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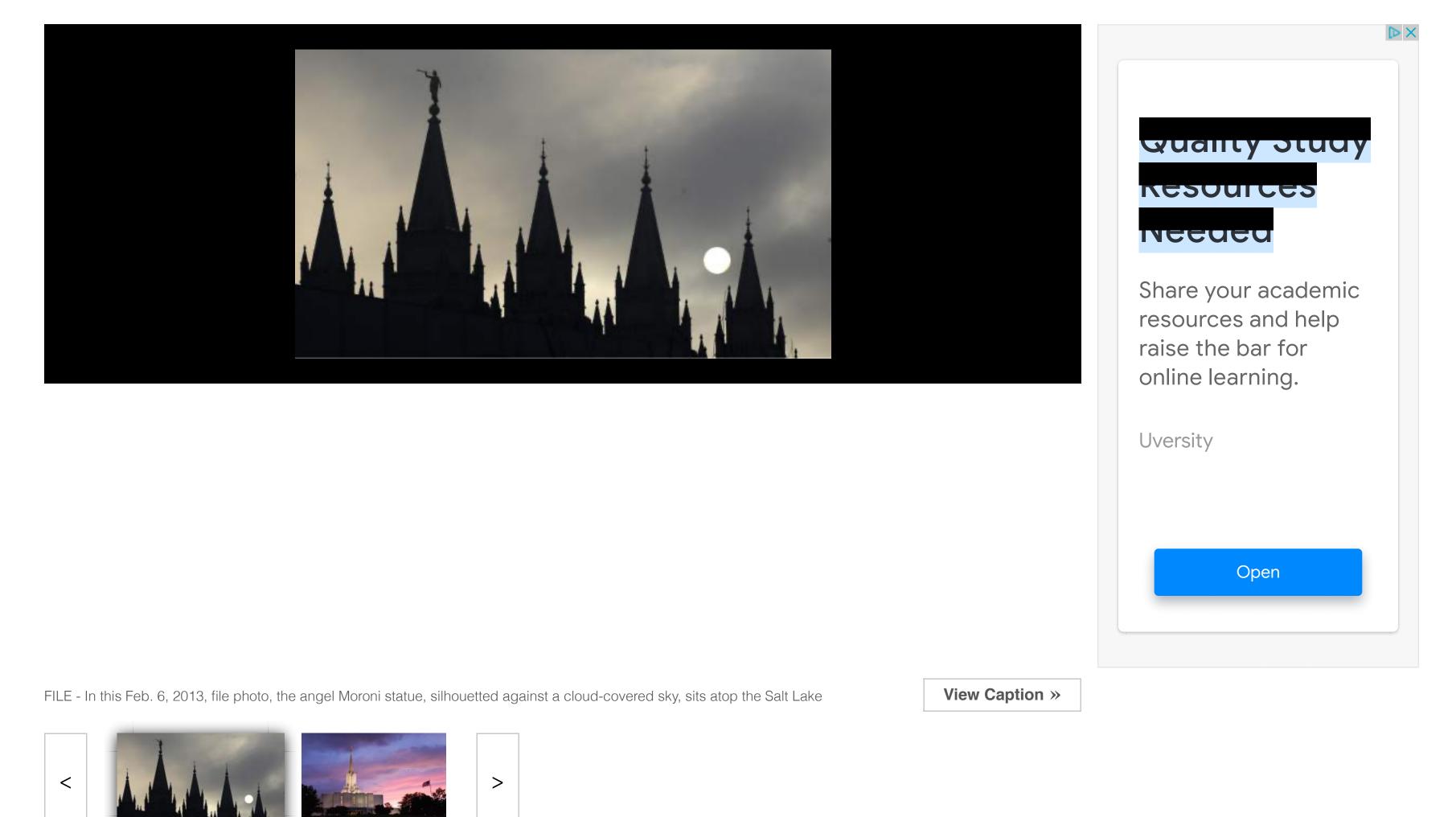
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Suicide fears, if not actual suicides, rise in wake of Mormon same-sex policy

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No stats • It's hard to tie reported deaths to the church policy, but therapists have seen more clients with suicidal thoughts.



By Peggy Fletcher Stack | The Salt Lake Tribune

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The fears were there right from the start — that the LDS Church's new policy on same-sex couples would make gay Mormons feel more judged, more marginalized, more misunderstood and that more of them would take their own lives.

Since early November — when the edict labeling gay LDS couples as "apostates" and denying their children baptism until age 18 took hold — social media sites have been buzzing with tales of loss, depression and death. Therapists have seen an uptick in clients who reported suicidal thoughts. Activists have been bombarded with grief-stricken family members seeking comfort and counsel.

Wendy Williams Montgomery, an Arizona-based Mormon mom with a gay son, says she began receiving email or Facebook messages from bereaved families nearly daily, mourning a loved one's suicide.

From the policy's onset through the end of 2015, Montgomery, a leader of the Mama Dragons support group for the families of gay Latter-day Saints, says she had counted 26 suicides of young LGBT Mormons in Utah — 23 males, one female and two transgender individuals — between ages 14 and 20.

She tallied another six in other states — though none of the reported deaths could be

specifically tied to the policy.

Montgomery's statistics were shared at a recent meeting in Los Angeles of Affirmation, a support group for gay Mormons.

"The number of suicides reported to Wendy Montgomery is shocking," says John Gustav-Wrathall, Affirmation's newly installed president. "I've never seen anything like it in the history of my involvement with the organization."

Trouble is, the number far exceeds the suicide figures collected by the Utah Department of Health.



Preliminary figures for November and December show 10 suicides in the Beehive State for people ages 14 to 20, with two more cases "undetermined."

In fact, the department reports, the overall number of Utah deaths for that age group in those months was 25, including the 10 suicides and two "undetermined" cases, along with 11 in accidents, one by natural causes and one homicide.

"We monitor the numbers [of youth suicides] very closely. We review them every month," says Teresa Brechlin, who works in the department's violence- and injury-prevention program. "If we had seen such a huge spike, we would have been investigating it."

Had there been any mention of the LDS Church's policy on gays, her department "would have noted that," Brechlin adds. "We have not seen that at all."

LDS Church spokesman Dale Jones says any suicide is lamentable.

"Every soul is precious to God and to the church, and the loss of life to suicide is heartbreaking," he says. "Those who are attracted to others of the same sex face particular challenges and pressures in this regard, both inside and outside the church. We mourn with their families and friends when they feel life no longer offers hope."

The state's suicide records are not broken down by religion or sexual orientation. Gay activists argue such a void cries out for more understanding — and a better way to collect data about these deaths.

No matter the exact number, the policy has sent tides of anguish throughout the 15 million-member Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

"It is a community," Gustav-Wrathall says, "in trauma."

Data deficit • The number of Utah's youth suicides likely is higher than the Health Department notes, says former Utah Pride Center Executive Director Marian Edmonds-Allen, "but no one has good data."

When violent deaths occur, investigators could do a quick survey of witnesses or family members to find out about the deceased's sexual orientation, mental health or religious community.

"Is a traffic death or overdose an accident or suicide?" Edmonds-Allen asks. "There's such shame and stigma around suicide and depression in our community."

She works with Kendall Wilcox, a gay Mormon filmmaker and co-founder of the podcast "Out in Zion," and others on the Utah Commission on LGBT Suicide Awareness and Prevention.

The commission is partnering with state and private organizations to produce an annual report with reliable numbers.

"We can't even begin to have real conversations about risk factors and how to mitigate them," Wilcox says, "because nobody agrees on the number."

The group has been "voted onto the Utah Suicide Prevention Coalition, which includes more than 15 organizations around the state," he says. "We are working to get LGBT

questions in the data collection."

Such a system would help launch "constructive dialogue about the mitigating factors," Wilcox says. "In the meantime, people can learn how to responsibly post about suicide prevention and get trained in effective suicide-prevention techniques."

There is a lot of interest and energy around this question at the state level, Edmonds-Allen says. "I am hopeful."

Words matter • Lisa Tensmeyer Hansen, an LDS therapist in Provo, knows of no LGBT suicides that have happened as a result of the church's policy, but she has seen its effect on many gay Mormons, especially those striving to remain in the faith.

Hansen has observed "increased suicidal thoughts, depression and anxiety."

"In my experience with specific cases, I have noticed that the more an LGBTQ person was interested in remaining close to the church or connected with it," she says, "the greater has been the negative emotional process resulting from the policy change."

Hansen says she has seen several cases in which active Mormon clients "felt they had hit a wall they could not negotiate and gave up trying to participate altogether. I am also aware of some who are ... struggling with greater depression and less hope."

Gay Latter-day Saints who had "already removed themselves from the church, either formally or informally, prior to the policy announcement," she says, seemed to experience "less mental distress, generally, as a result of the policy."

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Multiple catalysts • Linking any suicide to a particular cause is difficult.

"Suicide is a tragic and incredibly complicated phenomenon," says Brad Kramer, who just finished teaching a unit on suicide in his Utah Valley University ethics class. "It is clear that suicide incidence can be strongly influenced by how we talk about, describe and report on suicides."

Still, blaming LGBTQ suicides on any single cause, "including widely influential anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and policies," he says, "is probably not helpful."

Such simplistic thinking not only trivializes "the complexity of suicide and feels like weaponizing tragedies in a culture war," Kramer says, "but it's possible that publicly portraying people who die by suicide as martyrs in a righteous fight and escalating that conflict in the process will contribute to, rather than curtail, Mormon LGBTQ suicides."

The UVU scholar isn't trying to sympathize with the church's "homophobic rhetoric and policies," he says. "The new LDS policies are absolutely having a negative and ostracizing impact on LGBTQ Mormons and their families. They embolden anti-gay bullies and deepen social marginalization. They almost certainly contribute [along with a wide range of factors] to LGBTQ suicides and suicide attempts."

Activists, though, "should be very careful in how we discuss their complicity, not just in the spirit of de-escalation," Kramer says, "but because to discuss it irresponsibly could itself contribute to the phenomenon we seek to prevent."

Jones, the LDS Church spokesman, says Mormon congregations are expected "to welcome everyone."

"Leaders and members are taught to follow the example of Jesus Christ and to reach out in an active, caring way to all," he says, "especially to youth who feel estranged or isolated."

The spokesman reiterates that "those who feel same-sex attraction and yet choose to live the commandments of God can live fulfilling lives as worthy members of the church."

Mormon leaders, he says, "want all to enjoy the blessings and safety offered by embracing the teachings of Jesus Christ and living the principles of his gospel."

The LDS Church teaches that same-sex attraction isn't a sin, only acting on it is. Even so, some family members feel neither blessed nor safe in their Mormon congregations.

A Riverton mom whose LDS son recently killed himself was among those who reached out to Montgomery (his death was in January and not included in her count).

The 22-year-old was living with his devout Mormon father after the policy emerged, says the divorced mom, who asked not to be named to protect her family's private grief. "His dad didn't know he was gay, and he [the son] was ashamed. But he was arguing with his dad that what the church was doing was wrong."

It was at his father's house, the mom says, where her son ended his life — and his dad found him.

The church's policy "divides families," she says, "and will ripple through generations."

When Montgomery's own gay son heard about the policy, she says, "I held him for an hour as he sobbed in my lap."

Mormon leaders keep "hammering on marriage being between a man and a woman," she says. "For gays, that's like God is telling you you are not right unless you live in a heterosexual marriage. There is no higher level of rejection than God."

She was overwhelmed, Montgomery says, by all the messages she received, with tales of shame and alienation coming to her from some parents but mostly from siblings, cousins, aunts or uncles.

"I saw my son," she says, "in every one of them."

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Where to get help

National round-the-clock hotline

1-800-273-8255

Talking about suicide and LGBT populations

http://www.lgbtmap.org/file/talking-about-suicide-and-lgbt-populations.pdf

U.S. Department of Health

http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/suicide-prevention/pdf-recommendations-forrporting-on-suicide_136457.pdf

Utah Suicide Prevention Hotline

http://www.suicide.org/hotlines/utah-suicide-hotlines.html

Mormons Building Bridges

http://mormonsbuildingbridges.org/lgbtqissa-health-and-wellness/

Official LDS website for gays and their families

http://mormonsandgays.org/

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