



Research Snapshot

Approaches to Suicide Prevention differ between Inuit and Mainstream Health Initiatives

What is this research about?

Inuit peoples have a higher risk of being affected by suicide than members in the general Canadian population due to the effects of colonization. Throughout the colonization of Canada, most Inuit children were forced to attend residential schooling. Inuit children who attended residential schooling were subjected to sexual abuse, physical abuse and neglect. The residential schools were also responsible for stripping Inuit children of their cultural identities. Inuit peoples and scholars alike agree the widespread use of residential schools resulted in the traumatization of several generations of Inuit peoples. This trauma has been linked to increased suicide prevalence. Solutions as they are outlined by Inuit peoples to healing this trauma are provided in this paper and are expected to assist in mitigating risk of suicide amongst Inuit peoples.

“Colonization is not something that happened in the past, it is ongoing, and continues to cause problems when the results of the damage done to Inuit are dealt with using Western methods... The literature [developed by Inuit communities] envisions holistic views of mental wellness, suicide prevention and preventing substance abuse that incorporates housing, economic development and jobs as key actions, in addition to regaining cultural pride.”



What you need to know:

Increased rates of suicide are seen within Inuit communities in comparison to the general Canadian population. Research suggests that this increased risk is associated with intergenerational trauma and residential schooling. Solutions to reducing risk specific to Inuit communities are discussed. A call to action is made regarding reconnecting Inuit peoples back to their cultural practices and roles as a way to heal community members from the effects of colonization.

What did the researchers do?

The researchers collected and synthesized information on Inuit specific approaches to understanding suicide and suicide prevention in which were published by Inuit community organizations.

Researchers collected information published on suicide prevalence, risk factors and prevention efforts from 8 Inuit community organizations. These organizations included: The Nunavut Government, Pauktuuit Inuit Women of Canada, Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, National Inuit Youth Council, Ajunnginiq Centre/Inuit Tuttarvingat, Tungasuvvingat Inuit (TI), Blueprint for Life, Kamatsiaqtut Help Line, Government of Nunavut. The research team consumed the content of the publications including culturally relevant materials that were provided in audiovisual form and then synthesized the information.

The research team synthesized the information by categorizing the concepts into themes as they emerged throughout the publications. Information specific to Inuit approaches in understanding the following categories were collected:

- **Explanations of Suicide:** The influence of culturally-specific factors that permeate suicide prevalence.
- **Conceptions of Suicide Prevention:** How Inuit approaches can mitigate suicide prevalence rates.
- **Efforts to Prevent Suicide:** Culturally relevant evidence that supports the use of Inuit approaches to suicide prevention

What did the researchers find?

Upon synthesizing the information, the research team noticed that several of the themes that emerged were related to suicide risk and prevention specific to Inuit culture (based on publications written or presented by Inuit community members). One theme, in particular, that emerged in regards to evaluating prevalence rates of suicide amongst Inuit people was experiences with intergenerational trauma and residential schooling. This does differ from risk factors for suicide in the general population and it is argued that healing must occur from a trauma informed, but culturally-relevant perspective.

Inuit organizations and community members suggest that approaches to treating mental health must go beyond focusing on the management of suicidal symptoms. Connecting Inuit peoples with their cultural identities can help to mitigate risk of suicide. It was recommended by Inuit organizations that all treatment approaches ensure that as a focus of the healing process, cultural roles are taught to Inuit people. This will ensure that survival off of the land can occur and will support economical growth. When the community is strong, its members can heal.

Developing wellness initiatives that are culturally relevant to Inuit peoples is important for healing intergenerational trauma.

Building resiliency by educating Inuit peoples on cultural teachings like respect and care for others, as well as openness in relationships can have a positive effect against suicide rates. To achieve this initiative, Inuit organizations and communities recommend that elders be involved in suicide prevention efforts. There is also an importance placed on sharing trauma stories amongst Inuit peoples to assist healing of unresolved anger as it is associated with colonization.

How can you use this research?

This study showed that Inuit communities remain at risk of suicide as a result of colonization. Understanding that suicide risk is associated with loss of cultural identity can assist educators in understanding the importance of cultural sensitivity and education in the classroom/

Original Research Article:

Morris, M., & Crooks, C. (2015). Structural and Cultural Factors in Suicide Prevention: The Contrast between Mainstream and Inuit approaches to Understanding and Preventing suicide. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 29(3), 321-338.

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