

RENÉE GRAHAM

Child suicide rates are rising. No one is sure why



SHUTTERSTOCK



By [Renée Graham](#) | GLOBE COLUMNIST DECEMBER 14, 2018

On Dec. 3, [McKenzie Adams](#) died.

For months, she'd been subjected to racist bullying at her Alabama school, according to her family. There were profane taunts about her looks, her skin color, and her friendship with a white classmate. One child even passed hateful notes suggesting that McKenzie harm herself.

Eddwina Harris, the girl's aunt, told the Tuscaloosa News, "She was being bullied the entire school year, with words such as 'kill yourself,' 'you think you're white because you ride with that white boy,' [and] 'you ugly'."

McKenzie was 9 years old when she took her life.

It's often impossible to pinpoint why anyone dies by suicide. Experts discourage speculation and oversimplification about any individual death. And with someone so young, such an act is beyond any level of comprehension.

Still, adults in schools and neighborhoods must be alert to signs of trouble in younger children's lives. Whatever the dire circumstances, suicide rates among children between ages 5 and 14 have [nearly tripled](#) in the past decade, according to the American Association of Suicidology — and no one is sure why.

These tragedies occur around the country.

"You hear of all these kids taking their lives, and you just don't understand why it is," said Christine Sellars after [her 10-year-old grandson died](#) by suicide last May in Ohio. "I don't know if it's the changing times, the way kids are brought up or the peer pressure. It's just so sad."

While studies mark the rise in child suicides, such deaths remain rare. Yet it's enough of a concern that suicide experts worry about over-publicizing cases in which children die by their own hand. (I reached out to four national and local suicide prevention organizations. Three did not return my phone calls. At the fourth, an official said, "We are not commenting on this particular story.")

When the stakes are this high, I understand such reticence. Studies have shown that, especially in young people, [suicide contagion](#) can occur after exposure to reports of suicide or suicidal behavior among peer groups, family members, or through media coverage.

That may mean it's more than sad coincidence that less than a month before Adams died, [Madison "Maddie" Whittsett](#), another 9-year-old Alabama girl, took her own life.

Both Adams and Whittsett were African-American, and suicide rates are especially acute for black children. [A 2015 study](#) published in the American Medical Association's pediatric journal

found that, while suicide among white kids between ages 5 to 11 dropped from 1993 to 2012, the rate doubled for black kids.

Never before has a national suicide study of any age group discovered higher rates for black people than whites.

While empirical data are vital, definitive answers behind the increase in child suicides have proven elusive. In numerous cases, parents have cited how school bullying affected their child. After her 11-year-old son, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover of Springfield took his life in 2009, his mother Sirdeaner Walker became a fierce anti-bullying advocate.

“What could make a child his age despair so much that he would take his own life?” asked Walker, months after Carl’s death. (She died from cancer in 2016.)

“That question haunts me to this day, and I will probably never know the answer. What we do know is my son was being relentlessly bullied in school.”

“

It feels as if a community has failed to protect its most vulnerable population.

Harris said McKenzie was targeted by both white and black classmates because she traveled to and from school with a white boy who Jasmine Adams, McKenzie’s mother, described as her daughter’s “best friend.”

McKenzie “told me this one particular child was writing her nasty notes in class,” Adams said in a CBS News interview. “It was just things you wouldn’t think a 9-year-old should know. And my baby, to tell me some of the things they had said to her, I was like, ‘Where are they learning this from?’”

Adams disputes the school district’s finding that there’s no evidence that McKenzie was bullied, or that her family ever reported it. Wherever the truth lies, this is a fact: Missed or ignored warning signs may lead to the death of another child.

When children take their own lives, it feels as if a community has failed to protect its most vulnerable population.

But suicide is not inevitable. Children need safe spaces to talk about what they’re feeling. It’s not

enough for adults to listen; kids need to believe they've been heard, their concerns validated.

When a child feels as if there's no way out of their darkness, it's society's obligation to steer them toward support, light, and life.

* * *

If you or someone you know is in crisis, please call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK (8255) or contact the Crisis Text Line by texting TALK to 741741.

Renée Graham can be reached at renee.graham@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@reneeygraham](https://twitter.com/reneeygraham).