

Calls for greater action to prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide

3 September 2015, by David Stacey

A leading researcher in the field of Indigenous Mental Health at The University of Western Australia has used the approach of World Suicide Prevention Day to call for united action to reduce Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicide rates, which remain among the highest in the world.

Professor Pat Dudgeon, who with University of Canberra Chancellor Professor Tom Calma heads up the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) based at UWA, said suicide rates among the group are double that of non-Indigenous people, accounting for one in 19 deaths.

"This is a national crisis and strong and immediate action is needed, such as a national inquiry," Professor Dudgeon said.

"However, an inquiry or royal commission should not pause or delay initiatives that are already in place, or are about to be put in place."

Professor Calma said that by the mid-1980s, 99 Aboriginal deaths in custody prompted a Royal Commission and that the current Indigenous suicides should prompt similar attention.

"While some attention is being paid by governments, more needs to be done to address the determinants that contribute to the psychological stressors that afflict Indigenous society," he said.

Professor Dudgeon said that suicide among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is the leading cause of death in the 15 to 35 year age group.

"We believe this is being driven by a culmination of stresses and impacts, the majority of which are not felt by the rest of the Australian population," she said.

"These include the impacts of colonisation, often

acute poverty and marginalisation, various life stresses, psychological stresses and the sense of racism."

The ATSISPEP, funded by the Prime Minister and Cabinet and with partners including the Telethon Kids Institute WA and The Healing Foundation, is currently travelling around Australia convening regional and community roundtables to accompany a report to the Federal Government.

Senior community consultant with the project, Adele Cox, a Bunuba Gija woman from the Kimberley who has dedicated 18 years to [suicide prevention](#), is facilitating the roundtables and said many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities now believe suicide is being seen as normal behavior.

"Things must change at government level, as well as at community level so that we support our kids, our families and our communities to change these attitudes and these behaviours," Ms Cox said.

ATSISPEP community consultant Gerry Georgatos said the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of the Kimberley, far north Queensland and the Northern Territory fare the worst.

"They endure among the world's highest self-harm and [suicide rates](#) amid extreme poverty which is driving not only the increasing rates of self-harms and suicides but also the high arrest and incarceration rates," Mr Georgatos said. "At least one in 10 and up to one in six of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has been to jail."

Professor Dudgeon said while Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Nigel Scullion is "to be commended for enabling the ATSISPEP" and "for his ongoing responsiveness", she warned the [suicide](#) rate and underlying issues require a whole of government approach and substantial funding.

Provided by University of Western Australia

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