

Canada's Indigenous suicide crisis

Indigenous leaders have urged federal and local governments to address broader social issues to tackle the high rates of suicide in Indigenous communities. Paul C Webster reports from Toronto.



Natan Obed

Speaking at a conference on Indigenous health issues in Toronto in late May, Natan Obed, leader of the 60 000 Inuit who lay claim to a third of Canada's vast landmass, reprised his people's plight: shortened life expectancies, a high infant mortality rate, high rates of tuberculosis, widespread food insecurity, dangerously inadequate housing, and shockingly deficient local health care. But it was when Obed turned to the topic of suicide that the 750 people in the audience felt the full wintry force of his Arctic reproach: according to the Canadian Government, suicide rates in the four Inuit regions are more than six times higher than the rate in non-Indigenous regions. Among Inuit youth, suicide is responsible for 40% of deaths, compared with 8% in the rest of Canada.

But as Obed noted, these figures—which are drawn from Canadian Government data that include non-Indigenous as well as Inuit people living in Canada's far north—substantially misrepresent and understate the problem. According to a 2015 report commissioned by the Inuit, 27% of the deaths deemed in coroners' reports to have been suicides by Inuit people between 2005 and 2011 are missing from the figures relied on by the Canadian Government. According to study author Jack Hicks, this means that the Inuit suicide rate is 11 times the Canadian average—or 55% higher than the Canadian Government acknowledges. And in one lightly-populated Inuit region, the suicide rate is roughly 25 times the Canadian average, Hicks says.

At the very least, all this statistical confusion reveals a lack of government concern, Obed told the audience in Toronto. "This has been a crisis for

40 years", he said, "and yet we still don't have accurate suicide data."

Obed's comments on the suicide crisis among Indigenous people were widely echoed at the Toronto gathering, which although optimistically convened by the University of Toronto under the banner of "Towards Health and Reconciliation", was overshadowed by events earlier this year in which more than 100 young Indigenous people threatened suicide in several clusters in remote communities. Although most of these threats were averted, at least seven were not.

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As Isadore Day, head of the health committee of the Assembly of First Nations, the national political group that represents 900 000 Indigenous Canadians, told the Toronto gathering, suicide—both threatened and completed—has become a tragic marker for a broader array of health crises among Indigenous Canadians. "There's a temptation to want to focus on the suicide issue", Day told *The Lancet*. "But we have to look at the root causes. And those all have to do with the social and economic conditions in Indigenous communities with high suicide rates."

The Inuit reached a similar conclusion after drafting a 2010 suicide prevention strategy, says Obed, who has spent most of his personal and professional life struggling to understand and address the suicide crisis. "We have often thought of suicide only in its last iteration before death", Obed told the Toronto gathering. "But the discussion has to happen over the whole life course."

For Obed, the suicide crisis is rooted in a group of risk factors including the fact that Inuit people are eight times more likely than other Canadians to live in overcrowded homes. "Many of our households do not have enough to eat", he added, "and that has a huge impact on mental and physical health." The Inuit also lack access to basic health-care facilities and addiction treatment programmes, Obed said. Add to that very high rates of mental trauma rooted in forced resettlements, forced residential schooling, and high rates of sexual abuse and childhood adversity, Obed noted, and, "if you are Inuit, chances are you are growing up in a community with high risk factors for suicide".

In a plea rooted in extensive evidence drawn from numerous academic and government investigations linking the heightened suicide rate among Indigenous Canadians to historical traumas, enduring poverty, extensive family and community abuse and violence, and a pervasive lack of access to education and basic health care and social services, Obed says the time has come for Canada's federal and provincial governments to "go beyond the usual treatments and address broader social issues".

Canada's federal and provincial politicians have pledged their concern and promised to help with emergency programmes targeting youth at risk for suicide. But short-term stopgap measures are unlikely to make a lasting difference, says Perry Bellegarde, national chief for the Assembly of First Nations. Bellegarde has called for a national strategy similar to that crafted by the Inuit.

Paul C Webster