



World Suicide Prevention Day, September 10, 2005 Inuit Backgrounder

Suicide is one of the 10 leading causes of death in Canada. However, Inuit experience suicide at rates much greater than the rest of Canada. In fact, according to the Canadian Psychiatric Association, some Inuit regions experience suicide rates up to six times higher than the rest of Canada.

In response to this fact, Inuit leaders from across Canada have united to communicate a message of hope to Inuit living in Canada. They are also congratulating the many Inuit community members and groups who have established suicide prevention programs and initiatives as a way to address the problem of suicide.

World Suicide Prevention Day

The first World Suicide Prevention Day was on September 10, 2003. The International Association for Suicide Prevention (IASP), in conjunction with the World Health Organization (WHO), has designated this day as a way of focusing attention on the problem of suicide worldwide.

Many nations have adopted national suicide prevention strategies based on the recommendations of the World Health Organization. Canada, to date, has not developed such a strategy.

Inuit in Canada

There are approximately 45,070 Inuit living in Canada, according to the 2001 Census conducted by Statistics Canada. The majority of Inuit live in 53 communities spread across two provinces and two territories. Over 90 per cent of these communities are accessible by air only. Inuit communities are located in four regions:

- Nunatsiavut (Labrador)
- Nunavik (Northern Quebec)
- Nunavut Territory
- Inuvialuit (Northwest Territories)

The Inuit context

The Inuit population is the youngest in Canada, with 39 per cent under the age of 14. The Inuit birth rate is twice as high as the Canadian birth rate.¹ The fact that the population is so young has an impact on the health issues, capacity and needs of Inuit when compared to other Aboriginal groups.

Although Inuit had contact with Europeans several hundred years ago, imposition of Western culture did not occur until, in many cases, as late as the mid-twentieth century. For this reason, Inuit do not have, at this time, the same human resource and infrastructure capacity as many other Aboriginal groups in Canada.

Inuit have a strong and unique cultural identity. Inuit values and practices are significantly different from other Aboriginal Peoples in Canada. For example, 70 per cent of Inuit can carry on a conversation in Inuktitut.² In the eastern Arctic, Inuktitut is the language people read, speak and use on a daily basis. Inuktitut is one of only three Aboriginal languages in Canada expected to survive.

The political situation for Inuit is markedly different from that of other Aboriginal Peoples. Inuit live in four land claim regions with fractured jurisdictional responsibilities split between various territorial, provincial and federal governments.

Suicide in Inuit communities³

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami's "Suicide Prevention in Inuit Communities," issued in 2002, shows the following suicide rates:

Canada – 13 per 100,000 population

- Nunavik – 82 per 100,000 population
- Nunatsiavut – 80 per 100,000 population
- Nunavut – 77 per 100,000 population
- Inuvialuit – 18 per 100,000 population

¹ 2001 Census data.

² 2001 Census data.

³ 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 in the past 12 years, and this year there have been six suicides, according to an Aug. 8, 2005 press release from the Labrador Inuit Association.

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.

These tragically high rates appear to be on the increase. The number of suicide deaths in Nunavut and Nunavik have more than doubled in the past decade.⁴

Causes of suicide

Numerous studies have been undertaken regarding causes of and possible solutions for suicide among Aboriginal Peoples (this includes First Nations, Inuit and Métis). A quick review of literature shows a number of general factors that are said to be significant in Aboriginal suicides:

- Loss of and/or changes in language and culture;
- Socioeconomic factors such as high poverty rates, low levels of education, limited employment opportunities, and inadequate living conditions;
- Historical disruptions of family life as a result of enforced boarding school attendance, adoption, and long-distance hospitalization;
- Lack of coping skills in personal crises (break-up of a relationship is a frequent trigger for youth);
- Use of alcohol and drugs, including brain damage as a result of solvent use (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);
- Individual history.

What is being done:

National Initiatives

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami is the national Inuit association representing all Inuit in Canada. ITK is partnering with the NIYC and regional Inuit organizations in the development of a National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy and the Inuit-specific, *Inuusiqatsiarniq* Strategy. The ITK Health Department has a part-time policy coordinator working on suicide prevention and provides support to the NIYC for a joint full-time suicide prevention coordinator. ITK, along with the Inuit Circumpolar Youth Council and the National Inuit Youth Council, represent Inuit on the international "Suicide Prevention Working Group".

The Ajunnginiq Centre

The Ajunnginiq Centre, an Inuit-specific centre at the National Aboriginal Health Organization, focuses on Inuit health and wellness. Its current project on suicide prevention, named *Inuusiqatsiarniq*, aims to understand why there were few

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

suicides in Inuit communities before the 1970s. Through focus groups in the four Inuit regions, the Ajunnginiq Centre gathered information from elders on how they used to cope with and overcome hardships. Results of the *Inuusiqatsiarniq* Project will be published in Fall 2005.

National Inuit Youth Council

The National Inuit Youth Council held a Celebrate Life workshop at the 2005 National Inuit Youth Summit in Nain, Labrador. That workshop, as well as the "Youth Empowerment" workshop, produced results immediately. Three youth from Arviat, Nunavut, were motivated to take action in their community, and made plans for an "Embrace Life Committee" for the youth of Arviat and their family and friends.

The NIYC produced a day planner titled the *Life Book*. The *Life Book* is a compilation of writings, pictures and artwork from Inuit youth. The book also includes famous quotes and stories to motivate youth.

The NIYC supported the work of individuals who took it upon themselves to encourage youth to choose life. The NIYC was honoured to share the stories and pictures of the "Live Life" kayakers in Nunavik, and participants in the 2005 National Aboriginal Youth Suicide Prevention Walk. The achievements of the walkers, Nancy Saunders and Charlotte Qamaniq-Mason, have had a ripple effect in the Inuit community, inspiring youth to hold camps and walks in their home communities.

Regional Initiatives

Nunatsiavut (Labrador)

- In August 2005, the Labrador Inuit Association created a new position, a Community Healing Coordinator, to pull together all the agencies and service groups who are working on various ways to resolve the continued problem of suicides in Nunatsiavut.
- Two young people in Nain held a community walk in August 2005 to raise awareness of the high suicide rates among Inuit youth.

Nunavik (Northern Quebec)

- In July and August 2005 a group of Inuit traveled by *qajaq* (kayak) around the coast of Nunavik, bringing a message of "Live Life" to communities along their route. The trip, organized by the Saputiit Youth Association, will see Inuit paddle to more Nunavik communities in the summers of 2006 and 2007.

Nunavut

- The Embrace Life Council provides training to volunteers, educates the public on suicide issues and raises funds to promote suicide prevention. The Arviat Embrace Life Committee held a “Rekindling Hope Camp” in June 2005, teaching 17 youth about coping strategies, suicide prevention, depression and healthy living.
- The Coral Harbour Youth Celebration Committee hosted a youth camp in August 2005 to encourage young people to be positive and celebrate life.

Inuvialuit (Northwest Territories)

- The Inuvialuit Regional Corporation introduced the international “Yellow Ribbon” campaign to Tuktoyaktuk, where cards with special instruction are given to youth. On one side are instructions to hand the card to a trusted person (a parent, teacher, etc.) if you are feeling troubled. On the other side are instructions to stay with the person who handed you the card, until they are safe. The campaign is designed to show youth that it’s OK to ask for help.

Suicide Prevention and Crisis Lines 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

Inuvialut (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.