

Sunday Review | OP-ED COLUMNIST

Best, Brightest — and Saddest?

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Frank Bruni

PALO ALTO, Calif. — I HAD heard about all of the dying, about all of the grief, and still I didn't immediately understand what I was seeing when, at a railroad crossing here, I spotted a man in a blaring orange vest, the kind that road crews and public-safety workers wear. He wasn't carrying any equipment. He wasn't engaged in any obvious activity. He shuffled his feet, staring into the distance.

Hours later, at the same crossing: an orange-vested woman. Like the man, she just stood there, without evident purpose.

"They're on the lookout," a friend of mine who lives here explained.

"For what?" I asked.

"Suicides," my friend said.

Between May 2009 and January 2010, five Palo Alto teenagers ended their lives by stepping in front of trains. And since October of last year, another three Palo Alto teenagers have killed themselves that way, prompting longer hours by more sentries along the tracks. The Palo Alto Weekly refers to the deaths as a "suicide contagion."

And while mental health professionals are rightly careful not to oversimplify or trivialize the psychic distress behind them by focusing on any one possible factor, the contagion has prompted an emotional debate about

the kinds of pressures felt by high school students in epicenters of overachievement.

This is one such place. Children here grow up in the shadow of Stanford University, which established a new precedent for exclusivity during the recent admissions season, accepting just 5 percent of its applicants.

They grow up with parents who have scaled the pinnacles of their professions or are determined to have their offspring do precisely that. They grow up with advanced-placement classes galore, convinced that their futures hinge on perfect SAT scores and preternatural grade-point averages. Experts on sleep are in keen demand. The kids here don't get enough of it.

But the situation isn't so different in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., where a separate cluster of teen suicides in recent years forced educators and parents to re-examine the messages they give teenagers, intentionally and unintentionally, about what's expected of them and what's needed to get ahead in this world.

It's not so different in Chicago's western suburbs, where a high school teacher recently pulled me aside and, in a pained whisper, insisted that the number of advanced-placement classes that local students feel compelled to take and the number of hospitalizations for depression rise in tandem.

These are to some extent problems of affluence and privilege. But they have relevance beyond any one subset of our country's populace. They reflect a status consciousness that bedevils Americans at all income levels, and they underscore an economic trepidation that is sadly widespread and is seemingly intensified by the gaping divide between the haves and have-nots.

The suicide rate among all teenagers has seemingly risen a bit over the last decade. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, it was 8.15 per every 100,000 Americans between the ages of 10 and 24 in 2013, the last year for which complete data is available; the rate was 6.74 in 2003.

Many more children think about taking their own lives. According to a 2013 survey by the C.D.C., 17 percent of American high school students had considered suicide in the previous year. Eight percent said they'd attempted it.

And suicide clusters have at least as much to do with imitation as with

environment, each instance of self-annihilation planting an idea and heightening the possibility of the next.

There's no direct line connecting the pressures of Palo Alto and the deaths. But the community's soul searching goes beyond those tragedies, to matters plenty important in and of themselves. Are kids here getting to be kids? Does a brand of hovering, exactly prescriptive parenting put them in unforgiving boxes and prevent them from finding their true selves and true grit?

"There's something about childhood itself in Palo Alto and in communities like Palo Alto that undermines the mental health and wellness of our children," Julie Lythcott-Haims told me.

Lythcott-Haims was a dean at Stanford from 2002 to 2012. She lives in Palo Alto. Her two children, ages 13 and 15, go to school here. And she's the author of a new book, to be published in June, called "How to Raise an Adult."

It reflects on the shortfalls of some modern parenting, which, in her view, can be not only overprotective but overbearing, micromanaging the lives of children, pointing them toward specific mile markers of achievement and denying them any time to flail or room to fail. They wind up simultaneously frazzled and fragile.

"The suicides are tragic, but they are at the pointy head of the pyramid, the tippy top," she said. "Beneath them is a larger number of kids who are really struggling and beneath *them* is an even larger number of kids who feel an amount of stress and pressure that they shouldn't be made to and that's untenable."

THE local media has been rife with commentary, from many perspectives, about the mental health of Palo Alto teenagers.

Here is what Carolyn Walworth, a junior at Palo Alto High School, recently wrote: "As I sit in my room staring at the list of colleges I've resolved to try to get into, trying to determine my odds of getting into each, I can't help but feel desolate."

She confessed to panic attacks in class, to menstrual periods missed as a result of exhaustion. "We are not teenagers," she added. "We are lifeless bodies

in a system that breeds competition, hatred, and discourages teamwork and genuine learning.”

Adam Strassberg, a psychiatrist and the father of two Palo Alto teenagers, wrote that while many Palo Alto parents are “wealthy and secure beyond imagining,” they’re consumed by fear of losing that perch or failing to bequeath it to their kids. “Maintaining and advancing insidiously high educational standards in our children is a way to soothe this anxiety,” he said.

He made these observations apart from the suicides, for which, he emphasized, “There is no single cause.” He recommended lightening children’s schedules, limiting the number of times that they take the SAT, lessening the message that it’s Stanford or bust.

“I will never be neutral on this issue,” he wrote. “The ‘Koala Dad’ is the far better parent than the ‘Tiger Mom.’ ”

What he was saying — and what’s obvious, but warrants repeating — is that ushering children toward a bright future means getting them there in one piece.

There’s a fresh awareness of that here, and perhaps a new receptiveness to some words of his that should echo far beyond Palo Alto: “Want the best for your child, not for your child to be the best.”

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