

Backgrounder: World Suicide Prevention Day 2009



Inuit Approaches to Suicide Prevention

Suicide is among the 10 leading causes of death in Canada. According to 2001 figures from Health Canada the suicide rate among Inuit is 135 deaths per 100, 000 people – 11 times higher than the national rate of 12 per 100, 000. And 83 % of suicides among Inuit are committed by people under 30 years of age.

Communities are working with Inuit organizations, governments and non-government organizations in the four Inuit Land Claim Regions, to increase support for coping, promote resiliency and raise awareness so Inuit know where to go for help and how to help when asked. This backgrounder describes some of the activities taking place in Inuit communities, some facts about Inuit in Canada, protective factors and causes of suicide; and provides some information for assistance and funding.

Inuvialuit (Northwest Territories)

- In Aklavik, service providers are preparing a community presentation on Suicide Awareness & Prevention for World Suicide Prevention Day
- The Community Counselling Program will be providing Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (ASIST) in a number of Beaufort Delta communities and;
- In 2008, a group of Tuktoyuktuk youth participated in the course. Two trainers accompanied them on a three-day river trip, incorporating on-the-land experience with the training.

Nunavut

- In 2008, Isaksimagit Inuusirmi Katujjiqatigiit, the Embrace Life Council funded community events on September 10th, which is called “Celebrate Life” Day in Nunavut. In 2008, the Council offered \$300 in support to each community that held an even. The Council partners with Inuit communities, the territorial government and others to develop and coordinate culturally relevant information and training and raise awareness and funding for suicide prevention.
- In 2007, two Cambridge Bay youth leaders, inspired by the Aboriginal Suicide Prevention cross-Canada walk, arranged youth workshops with support from social workers and educators; organized a community walk and created a “comment wall” in the elementary school to allow participants to express their feelings after the walk.

Nunavik (Northern Quebec)

- On July 14, 2009, Saputiit Youth Association took the decision to made youth suicide prevention its number one priority. In addition, the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services (NRBHSS), the Ungava Tulattavik Health Centre, the Inuulitsivik Health Centre, each CLSC point of service and other community stakeholders plan to implement a comprehensive strategy for suicide prevention activities at the local level. They will hold

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periodic meetings involving various partners of an inter-sectoral suicide-prevention committee.

- A volleyball project aimed at achieving participation in the 2010 Québec games has been initiated by CLSC workers in Salluit. The excellent work of Charlie Nowkawalk, Annie Niviaxie, Martha Inukpuk-Iqaluk, Daniellie Qinnuajuaq, Lolly Annahatak and Elsie Simigak should also be recognized. All these individuals are certified or are in the process of becoming certified through Living Works' ASIST Program. These health and social service professionals continuously offer prevention and postvention workshops for members of the population who are suffering from the pain associated with the suicide of a loved one. It is difficult to list all the other related initiatives underway in Nunavik, although it should be stated that the issue of suicide prevention is a high social-policy priority in the region.

Nunatsiavut (Labrador)

- Spiritual drumming groups have been organized in Happy Valley-Goose Bay and Nain. They focus on positive thinking, forgiveness, and healing from the trauma of the residential school experience.

National Inuit or Aboriginal Organizations

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

- Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) is a national Inuit association representing Inuit across Canada. Our Department of Health and Environment works with Inuit organizations, governments and other stakeholders to develop policies, plans and programs for the well-being of Inuit. ITK provides for a Suicide Prevention Coordinator to work with The National Inuit Youth Council (NIYC), along with other staff who work on suicide prevention and mental wellness. The holistic, strength-based Inuit approach to suicide prevention strongly influenced the draft Alianait Action Plan for Inuit mental wellness. ITK is also working to ensure Inuit projects funded under the National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (NAYSPS) are documented and evaluated in a way that is useful to Inuit. On the international scene, ITK sits on all Suicide Prevention Working Groups along with the Inuit Circumpolar Council and NIYC/ICYC.

Pauktuutit Inuit Women of Canada

- Pauktuutit supports the involvement of Inuit women in local, regional and national activities to advocate for social, cultural, political and economic innovation. Through projects which are focused on Inuit specific needs in the areas of abuse prevention, maternal and child health, sexual health and community and healthy living, Pauktuutit contributes to solutions and programs to help build healthy individuals, families and communities. (See www.pauktuutit.ca)

National Inuit Youth Council

- The National Inuit Youth Council has had the opportunity to take part in a project called the Inuusivut project, geared towards teaching young people how to express themselves through multi-media; film making and photography. NIYC believes that programs geared towards building confidence and pride in young Inuit plays an essential role in the mental

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wellness of a person, things like land programs, learning traditional skills, Inuit history, communication tools and of course learning to produce through modern technology.

Inuit Tuttarvingat of the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)

- Inuit Tuttarvingat focuses on Inuit health and wellness and has produced a series of resources on mental health, including: “Suicide Prevention: Inuit Traditional Practices that Encouraged Resilience and Coping”; “Resilience: Overcoming Challenges and Moving on Positively”; “What is Mental Illness?”; and “Ikajurniq: Basic Counseling Skills”. In May 2009, Inuit Tuttarvingat broadcast a live phone-in TV show in Canada, Alaska and on the Internet about Inuit youth resilience and coping skills. The show, called “Makkuktuvunga, upimmavunga – I am young, and I am proud” can be viewed online at www.inuitwellness.ca.

The National Aboriginal Role Model Program (NARMP) at the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)

- The NARMP celebrates the accomplishments of Inuit, First Nations, and Métis youth aged 13 to 30. “Lead Your Way!” inspires Aboriginal youth to strive to reach their goals. One of the program’s objectives is to promote a healthy lifestyle and build self-esteem. Throughout the year, role models visit communities to share their stories with other Aboriginal youth. Invite a role model to your conference, workshop or event. For more information check out: www.naho.ca/rolemodel

The Honouring Life Network of the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO)

- Funded by Health Canada the HLN is an interactive web site offering culturally relevant suicide prevention information and resources to help First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities deal with the high number of youth suicides occurring in some of these populations.
- In addition to providing a place for youth to read about others dealing with similar issues, the site allows those working with First Nations, Inuit and Métis youth to connect, discuss and share suicide prevention resources and strategies. The site’s directory of suicide prevention resources is updated on a regular basis to provide First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities with a comprehensive inventory of suicide prevention materials.
- This year, the HLN is excited to announce an online video contest that will highlight personal stories and/or creative expressions surrounding the issue of youth suicide prevention in First Nations, Inuit and Métis communities. The contest will be launched online on World Suicide Prevention Day, September 10, 2009. Youth workers are encouraged to work with youth in their communities between the ages of 17-30 to submit a short video to the HLN YouTube Channel. The videos will then be judged by the HLN Youth Advisory Committee, and the winner of the contest will receive a trip to Ottawa for NAHO’s annual conference in November 2009.

The main goals of this video contest are to:

- Share culturally appropriate information about Aboriginal youth suicide prevention projects and programs.
- Build awareness and understanding of youth suicide by showcasing individual and community perspectives.

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- Allow various audiences, particularly Aboriginal youth and youth workers, to gain insight into the types of activities, initiatives, thoughts, plans, et cetera on suicide prevention and mental wellness.

For more information on the HLN and the video contest, please visit: www.honouringlife.ca

Inuit in Canada

There are approximately 55,000 Inuit living in Canada, according to recent estimates from Statistics Canada. The majority of Inuit (over 80%) live in 53 communities spread across two provinces and two territories. Over 90% of these communities are accessible by air only. Inuit communities are located in four Land Claim Regions:

- Nunatsiavut (Labrador)
- Nunavik (Northern Quebec)
- Nunavut Territory
- Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Northwest Territories)
- Inuit also live in southern Canada.

The Inuit population is the youngest in Canada, with 39% under the age of 15 (compared with 19% in the general Canadian population). Not only is the Inuit population very young, it is growing fast with a 12.1% increase from 1996-2001, compared with a 3.9% in Canada as a whole over the same period.¹ The youth and the growth rate of the population impact on health issues, capacity and needs of Inuit when compared to other Aboriginal groups and the rest of Canada.

22% of Inuit live in urban settings as in Yellowknife, Edmonton, Winnipeg, Ottawa, Montreal, St. John's and in more rural, remote southern settings.

Suicide in Inuit communities²

According to 2001 Census data, the national Inuit suicide rate is 135 per 100,000 population, or more than 11 times higher than the overall Canadian rate of 12 per 100,000 population. It is not possible to cite a national suicide rate for Inuit as provincial death certificates do not identify ethnicity. Health Canada estimates the following suicide rates for Inuit regions from 1999 to 2003:

- Nunavik – 181 per 100,000
- Nunatsiavut – 239 per 100,000
- Nunavut – 120 per 100,000
- Inuvialuit – 61 per 100,000

85% of Nunavut suicides are males, the majority in the 15-24 age range. In one Nunavut region, from 1999 to 2003, young Inuit men between the ages of 14 and 24 committed suicide at an annual average rate of 280 per 100,000.³ These tragically high figures appear to be on the increase, and the average age is dropping. The number of suicide deaths in Nunavut and Nunavik has more than doubled in the past decade.⁴

While the suicide rate for Inuit women is lower than for Inuit men, it is far above the 2001 Canadian average of 4.9 per 100,000. The rate for Inuit women in Nunavut in 2001 was 24.6 per 100,000 and in Nunavik, 52.4 per 100,000⁵.

¹ 2001 Census data, StatsCan

² In Nunavik, from 1973 to 2004, there were a total of 188 deaths by suicide, according to statistics from the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services.

In the Nunatsiavut region of Labrador, there have been 55 suicides between 1993 and 2005, according to the Nunatsiavut Department of Health and Social Development.

In Nunavut, from April 1, 1999 to August 29, 2005, there were a total of 177 suicides, according to statistics from the Office of the Chief Coroner, Nunavut.

³ Hicks, J. "Nunavut Kiglisinaiqtiit; Evaluation and Statistics; Presentation to the Founding Conference of the Nunavut Suicide Prevention Council" Iqaluit, 2004

⁴ Office of the Chief Coroner, Nunavut; Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services

⁵ Hicks, J. 2004

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Protective Factors

Inuit Tuttarvingat's 2006 report on suicide prevention drew on the traditional knowledge of Elders in each of the four Inuit regions. Inuit elders believe the coping and resilience skills and values they used in the past are just as necessary in today's world. These values include patience; perseverance; love and caring; communication; awareness of self and others; confidentiality and respect for others; and personal responsibility to youth. They identified certain coping skills as especially important in Inuit culture:

- Paying attention to each other's needs
- Focusing on helping others as a way of promoting connection and a sense of usefulness
- Doing something productive, active and healthy
- Talking things out
- Solving conflicts with others
- Accepting that life is not always easy but that tomorrow can be better

Another study underway is *Qaujivallianiq inuusirijauvalauqtunik*, an Inuit-specific, comprehensive, territory-wide follow-back study to collect and analyze 300 Inuit life stories, including 100 people who have never attempted suicide, 100 who have, and 100 who completed suicide. The purpose is to better identify risk factors and assist in developing more effective prevention approaches. The study was designed by a reference group, including the Embrace Life Council, RCMP, Nunavut Tunngavik Incorporated (the Nunavut Inuit Land Claim organization), the National Inuit Youth Council, the Government of Nunavut and the clergy, with the McGill Group for Suicide Studies.

Causes of Inuit suicide

Some common factors exist in Aboriginal suicides⁶; however, some factors are specific to Inuit:

- Lack of coping skills (relationship break-ups frequently trigger suicides by Inuit youth);
- Barriers or lack of access to mental health treatment;
- Loss of control over land and living conditions;
- Socio-economic factors in the community⁷ (non-medical determinants) including:
 - high poverty rates; in 2001, the average personal income among Inuit was only 66% of the average Canadian's personal income, although food may cost from 2 to 3 times more than in Southern Canada
 - housing problems: in 2001, 20% of Inuit households were crowded, compared to less than 2% of non-Aboriginal Canadians
 - low levels of education and literacy; only half of Inuit have completed high school
 - lack of employment: in 2006 only 37% of Inuit were satisfied with job opportunities in their communities; in 2001, unemployment rates for Inuit men were nearly 30% higher than for other Canadian men
 - Inadequate sanitation and water quality; in one region, over 40% of Inuit consider their drinking water unsafe year-round
- Intergenerational trauma resulting from historical events, for example:
 - forced relocations to permanent settlements which ended nomadic life and in some cases, separated extended families completely
 - sled-dog slaughters impaired Inuit hunters' abilities to provide for their families and obliged them to remain in settlements

⁶ As cited in: "Suicide Prevention: Inuit Traditional Practices that Encouraged Resilience and Coping", *Ajunnginiq Centre, National Aboriginal Health Organization Report September 2006*: Kral, M. "Unikkaatuit: Meanings of Well-Being, Sadness, Suicide and Change in Two Inuit Communities." Report to Health Canada, February 2003; White, J. and Jodoin, N. "Aboriginal Youth: A Manual of Promising Suicide Prevention Strategies." Calgary: Centre for Suicide Prevention 2004; and Chenier, N.M. "Suicide Among Aboriginal people: Royal Commission Report." Ottawa: Library of Parliament Parliamentary Research Branch, February, 1995

⁷ Statistics Canada, March 2006. Harvesting and community well-being among Inuit in the Canadian Arctic: Preliminary findings from the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey – Survey of Living conditions in the Arctic

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- enforced boarding school attendance or lengthy treatment for tuberculosis or other illnesses in hospitals in southern Canada, caused damage to family relationships through separation and language loss
- Loss and/or changes to values, beliefs and lifestyle from various causes; for example, climate change leaves Inuit hunters unable to trust their traditional methods of predicting weather and animal migration patterns;
- Individual history (e.g. experiencing traumatic events such as the early loss of a parent; sexual abuse; experiencing or witnessing violence, etc.);
- Alcohol is frequently cited as a major factor in Aboriginal suicides. However, the Nunavut coroner's report for 1999-2003 and the coroner's data cited in the Health Canada Northwest Territories study for 1994-1996 both report that in the approximately 80 per cent of suicide deaths in which toxicology testing was possible, alcohol was not a factor in approximately 70 per cent of cases;
- Family or caretaker history of suicide, or suicide "clusters", where a number of suicides occur over a short time period.

Some Sources of Help in Inuit Regions

Nunatsiavut (Labrador)

- Nain Help Line
Phone: (709) 922-2277

Nunavik (Northern Quebec)

- Nunavut Kamatsiaqtut Help Line, operated out of Nunavut, also takes calls from people living in Nunavik.
Phone: (867) 979-3333, or toll-free 1-800-265-3333.
Every night, 7:00 p.m. to midnight.

Nunavut

- Nunavut Kamatsiaqtut Help Line
Phone: (867) 979-3333, or toll-free 1-800-265-3333.
Every night, 7 p.m. to midnight.
- Keewatin Crisis Line
Phone: (867) 645-3333, Monday to Friday 7 p.m. - 10 p.m.
- Kugluktuk Awareness Centre
Phone: (867) 982-4673
- Kid's Help Phone
Phone: 1-800-668-6868

Inuvialuit (Northwest Territories)

- Inuvik Suicide Crisis Line
Phone: (867) 777-1234. Monday to Friday, 5 p.m. - 8:30 a.m.
- Helpline Western Arctic
Phone: 1-800-661-0844, 7 p.m. - 11 p.m.

To access **National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy** funding, contact a Suicide Prevention Regional Coordinator, in the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch of Health Canada:

In the Inuvialuit Region, contact Patty Zeman. Tel: (613) 948-4652

In the Nunavut Region, contact Maureen Connors. Tel (613) 946-6832 fax (613) 946-1823

In Nunavik, contact France Racette, Regional Coordinator, Community Based Programs.
Tel (514) 283-1559 fax (514) 283-8067

In Nunatsiavut, contact Kevin Ryan, Atlantic Regional Coordinator.
Tel (902) 426-2135 fax (902) 426-8675