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Bullying by the numbers

By JASON BROWN
Sat, Apr 30 - 4:54 AM



I am sitting at my desk, looking at a picture of Jenna Bower-Bryanton of Truro. Beautiful, talented Jenna, who took her own life after being on the receiving end of a lot of bullying.

I'm also cognizant of the fact that the memorial day for the Holocaust is May 2. The holocaust was bullying on an unspeakably enormous scale, and as a mathematician, I can't help but draw a connection.

I previously wrote about mathematical reasoning and morality. Here I want to speak about the numbers behind bullying — the social cost.

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Jews comprise about 0.2 per cent of the world's population. And yet, of 182 Nobel Prizes in physiology and medicine, 49 prizes went to Jewish people. What is the probability of this happening just by chance?

You would expect a group of only 0.2 per cent to win not even one of the 182 awards. I did a calculation. The chance that a random group of 0.2 per cent of the world's population receiving at least 49 out of 182 Nobel prizes in physiology and medicine is the same as the probability that purchasing a single ticket each week for Lotto 649, you win the top prize — every week for close to four years!

The figures are even more staggering if you consider all Nobel Prizes, where from 1901 up to and including 2008, 163 out of 750 were awarded to Jewish people. The chances of something this extreme happening are the same as winning Lotto 649 each week for over 10 years!

Along with the loss of six million Jews in the Holocaust, thousands of creative, brilliant ideas were lost as well. Did you lose someone in the Holocaust? Perhaps you think not. But if you have lost someone to a heart attack, stroke, cancer, diabetes or one of countless other diseases, you likely did.

I say this because the probability of humankind being much further ahead in treating (or even curing) such illnesses would have increased had the Holocaust not occurred. What a huge toll on all of us.

Back to the story of Jenna, which brings to mind Felix Hausdorff. Felix was a world-famous mathematician, discovering many results that had eluded others of his generation. Among many insightful ideas was his notion of dimension of a set that didn't need to be a whole number, like two dimensional or three dimensional. It could be any fraction.

This idea was essential in the development of fractals, which I mentioned in my last article. And fractal dimensions are showing great promise in recognizing pathology in various organs, such as the brain.

Felix was Jewish, and lived in Germany as the Nazis rose to power. His world-renowned

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research was deemed "Jewish" and therefore of "no use," by the German government. Feeling the anti-Semitic persecution intensely, Hausdorff took his own life as his deportation to a concentration camp became imminent.

Bullying, on a grand scale, took a brilliant mind from us. Who knows what ideas were lost along with him? So this brings me around to Jenna again. Whatever great talent she had to give is lost, and that is a loss for all of us.

The world I want has the Jennas and the Felixes reaching their full potential. Bullying costs us all and we need to stand up for the victims.

On May 2, I encourage you to attend a service for Holocaust Memorial Day and recognize what we have all lost through bullying. Recognizing the magnitude of costs to all of us is the first step in changing the world.

Jason I. Brown is a professor of mathematics at Dalhousie University.

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