Distraught Father's Courthouse Suicide Highlights America's Male Suicide Epidemic

By Glenn Sacks

A distraught father struggling with overdue child support obligations and adverse family court decisions committed suicide on the steps of the downtown San Diego courthouse Monday. Angrily waving court documents, 43 year-old Derrick Miller walked up to court personnel at the entrance, said "You did this to me," and shot himself in the head.

Miller is one of 300,000 Americans who have taken their own lives over the past decade--as many Americans as were killed in combat in World War II. America is in the throes of a largely unrecognized suicide epidemic, as suicide has become the eighth leading cause of death in the United States today, and the third leading cause of death among adolescents. All Americans recognize that our country is rife with violent crime, but few know that 50% more Americans kill themselves than are murdered.

Who is committing suicide?

For the most part, men. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, males commit suicide four times as often as females do, and have higher suicide rates in every age group. There are many risk factors for suicide, including substance abuse and mental illness, but the two situations in which men are most likely to kill themselves are after the loss of a job, and after a divorce.

Because our society strongly defines manhood as the ability to work and provide for one's loved ones, unemployed men often see themselves as failures and as burdens to their families. Thus it is not surprising that while there is no difference in the suicide rate of employed and unemployed women, the suicide rate of unemployed men is twice that of employed men.

It is for this reason that economic crises generally lead to male suicide epidemics. During the Midwest farm crisis of the 1980s, for example, the suicide rate of male farmers tripled. A sharp increase in male suicide occurred after the destruction of Flint, Michigan's 70 year-old auto industry, as documented in the disturbing 1989 film "Roger and Me." Some suicide experts fear a rise in suicide related to our current economic downturn.

The other most common suicide victims are divorced and/or estranged fathers like Derrick Miller. In fact, a divorced father is ten times more likely to commit suicide than a divorced mother, and three times more likely to commit suicide than a married father. According to Los Angeles divorce consultant Jayne Major:

"Divorced men are often devastated by the loss of their children. It's a little known fact that in the United States men initiate only a small number of the divorces involving children. Most of the men I deal with never saw their divorces coming, and they are often treated very unfairly by the family courts."

According to Sociology Professor Augustine Kposow of the University of California at Riverside, "The link between men and their children is often severed because the woman is usually awarded custody. A man may not get to see his children, even with visitation rights. As far as the man is concerned, he has lost his marriage and lost his children and that can lead to depression and suicide."

There have been a rash of father suicides directly related to divorce and mistreatment by the family courts over the past few years. For example, New York City Police Officer Martin Romanchick, a Medal of Honor recipient, hung himself after being denied access to his children and being arrested 15 times on charges brought by his ex-wife, charges the courts deemed frivolous. Massachusetts father Steven Cook, prevented from seeing his daughter by a protection order based upon unfounded allegations, committed suicide after he was jailed for calling his four-year-old daughter on the wrong day of the week. Darrin White, a Canadian father who was stripped of the right to see his children and was about to be jailed after failing to pay a child support award tantamount to twice his take home pay, hung himself. His 14 year-old daughter Ashlee later wrote to her nation's Prime Minister, saying, "this country's justice system has robbed me of one of the most precious gifts in my life, my father."

We'll never know exactly why Derrick Miller took his life and if his suicide could have been prevented. What we do know is that male suicide is one of America's most serious public health issues, and it is time to address it.

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