

research snapshot

summarize | mobilize



Cultural Continuity Reduces Suicide Risk Among Aboriginal Peoples

What is this research about?

Suicide is a serious problem facing Aboriginal youth. In British Columbia, the rate of Aboriginal youth suicide has been known to climb to as much as five times the national average. Past research, however, has shown that some First Nations communities fare better than others in this area. Between 1987 and 1992, more than half of the province's communities experienced no youth suicides. In fact, over 90% of the suicides took place in less than 10% of the Aboriginal bands. Youth suicide is not an "Aboriginal" problem per se; it's a problem for only some communities – and not necessarily those that are poor or isolated.

In fact, one of the less well-known factors that can have an impact on the health of a community is "cultural continuity." Communities that take certain steps to preserve their cultural past and control their civic lives tend to have fewer suicides. In other words, a sense of cultural continuity can help young people – who often lack a firm sense of their self – to see that they have a future. An Aboriginal youth who is encouraged to view his or her identity as something that persists over time is less at risk for suicide.

What you need to know:

Aboriginal communities that give their citizens a sense of a shared past and a promising future are less vulnerable to suicide. People who see their identity as something that persists over time are less inclined to take their own life when facing hardships.

But does cultural continuity still predict the health of a First Nations community, years after the original research? And does it reduce suicide among Aboriginal adults as well as youth?

What did the researchers do?

Building on their earlier work, researchers at the University of Victoria looked at cases of Aboriginal suicide from 1993 to 2000. They calculated the suicide rate of each of British Columbia's 197 formally identified bands. Their expanded focus included information on adult as well as youth suicides. They also considered a few new markers of cultural continuity.

What did the researchers find?

First Nations communities in BC have no youth suicides and very low rates of adult suicide when they have: achieved a measure of self government; been quick off the mark to pursue

Aboriginal title to traditional lands; promoted women to leadership roles; constructed facilities that preserve their culture; and worked to gain control over their own civic lives, including health, education, policing, and child welfare services. In short, bands that maintain a sense of cultural continuity are less at risk for suicide. By giving their members a sense of a shared past and a promising future, they reinforce identity and the value of life in youths and adults.

How can you use this research?

Researchers who study Aboriginal communities in Canada should avoid a “one size fits all” approach; these communities can be very different from one another, and therefore require specially tailored policies. Moreover, researchers and policymakers need to avoid a “top-down” model when engaging with Aboriginal peoples. Knowledge shouldn’t be imposed from above so much as shared in a horizontal way. Finally, just because a community is free of the problem of suicide doesn’t mean that the community fully understands why it has solved the problem. Social scientists need to learn how to collaborate with bands to better access their knowledge. They also need to learn how best to “transfer” or “exchange” this knowledge.

About the Researchers

Michael J. Chandler is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Psychology at the University of Victoria.

Christopher E. Lalonde is Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the University of Victoria.

lalonde@uvic.ca

Citation

Chandler, M.J. & Lalonde, C.E. (2009). Cultural continuity as a moderator of suicide risk among Canada’s First Nations. In Laurence J. Kirmayer & Gail Guthrie Valaskakis (Eds.), *Healing traditions: The mental health of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada* (221-248). Vancouver, Canada: UBC Press. Available online at: <http://bit.ly/1j0wt33>

Keywords

First Nations, Aboriginal, Indigenous, Youth, Suicide, Cultural continuity, Identity, Mental health

Knowledge Mobilization at York

York’s Knowledge Mobilization Unit provides services for faculty, graduate students, community and government seeking to maximize the impact of academic research and expertise on public policy, social programming, and professional practice. This summary has been supported by the Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation at York and project funding from SSHRC and CIHR.

kmbunit@yorku.ca

www.researchimpact.ca

