

# As experts believe as many as 13 young people have now committed suicide in Bridgend, we reveal how panic has taken hold of the town, with families fearful for their own children

by **Rachel Porter** and **Tony Bonnici**

**A** DEATH toll of seven young and seemingly happy people turned the small town of Bridgend in South Wales into Britain's most notorious place this week after a shocking series of events that has seen it dubbed the suicide capital. But as residents there struggled to come to terms with the tragedies, it seems they knew barely half the story.

Glamorgan Valleys coroner Philip Walters has now disclosed that a further six youngsters aged 17 to 27 have taken their own lives within the past year, bringing the total to an unbelievable 13, all found hanged. But unlike the seven suicides that first put an unwelcome spotlight on the town – the last was 17-year-old Natasha Randall, the only girl to have died – the new cases are not thought to have been linked to one another.

One of the men, James Knight, 26, hanged himself from a belt during a heavy drinking session after a painful break-up with his girlfriend. Another, 19-year-old Andrew O'Neill, killed himself after being convicted of drink-driving and assaulting a police officer. A further hanging victim was lorry driver Jason Williams, 21, just weeks before he was due to marry. His heartbroken bride-to-be said at the time that she was mystified as to his motives.

"The situation is very grave," coroner Mr Walters told the Daily Express. "I believe the suicide rate across Wales is some five times higher than it is in England but in Bridgend it's soaring among young people."

"It is very important that we get to grips with the situation. There are 12 young men and one young woman involved and all were found hanged in the area in the past year."

This new figure has triggered a wave of concern among parents and teachers – with one secondary school even setting up its own suicide watch task force after pupils appealed for help. And just how much help is needed has become only too clear in recent days.

Friends of Leah Phillips, 15, who tried to hang herself in a copycat suicide, have appealed to their teachers for help after admitting they too had been feeling suicidal.

Michelle Hatcher, deputy head-teacher of Ynysawdre Comprehensive, said the school "felt the need to act swiftly to prevent further tragedies". She added: "There were 12 pupils who are friends of this girl and they came to us and asked for help."

As officers sought an answer to just why so many young people had taken their own lives in such a short space of time, the online social networking site Bebo appeared to be a link

between all seven of the first victims named by police. But now they and parents believe this extraordinary killing "craze" must have been sparked by something other than just a perverse desire to find posthumous fame on the internet, although they are still no closer to solving this most terrible of riddles.

Melanie Davies, 36, whose 20-year-old son Thomas hanged himself from a tree near her home in Cornelly last February, says she now feels further than ever from finding the truth. On a small table in her living room stands a photo of a happy and handsome young man. The silver frame is inscribed with the words "Happy 21st Birthday" – a milestone he was never to reach.

Like most of the young victims on this grisly roll call, Thomas was an outwardly happy person. He spent a lot of time online, "maybe as much as three hours a day", his mother says. "But he wasn't obsessive about it, like some people are claiming. I think Bebo was just cheaper than sending texts or calling his friends."

Early rumours that he and the others were part of an online "suicide cult" do not ring true for Melanie. "There has been a lot of speculation but I just don't believe it – I can only speak for Thomas but in his case it doesn't make sense. I knew his computer passwords. I know he had nothing to hide."

"Since he died, his brother Nathan has trawled through his messages, online and on his phone; he never wrote a single word about feeling upset, let alone suicidal."

In the months before Thomas's death, his friends Dale Crole and Dai Dillings hanged themselves. Thomas was very shocked but seemed to be coping," adds Melanie. "Like every parent would, when I heard those boys had killed themselves I worried about my own."

"But I never really believed he might do it – he was a happy boy, with a good head on his shoulders. He said, 'Mum, I could never do that to you. No way'."

However, two days before Dai's funeral, Thomas was found hanging by a length of rope from a swing in a nearby park. Melanie says: "The only connection I can see between Thomas and the rest of the victims is that they had everything to live for. Sure, they probably had a few

## 'Hopelessness and failure are a common thread'

problems – Thomas had a criminal record for being drunk and disorderly which sometimes got in the way of him finding a job. But they all had lives to live for. Not one of them left a note. So not one of us parents will ever really know."

Kevin Clarke, the father of 20-year-old Liam who hanged himself in a park on Boxing Day, says it is "mind-boggling" that so many of the town's young people have taken their lives. And with each new death, he says, his family endures the pain of their own loss all over again.

"There was no reason for it. We keep torturing ourselves, running it back in our minds to see if there was any sign, anything at all that we could do. But he was a lad with absolutely everything to live for – we simply can't explain it. Liam was just a typical young man for his age. He had a job at a recycling plant, he had a girlfriend and lots of friends."

"If he wasn't out at her house he was upstairs with his girlfriend Rachel, watching videos together in his room, or he would be with his friends. He was never on the computer for that long, he was very active – so all this stuff about a cult is just nonsense."

**K**EVIN adds: "It doesn't make any sense at all; if we were able to understand why he did it, we might be able to deal with it better – but we can't, we simply can't. And every time we hear of another suicide it just brings everything flooding back to us. We just wish there was something, anything, to explain what is happening."

And he is not alone. Parents in Bridgend are facing the very frightening possibility that there may be no clear answers.

Clare Gardner, a health worker, admits that she and other mothers are gripped by the fear that a suicidal compulsion could strike out of the blue and take one of their children.

"Not knowing why they do it is terrifying. It makes you want to leave, get out quick before it takes one of

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