

The Effect of Country Music on Suicide

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Abstract: This article assesses the link between country music and metropolitan suicide rates. Country music is hypothesized to nurture a suicidal mood through its concerns with problems common in the suicidal population, such as marital discord, alcohol abuse, and alienation from work. The results of a multiple regression analysis of 49 metropolitan areas show that the greater the airtime devoted to country music, the greater the white suicide rate. The effect is independent of divorce, southernness, poverty, and gun availability. The existence of a country music subculture is thought to reinforce the link between country music and suicide. Our model explains 51 % of the variance in urban white suicide rates.

Sociological work on the relationship between art and society has been largely restricted to speculative, sociohistorical theories that are often mutually opposed. Some theorists see art as creating social structure (Adorno 1973), while Sorokin (1937) suggests that society and art are manifested in cyclical autonomous

spheres; and still others contend that art is a reflection of social structure (Albrecht 1954). Little empirical work has been done on the impact of music on social problems. While some research has linked music to criminal behavior (Singer, Levine & Jou 1990), the relationship between music and suicide remains largely unexplored. Music is not mentioned in reviews of the literature on suicide (Lester 1983; Stack 1982, 1990b); instead, the impact of art on suicide has been largely restricted to analyses of television movies and soap operas (for a review, see Stack 1990b).

In this article, we explore the link between a particular form of popular music (country music) and metropolitan suicide rates. We contend that the themes found in country music foster a suicidal mood among people already at risk of suicide and that it is thereby associated with a high suicide rate. The effect is buttressed by the country subculture and a link between this subculture and a racial status related to an increased suicide risk¹.

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