's presentations, about 50 people—a fraction of the congregation—sat on folding chairs on the basketball court, listening for more than an hour. There had been a suicide in the area just a few days before—not a student, but the man wasn't much older, in his early 20s.

Most of the audience listened in silence. One person in the crowd, Bill Barney, spoke up, saying he recognized the reluctance to confront mental-health struggles.

"I know a lot of parents who don't want to take their suicidal child to the emergency room"



Quinn Marcroft now says she is glad her suicide attempts failed.

during a mental health crisis, he said. "They're afraid of that stigma."

Teens who aren't active in the LDS church, meanwhile, can feel like outcasts in Herriman. Many recall not being allowed into their Mormon friends' houses after school. Friendships can abruptly end when teens leave the church.

"Cooper felt like he didn't fit in sometimes because he wasn't part of that group," said Laura Nagy, Cooper's mom. Though the family had attended LDS churches when he was young, Cooper hadn't been active for years.

At Herriman High football games, which are major social events, "if you're not Mormon and you want to go, it's an ordeal," said Grace Bellini, a close friend of Bryson's. One classmate told Grace, who dates other girls and wears short hair and ripped jeans, that she "didn't have enough school spirit" to attend a game.

After Chandler Voutaz's death, Herriman High officials mulled how—and even whether—the problem should be discussed. Jim Birch, the principal, said there was "no need to announce that there had been a death on the first day of school." When classes resumed in the fall, the school made no official acknowledgment of what had happened.

Then the suicides began again.

By spring, a macabre routine had developed at the high school.

After a suicide, Mr. Birch would come on the intercom to announce only that they had "lost a Mustang," referencing the school mascot.

The school took some steps to help students cope. Teachers made a video about dealing with struggles when they were young, and a youth suicide expert spoke to parents in the district.



Quinn, who now lives in Salt Lake City, shows the scars from self-inflicted cuts growing up.

Every student was given a shirt with the words "You Matter" on it; the same slogan periodically flashed on the jumbotron outside school. Grief counselors were brought in.

"We did everything we possibly could," Mr. Birch, the principal, said. "I was physically ill because of some of the situations that happened. My counseling team was on the brink."

Lisa Cummins, who represents Herriman on the state board of education, said it should be up to parents and religious organizations—not schools—to address the problem.

When "we start talking about death, people tend to start thinking about death more," Ms. Cummins.



The school day begins at Herriman High.

Students said there was little discussion in class or attention paid to those traumatized by the deaths of their friends, a step experts say is essential to stopping further suicides.

When Cooper's death was announced on the loudspeaker, Elizabeth Sainsbury, a friend, ran out of class to the bathroom and broke down. She left school and didn't go back for several days. "It just felt so gloomy and terrible," she said. "I never wanted to be at school."

Anger peaked after a popular senior, whose father was a football coach, died in a car accident. His funeral service was held in the school auditorium, and his photo was plastered all over the halls.

The contrast with the brief mentions of those who died by suicide left some students feeling like the school only "cares about kids who are popular," Ms. Plummer said. Mr. Birch said no other student's family asked for a funeral in school.

In April, Hannah Warren, a close friend of Chandler's, posted about the Herriman suicide cluster on Facebook , saying that school officials were more concerned with admonishing girls for dress-code violations than checking on their emotional well-being. "I wanted to know why we weren't talking about it," she said.



Graffiti rock in Herriman, a popular spot for teens.

Though school officials often fear that discussing suicide could spark a cluster, a growing consensus regards silence as counterproductive.

"Not to talk about it just creates further stigma," said Frank Zenere, district coordinator of the Miami-Dade County Public Schools crisis-management program. "It leaves it up to the kids to draw their own conclusions."

At the state level, officials have been pushing youth suicide to the forefront of public discourse. In the midst of the cluster in Herriman last year, the governor convened a task force on the issue, and the legislature passed a package of suicide-prevention bills.

Lieutenant Governor Spencer Cox, a member of the LDS church who co-chaired the state task force, posted an essay online about his own experience with depression growing up in rural Utah, where he felt like there was something wrong with him for having divorced parents.

The LDS church donated $150,000 to the governor's suicide-prevention fund and released a series of videos featuring senior church leaders discussing the issue. In one of the videos, a high-ranking church official called the idea that those who killed themselves went to hell "totally false."

As the school year wore on, parents in Herriman began pushing for more action.

Catherine Voutaz had felt numb after her son died. But as the death toll mounted around her, Ms. Voutaz saw the effects of Chandler's suicide rippling outward, like a grenade had gone off.

She saw friends visiting the makeshift memorial behind her house and crying at a second candlelight vigil, this one for Cooper.

A week after Bryson died, Ms. Voutaz wrote an email to Mr. Birch and other local and state officials, asking them a series of questions about what was being done.

"I am personally drained each time I see or hear of another teenager take his/her own life," she wrote. "Hopeful no one else commits suicide within 50 feet of my backyard."



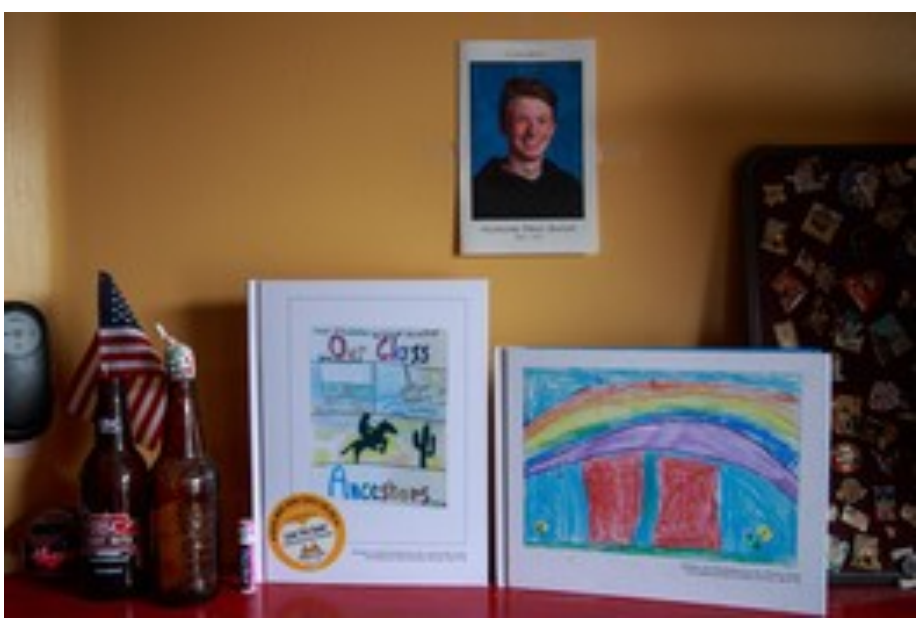
After their son's suicide, Catherine and Kurt Voutaz demanded school authorities take action to help prevent more tragedies.

On the morning of May 2, Ms. Voutaz and her husband walked into Mr. Birch's office for a meeting about efforts to prevent further suicides.

That same day, Nick Swint, a senior at Herriman High, cut out early from school.

Nick had grown up in a classic LDS family—five children, a big house in the Herriman hills and a garage where he would help his father finish furniture.

For much of his life, Nick was the most devoted in his family to the church. Around ninth grade, though, he began telling anyone who would listen that the faith was "a bunch of bunk," his mother, Jayme Swint, said.



Nick Swint's funeral program hangs in his younger brother's room.

Lifelong friends from church and Boy Scouts stopped hanging out with him, his parents said. His grades fell; he smoked copious marijuana and spent more and more time alone in his room.

Ms. Swint wondered if he was struggling with his sexuality and asked him about it half a dozen times. "If you don't like girls, and you like men, I could care less. I just want you to be happy," she recalled telling him. He told her every time that he liked girls.

Then in January, Nick texted his mother at work, “Mom, I’m really scared.” He was at home with a shotgun and told her he had almost tried to kill himself.

His parents put him into counseling. After about six sessions, he refused to return, but he seemed to be doing better. He went back to church and began dating a girl from his seminary class. On the last Sunday of April, he was the first one dressed for church in the morning.

“A lot of kids in Utah go away from the religion and come back,” Ms. Swint said. She thought that’s what Nick was doing.

Three days later, he disappeared from school. Classmates left campus to search for him, and his family drove up and down the canyons near town where his phone showed he had been.

The police eventually found Nick at a truck stop. He had shot himself inside his car.

Nick’s father, Paul Swint, at home in Herriman. Nick’s death proved a turning point.

Nick was the sixth Herriman high-school student to die by suicide since the cluster began with Chandler Voutaz less than a year earlier.

At least five of those six had used firearms they had stolen from relatives. (The family of the sixth declined to comment.)

Nick also left a note for his family on his phone.

“Looking back, and the note he left, he was just so afraid to disappoint me,” his mother said. “Like, ‘are you still going to like me if I don’t go to church?’ ”

Months later, Ms. Swint sometimes struggled to get out of bed.

“I no longer pray for longevity,” she said. “I feel like I’ll see him



again someday, but that's a long ways away."

Nick's death proved to be a turning point in how the community addressed suicide. When school administrators emailed parents about the death, they said explicitly that it had been a suicide.

Parents began showing up before school to greet the children as they arrived each morning. A student group called the Golden Gate Club, designed to promote a more positive social atmosphere at the school, peppered the lockers and walls with sticky notes that said, "To someone, you are the world," and, "You are beautiful."

Darrell Robinson, a member of the Jordan School District board who represents Herriman, said that at first the district fell victim to the "misconception that…if you talk about it, it'll cause another suicide."

"For those early suicides I believed that," he said.

Before school began this fall, Herriman High got a new principal, and teachers received training on suicide prevention.

No students from Herriman High have died since May, but residents don't have to look far to find evidence that the problem hasn't gone away. A high-school student one town over—a lacrosse player and LDS church member—died by suicide in August. At least two students in Herriman have been hospitalized for depression since then, according to family members; one of them had a suicide plan.

There is still some reluctance to openly discuss suicide at school this year. Ms. Plummer, the Herriman High teacher, said the administration edited the word “suicide” out of some Golden Gate Club materials.

As students were going back to school this fall, Catherine and Kurt Voutaz were sitting on their porch. A group of children was playing Frisbee golf in the park, just a few feet from where Cooper and Chandler had died. They still didn’t know why their son had ended his own life and acknowledged they likely never would.

Ms. Voutaz has thrown herself into suicide prevention. She has driven to Salt Lake City and pleaded with the board of education for more resources. She has manned booths at local fairs, handing out pamphlets she compiled about suicide prevention. They listed warning signs she felt she had missed with Chandler, like when a teenager stops sleeping or showering.



The small bedroom community of Herriman has endured a number of teen suicides.

Despite the tragedy in their town, it is tough work getting parents to pay attention. While the teenagers have shown they are all too willing to act, she said many adults are still reluctant to talk about it.

“People don’t understand how bad it really is,” she said. “They don’t want to address it, because they don’t think they’re at risk.”

— Erica Berenstein contributed to this article.

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Write to Ian Lovett at Ian.Lovett@wsj.com

Appeared in the April 13, 2019, print edition as 'One Teenager Killed Himself, Then Six More Followed.'



Judy Van Eperen's son, Chris Van Eperen, 17, killed himself on Dec. 30, 2017.

DO YOU NEED HELP?

The contact number for the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline is 1-800-273-8255.

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