

Backgrounder: World Suicide Prevention Day 2007



Inuit Approaches to Suicide Prevention

Suicide is among the 10 leading causes of death in Canada. Inuit suicide rates are more than 11 times higher than the Canadian rate, according to Health Canada. And 83% of these are 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 supports 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 these activities taking place in Inuit communities; some facts about Inuit in Canada; Inuit suicide rates, protective factors and causes of suicide; and provides some information for assistance and funding.

Inuvialuit (Northwest Territories)

- Since 2005, the Inuvialuit Regional Corporation has sponsored the international “Yellow Ribbon” campaign in Tuktoyaktuk, which shows young people that it’s OK to ask for help. Youth who are feeling troubled can hand a special card to a trusted adult (a parent, teacher, etc.), which instructs the adult to stay with the young person until they are safe. Plans to sponsor the campaign in more communities are underway.

Nunavut

- Isaksimagit Inuusirmi Katujjiqatigiit, the Embrace Life Council, funds community events on September 10th, which is called “Celebrate Life” day in Nunavut. The Council partners with Inuit communities, territorial government and others to develop and coordinate culturally relevant information, training and raise awareness and funding for suicide prevention.
- In Cambridge Bay last year, two 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)

- The Nunalituqait Ikajuqatigiit program is celebrating its 20th year, offering workshops on trauma, addiction and suicide for leaders and frontline workers in Nunavik communities.
- The Saputit Youth Association organized a project for the past three summers, where a group of Inuit youth traveled by *qajaaq* (kayak) around the coast of Nunavik, bringing a message of “Living Life”. Now in its final year, this project, funded by the province and regional Inuit organizations, is featured in the spring 2007 issue of *Inuktitut* magazine.

Backgrounder: World Suicide Prevention Day 2007

Nunatsiavut (Labrador)

- In June 2007, a second “Honoring Abstinence” retreat was held at Gosling Lake. The link between suicide prevention and abstinence was recognized by participants. As a result, they created spiritual drumming groups in Happy Valley-Goose Bay and Nain. The groups focus on positive thinking, forgiveness, and healing from residential schools.
- In Nain, the community created a “Memory Wall” of photos of loved ones who have died from suicide, accident, illness or natural causes. The project provided support for people to remember and grieve.

National Inuit or Aboriginal Organizations

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami is a national Inuit association representing Inuit in Canada. The 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. One outcome of such partnerships is a draft 10 year plan for Inuit mental wellness, which includes suicide prevention. ITK also funds the National Inuit Youth Council’s (NIYC) suicide prevention coordinator, and along with the Inuit Circumpolar Council and NIYC, represents Inuit on an international “Suicide Prevention Working Group”. ITK’s website, www.itk.ca, contains links to these, and other related organizations.

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 improvements. Pauktuutit has been a national organization since 1984. Their *National Strategy to Prevent Abuse in Inuit Communities* is now being implemented. One initiative under the National Strategy, *Supporting Communities to Achieve Wellness* aims to lower tolerance for, and incidents of abuse; promote healthier relationships; gather knowledge about promising practices; and develop four healing models by Inuit, for Inuit. These will address: family counselling on the land; couple counselling; a Community Healing Circle; and the Somebody’s Daughter program will teach traditional skills and offer healing on the land. To learn more, visit www.pauktuutit.ca

National Inuit Youth Council

NIYC is a volunteer organization that advances the interests of Inuit youth (under age 30) in Canada. NIYC recently partnered with regional Inuit organizations and Health Canada in an Inuit-specific strategy, *Inuusiqatsiarniq*, within the National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy (NAYSPS). One of the features of *Inuusiqatsiarniq* is the development of Youth Media Teams, which build skills and encourage self-expression. NAYSPS continues until 2011, and can be accessed by Inuit communities through First Nations and Inuit Health Branch Regional offices. Contacts are provided on the final page of this document. To learn more, visit www.niyc.ca

The Ajunnginiq Centre at the National Aboriginal Health Organization

The Ajunnginiq Centre focuses on Inuit health and wellness. The Centre will be holding a workshop at the Canadian Association of Suicide Prevention conference in October to gather Inuit youth’s thoughts on coping and to get their perspective on the Centre’s report, *Suicide Prevention: Inuit Traditional Practices that Encouraged Resilience and Coping*. www.naho.ca/inuit
The National Aboriginal Role Model Program (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 self-esteem among Inuit, First Nations, and Métis. 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: www.naho.ca/rolemodel.

Backgrounder: World Suicide Prevention Day 2007

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; in Canada, 19% are under age 15. Not only is the Inuit population very young, it is growing a rate of 12.1% in the years 1996-2001, compared to the rate of 3.9% for the entire population of Canada.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.

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.

Protective Factors

The NAHO Ajunnginiq Centre'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, including 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:

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

Backgrounder: World Suicide Prevention Day 2007

- 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, and
- 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 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 Inuit income 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 ½ 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 which impaired Inuit hunters' abilities to provide for their families and obliged them to remain in settlements
 - enforced boarding school attendance or lengthy treatment for tuberculosis or other illnesses in hospitals in southern Canada, which 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.);

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

Backgrounder: World Suicide Prevention Day 2007

- 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 NORTHERN SECRETARIAT
Patty Zeman –NWT, including the Inuvialuit Settlement Region
Tel: (613) 948-4652

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

In Nunavik, contact FNIHB QUÉBEC REGION
France Racette, Regional Coordinator, Community Based Programs
Tel: (514) 283-1559 Fax: (514) 283-8067

In Nunatsiavut, contact FNIHB ATLANTIC REGION
Kevin Ryan, Atlantic Regional Coordinator
Tel: (902) 426-2135 Fax: (902) 426-8675