

Government Inaction Contributing to High Inuit Suicide Rates in Canadian Arctic? Am Johal, 2008-01-07

When the spotlight hits Canada for the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, the event will be promoted with a traditional Inuit 'inukshuk' – the official logo for the 2010 Olympic Games. Deeply embedded in Inuit culture, an inukshuk is a structure made with stones which serves as a directional landmark on the frozen Arctic tundra and symbolizes safety, hope and friendship.

But most Canadians and the international community are unaware that suicide rates for Inuit are 11 times higher than the Canadian average. In some specific areas in the Eastern Arctic, the suicide rate is even higher. Despite these alarming numbers, no public health emergency or advisory has been declared by territorial or federal government health departments.

Critics argue that the Nunavut government and most other people capable of dealing with this problem continue to look at suicide as a result of "cultural change" while ignoring depression, alcoholism and historical trauma in Nunavut's communities. However, most agree that many of these issues are inherently connected.

Many Inuit were forcibly relocated from 1939-1963 to colonial settlements by the federal government for the purposes of assimilation as part of land use policies. The legacy of these failed policies continue to be a contributing factor in current social issues which exist in the region according to researchers.

Jack Hicks, a long time Arctic resident, is researching a Ph.D. dissertation on the social determinants of elevated rates of suicide among Inuit youth. "In recent years the overall rate of suicide among Inuit in Nunavut has been 11 times that of Canadians as a whole. Our suicide rate varies widely by age, sex and region. There are very few suicides by Inuit elders, for example, but for Inuit men in Nunavut between the ages of 15 and 24 the suicide rate is over 60 times that of their peers in southern Canada. And Nunavut's rates aren't the highest. For the period 1999 to 2003 the suicide rate among Labrador Inuit was twice that of Inuit in Nunavut and the rate among Inuit in Nunavik was 50 percent higher than in Nunavut, which the rate among the Inuvialuit of the Western Arctic was substantially lower. When you're studying small populations it's best to use five-year averages to smooth out the ups and downs of individual years. The situation is tragic, and there's no need to exaggerate. The accurate statistics speak for themselves," Hicks told IPS in an interview.

"Suicide rates across the Inuit world were very low as recently as the 1950s and 1960s. Coronial records suggest that there was just one suicide in the area now known as Nunavut during the entire 1960s. But what has been described as a 'suicide transition' occurred first in Alaska, then in Greenland, and later in the Canadian Arctic. This was the same sequence in which the different national governments had implemented policies such as moving people into settlements, policies which had huge impacts on Inuit lifeways. A few decades later suicides began to occur more frequently—not

among the Inuit who were moved into communities so much as among their children. I believe that understanding that history can help us understand the social determinants of suicidal behaviour. In addition to poverty and low standards of living, there is a lot of unresolved historical trauma in the communities."

Hicks added, "The suicide rate among Inuit boys and men has increased far, far more than it has among Inuit girls and women. The role of being an Inuit man has suffered greater shocks from the social and economic transitions of recent decades than has been the case for Inuit women. As one Inuit leader said recently, "Government took over parts of the roles of men." Teenaged boys today are less likely to succeed in school and more likely to have substance abuse problems than teenaged girls are. Lots of people in Nunavut are making the link between what has happened in the past and what is happening today, and are exploring what the connections and pathways might be."

Prior to the intervention of government authorities, there is little evidence of a culture of suicide amongst the Inuit. "Inuit society was all about survival under incredibly harsh conditions. Coping skills were taught to kids in all manner of ways. Doctors and social workers today talk about the extreme impulsivity they see in many young people, overreactions to life stressors—like a relationship break-up—that a more resilient person would be able to handle. When I hear Inuit elders talking about the need to strengthen the coping skills of young people I think they're addressing the same thing."

"I think the society here is in something of a state of shock. Friends of mine who attended residential school in Churchill, Manitoba in the 1960s tell me that they can't recall ever having had a conversation there about suicide in their home communities. Today a young person who graduated from high school is likely to attend one or more funerals of classmates, friends and relatives who have taken their lives. All the pain of recent decades has a cumulative numbing effect."

"Canadians should be appalled at what is happening here, and at how little is being done to try and address the problem. As a young Greenlandic woman told a United Nations forum, "If the populations of 'mainland' Canada, Denmark and the United States had suicide rates comparable to those of their Inuit populations, national emergencies would be declared." It's easy to look back a few decades and suggest that government didn't understand the mental health implications of some of their policies. But what will future generations think of how the federal and territorial governments addressed a terrible need for services and resources in the 1990s, this decade and the next? I think their judgments will be 'indifference' and 'neglect'. 'You couldn't have prevented all those suicides, but you could have prevented many of them. You could have done much more. And you didn't.'"

Hicks is part of a team, organized through the McGill Group for Suicide Studies in partnership with Nunavut organizations with funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, that is conducting a suicide follow-back study. The detailed 5 year

follow-back study in the Eastern Arctic will examine past suicides in the region and specific details related to them. The study began in 2005.

"Research specific to the most at-risk groups has played a key role in strengthening suicide prevention in other parts of the world," Hicks said. "We very much hope that this will be the case in Nunavut as well. Whether governments will be willing to act on the recommendations remains to be seen."

Though broader Canadian suicide rates have decreased over the last twenty years, aboriginal suicide rates have continued to increase over the same period.

In a 2007 report for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation titled *Suicide Among Aboriginal People in Canada*, Laurence Kirmayer and other researchers wrote, "In general, risk factors for suicide among Aboriginal youth are similar to those for suicide in the general population of young people. These factors include: depression, hopelessness, low self-esteem or negative self-concept, substance use (especially alcohol), suicide of a family member or a friend, history of physical or sexual abuse, family violence, unsupportive and neglectful parents, poor peer relationships or social isolation, and poor performance in school. Two overlapping patterns of vulnerability to suicide can be identified in the existing literature: (1) severe depression is a key contributor to many suicides; and (2) life crises, substance abuse, and personality traits of aggressive impulsivity may play an important role in many suicides, especially among youth."

In an interview with IPS, Dr. Laurence Kirmayer said, "What's happening in the Eastern Arctic, small scale indigenous societies have been enveloped and transformed by colonizing powers. It is not a unique phenomenon. The suicide problem is a barometer of other social problems in the community. There are a lot of questions about what best is going on and what weight to give to causal factors. There is very rapid social change which occurred where people don't have a say over their life and discontinuity over choices in their life."

Kirmayer added that there have been similar factors with indigenous populations in Alaska and Greenland. "They are historically linked to social change of outside forces making change. Meaning, sense of individual and collective worth is undermined, it is perhaps not surprising, what we were struck by is that we found a much different situation between men and women. There is much more continuity in social role for women traditionally in taking care of children. Those are still functions that Inuit women perform. For men, food and material resources which is an activity that is not as central for people, as accessing them has become more complicated as it is now connected to a cash economy. That change, when it happens rapidly, when people don't have a say over it, it is a risky proposition. People feel like refugees in their own land. People try to regain the material circumstances of their lives. From the residential school system and other assimilationist policies, this discontinuity is problematic. This has happened in Micronesia and many other places where these phenomenon occur," he said.

Kirmayer also said that many Inuit communities have suicide rates that are no different than the national averages and that interventions and social cohesion can occur and the issue should not be sensationalized.

Dr. Frank Tester, a UBC Social Work Professor and author of *Taamarniit (Mistakes): Inuit Relocation in the Eastern Arctic, 1939-1963* told IPS in an interview, “Understanding the causes of suicide in the Eastern Arctic isn’t rocket science. This goes back to Emile Durkheim and many others who looked in depth at the causes of why people take their own life. This issue, quite frankly, has been studied to death. Culture is sacred and it gives meaning to life. It contributes to physical, mental and spiritual well-being. When you alter that, it affects people, especially young people who are dislocated from previous generations of their family and cultural life. We know the factors contributing to young Inuit suicide. What we need are well-designed programmes and the resources necessary to do something about the problem. It doesn’t take much to figure out that hopelessness is related to high unemployment rates, a sense of personal failure, high expectations that can’t always be met and depression. It’s time to do something. The problem has been studied long enough.”

Lori Idlout, Executive Director of the Embrace Life Council in the self-governing Inuit region of Nunavut in the Canadian Eastern Arctic told the Nunatsiaq News in 2005, “The Nunavut communities need to realize that they were once self-reliant and independent people, that they didn’t always depend on government services or other organizations to take care of themselves.”

IPS was unable to make contact with the Nunavut government’s health services ministry.