



CULTURAL CONNECTION MAY REDUCE FIRST NATIONS YOUTH SUICIDE RATE

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INCREASING cultural connection and reducing discrimination could reduce the number of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who die by suicide, according to research published today by the *Medical Journal of Australia*.

"Four times as many First Nations people under 18 years of age die by suicide as other young Australians, and over 7 times as many First Nations children under 15," wrote the authors of the study, led by Ms Mandy Gibson, a Senior Research Assistant with the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention at Griffith University.

"Further, First Peoples experience poorer outcomes in domains such as mental health, infant mortality, life expectancy, income, employment, and education because of continued injustice caused by colonisation, including the forced removal of communities from traditional homelands and of children from their families, genocide, dispossession, discrimination and exclusion."

The "cultural continuity" model proposes that community level cultural factors protect against youth suicide among First Nations peoples. Indicators of cultural continuity include self-governance, cultural facilities, indigenous language use, sovereign lands, and community control of health care, education, family, and police services. Research done in Canada found that those indicators were associated with lower suicide rates in First Nations communities.

Gibson and colleagues analysed retrospective mortality data for suicide deaths of people aged between 10 and 19 years recorded by the Queensland Suicide Register during 2001-2015. The authors used the cultural connectedness indicators of cultural social capital (participation of community members in cultural events, ceremonies, organisations, and community activities), Indigenous language use, and reported discrimination as a risk factor.

"The age-specific suicide rate was 21.1 deaths per 100 000 persons/year for First Nations young people and 5.0 deaths per 100 000 persons/year for non-Indigenous young people," they wrote.

"The rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people was higher in areas with low levels of cultural social capital than in areas classified as having high levels, and also in communities with high levels of reported discrimination.

"Specifically, the age-adjusted suicide rate was 80% higher in areas classified as having lower levels of cultural social capital; alternatively, it was 44% lower in communities with high cultural social capital.

"The rate was over 2.5 times higher in communities with higher levels of reported discrimination.

"Associations with proportions of Indigenous language speakers and area level socio-economic resource levels were not statistically significant."

Gibson and colleagues concluded that:

"These findings confirm the need for multifaceted approaches to suicide prevention in First Nations communities, including strategies to reduce systemic disadvantage, such as limited access to services, and incorporating features that recognise Indigenous-specific risk and protective mechanisms.

"Our results support trialling strategies that reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander youth suicide by increasing cultural connections and engagement, and reducing institutional and personal discrimination."

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