B. Contagion Effects

Imitative behavior can also occur on a larger scale. Every so often, a school, library, or hotel is evacuated after several of its inhabitants report being ill. The syndrome starts when one person complains of rather vague symptoms, such as dizziness or shortness of breath. Other people soon notice that they are having similar problems, and seek medical attention. When environmental engineers scour the building, they are unable to find any physical cause, and when the victims undergo medical testing, no evidence of any physiological illness is found. What is going on? According to one team of researchers, the victims are suffering from a form of contagion known as mass psychogenic illness. (T. F. Jones et al., 2000). Without knowing it, they have mimicked the symptoms of other people.

Behaviors are also subject to contagion effects. Criminologists have long known that copycat crimes follow in the wake of highly publicized crimes. For example, following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, a young man in Tampa, Florida, commandeered an airplane and flew it into a building. Even fictional crimes have been imitated. After viewing a scene depicted in the Clint Eastwood movie *Magnum Force*, two armed men forced the patrons of a convenience store to drink Drano (Leland, 1995).

Imitation can even produce suicide. Two hundred years ago, the German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote a novel called *The Sorrows of the Young Werther*, a story of a young man who commits suicide. Suicide rates seemed to rise following publication of the book, prompting some social commentators to wonder whether a highly publicized suicide could prompt people to kill themselves through imitation. The issue was debated until sociologist David Phillips undertook a systematic examination of the issue. Using the period from 1946 to 1968 as his sample, Phillips calculated the occurrence of suicides in the months preceding and following the publication of a suicide in two New York City newspapers.

Figure 8.2 shows that suicide rates rose dramatically following the publication of these stories, and remained elevated for one month afterward. Follow-up analyses established that these effects were matched to the geographic area in which the suicide occurred. For example, if a highly publicized suicide occurred in England, suicide

![Figure 8.2](image-url)

**Figure 8.2**

Suicide as Imitation

Suicides increase in the month after a highly publicized suicide, suggesting that they are affected by imitation.