# INDIGENOUS SUICIDE:

# FINDING A CATALYST FOR ACTION

Dr Anthony Dillon
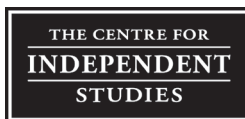
THE CENTRE FOR
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STUDIES

# Indigenous suicide: Finding a catalyst for action

## Dr Anthony Dillon

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# Introduction

D eath by suicide is always a difficult topic to discuss. It affects those left behind like no other death. Suicide of a non-Indigenous person is no less tragic than the suicide of an Indigenous person, but best available statistics show that Indigenous people are far more likely to take their own lives, and so it warrants additional attention.

Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that there were 27.1 Indigenous suicide deaths per 100,000 persons in 2019, compared with 12.9 non-Indigenous suicides per 100,000 people in the same time period.[1] A reduction in the suicide rate among Indigenous Australians was included as a specific target area when the Closing the Gap initiative was updated in July 2020.

The most recent Productivity Commission report on mental health stated that "suicide is the fifth leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, compared with the twelfth for non-Indigenous people".[2] The situation is even more dire for younger males (15–44 years), as shown in the Figure below taken from the report.

In documenting the problem of suicide among the Indigenous population, particularly youth, a 2019 systematic review argued that the term "crisis" is appropriate, given that young Indigenous Australians not only die by suicide at significantly higher rates than their non-Indigenous peers, but also do so at an increasingly younger age, particularly in remote areas.[3]

## Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males are at particularly high risk of suicide[a]

Age-specific suicide rate per 100 000 people, 2009–2018
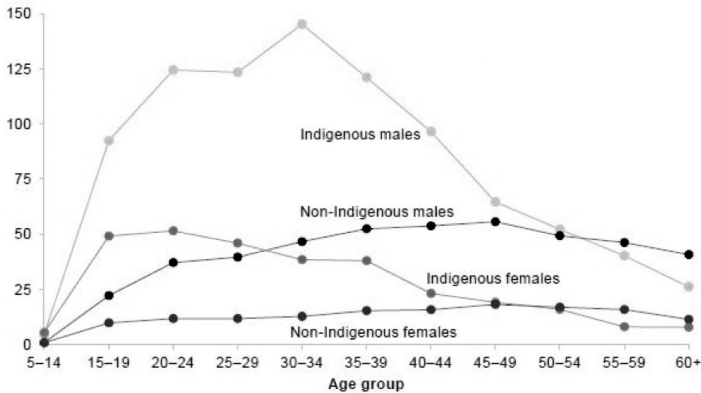


[a] Data is for New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Northern Territory only.

Source: ABS (*Causes of Death, Australia, 2018*, unpublished data, Cat. no. 3303.0).

This paper aims to provide a catalyst for the actions needed to address this crisis. It begins by examining a major barrier to addressing Indigenous suicide—the politicisation not only of Indigenous suicide, but all Indigenous issues—before discussing some of the likely causes of suicide, and factors that make Indigenous suicide qualitatively different from non-Indigenous suicides. It then summarises possible solutions based on this discussion.

# Politicisation

The aforementioned statistics have ignited plenty of action for dealing with Indigenous suicide in terms of government policy, committees, research, and endless reports, but still the problem persists. This is an endemic issue in the Indigenous policy space. As Kimberley activist Peter Yu has lamented: "despite the wealth of empirical data dished up by countless inquiries, royal commissions and research projects over many decades about the social and economic condition of Aboriginal society, little practical benefit seems to come from all this data."[4]

Yes, there has been action, but it's the wrong sort of action. It may have helped gatekeepers, politicians, and academics, but it hasn't helped Indigenous people. This action is both a result and cause of the politicisation of Indigenous issues—using the problems Indigenous people face today as an excuse to make accusations of systemic racism, claim Australia is an uncaring society, and portray Indigenous people as vastly different from other Australians and requiring a separate set of rules to live by.

Given this politicisation, you sometimes hear claims like: "If suicide happened to the same degree in the general population, government would do much more" or words to that effect; the implication being that government doesn't care at best, or is racist at worst. Consider the words of Indigenous affairs commentator Gerry Georgatos: "In these discriminated communities, the residents cannot continue to cry out to governments, because it is the very government they cry out to who is their oppressor, who discriminates against them."[5] However,

claiming the issues are the fault of an "oppressor" diverts attention from what Indigenous Australians themselves can do to help solve the underlying problems and prevent suicide—and denies them agency and impact in their own lives and communities.

It has become too convenient to blame government where Indigenous suicide is concerned. For example, Professor Tom Calma has stated: "The government must start listening to expert indigenous advice on how to stem the high rates of suicide."[6] He has further stated that there will not be change until "people can see governments are genuine."

Blaming an external body such as the government for suicide can be appealing. But in reality, such misplaced blame only worsens problems—people begin to believe that government has far more control over their lives than they themselves do. Believing that one's fate is in the hands of another, such as the government or the 'system', only breeds a sense of hopelessness and helplessness. These two states—hopelessness and helplessness—are common to those who commit suicide.[7] None of this is to suggest that government does not have a role to play, because it does, and this will be discussed shortly.

# Factors Impacting on Suicide

While our understanding of issues relating to mental health and suicide is far from complete, factors have been identified that increase the likelihood of suicide. The Centre for Disease Control and Prevention website states: "A combination of individual, relationship, community, and societal factors contribute to the risk of suicide."[8] These factors can present in many ways: broken relationships, bullying, major financial crises, humiliating experiences, unemployment, restrictions like those resulting from COVID, and so on. For this paper, these factors will be categorised as *external* and *internal*. These categories are not mutually exclusive, indeed, there is a dynamic interplay between them, with each influencing the other. They provide a useful framework for understanding the causes of suicide, and, most importantly, reducing the high rate of Indigenous suicide.

# External Factors (Employment, education and the role of government)

*"In classrooms and in jobs, that is where our Aboriginal youth belong."* (Warren Mundine, 2020)

*"Children need education and they need parents—dads as well as mums. Dads need jobs, not gaols, and for jobs they need education. That is why, in my mind, so much comes back to our schools. I believe if we get them right, much else will follow—not everything but a lot."* (Alison Anderson, 2013)

## Employment

I have argued previously, if we can fix unemployment, we can fix most of the other problems facing Indigenous Australians.[9] As noted in the 2016 *Closing the Gap Report*: "Employment not only brings financial independence and choice, it also contributes to self-esteem."[10] Most of us would know that having a job often provides a person with purpose, opportunities for connecting with others, and contributing to their wellbeing. All this contributes towards feeling valued and worthy, and when this happens, people have a reason for living and celebrating life.

Engaging in meaningful work and learning was a normal feature of traditional Indigenous society, so nothing new is being suggested here; rather, just a return to old practices. In the autobiography of Indigenous Australian, Dick Roughsey, he states that his family made sure that he learned to do his fair share of the hunting, as "There is no place in a hunting camp for lazy people".[11] Or as Indigenous leader Galarrwuy Yunupingu puts it:

> In our world we hunted with success or we did not eat, we exchanged gifts with friends so that these friends would respond with gifts that we valued … We laboured every day. Under the early mission system we worked or there was no pay. We contributed or we were left aside.[12]

What happens when children do not see adults working? In discussing communities that lack employment opportunities and occupational role models, then Western Australian mental health minister, Helen Morton, wrote in *The Australian* that "The bright eyes of children's early hopes and dreams quickly fade without opportunities. In an unsafe community, children feel helpless and hopeless, sometimes choosing death as a means of escape."[13] Note the theme of hopelessness and helplessness once more. From this, we know that adults must be working, and children must be in school, if we want to build strong and vibrant communities.

## Education
Seeing adults working inspires children to do well in school, and given that education is recognised as one of the clearest indicators of life outcomes such as employment, income, and social status, as well as being a strong predictor of attitudes and wellbeing, its importance cannot be overstated.[14]

It is interesting (and distressing) to note in WA State Coroner's Ros Fogliani's 2019 inquest into a cluster of Indigenous child and youth suicide in the Kimberley region, she states: "Very sadly, practically all of the children and young persons whose deaths have been investigated in this Inquest had poor school attendance rates."[15] The imperative for getting Indigenous children into schools and engaged in their learning, so that they become capable of being all that they can be, could not be clearer.

With regard to regular school attendance, Indigenous former Northern Territory politician, Alison Anderson, has suggested this is something government and local councils can help with and that there should be no more support for any type of event that takes children away from home during school term.[16] While these may seem like tough words, keeping children away from school unnecessarily can have tougher consequences.

Of course, the success of a school is significantly impacted by the society in which it is located. Population size and composition, employment (previously discussed), other services nearby, and more, play their role. It is with these variables that government can play an important role. Government should ensure that schools are of a high standard with excellent teachers so that the children want to be there, and equally important, mums and dads want them to be there.

## Role of government

Obviously, there is a need for crisis intervention when combatting suicide. When a person has reached the stage where they wish to end their life, suicide-prevention services are needed. Interventions are also needed when people are stressed, depressed, or when their mental state is compromised in some other way, so as to prevent them

from progressing towards contemplating suicide. Government has an important role to play here. However, ideally intervention is best placed 'upstream'—minimising the chances of people reaching such depressive states in the first place—rather than 'downstream' once they have reached those states. As noted in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project Report*:

> Upstream suicide prevention interventions have the potential to prevent the onset or reduce the severity of a range of suicide and self-harm risk factors. They seek to prevent risk factors from developing, and enhance protective factors to safeguard against the effect of risk in people's lives. Such approaches typically target the physical, mental, behavioural and emotional health of people, especially children and young people, to mitigate or avoid the development of issues that can lead onto suicidal risk.[17]

Government working together with local communities, councils, and other organisations can create opportunities for people to lead fulfilled lives with access to basic services, connection with others, and a sense of purpose.

# Internal Factors

*"Psychological pain is the basic ingredient of suicide."* (Terry Lynch, 2005)

Some people experiencing psychological pain feel that suicide is their only solution. For the person contemplating suicide, there is the internal dialogue of 'How can I end the pain?'. When hope is diminished, suicide becomes attractive. Indigenous researcher, Pat Dudgeon, when discussing suicide specifically, has stated "there's a feeling of hopelessness and despair, a feeling that you don't have a future."[18]

For the person experiencing emotional pain, it's fair to say that their sense of self-worth has suffered or that they have low self-esteem. While such terms are closely related, Mutrie and Faulkner note that self-esteem is often regarded as the single most important indicator of psychological wellbeing.[19] In relation to suicide, Lynch sums it up well when he states: "The lower a person's self-esteem, the more painful it becomes to fail in public. Sometimes it seems less painful to end one's life than to live with the pain of losing face."[20] Poor self-esteem reflects a poor relationship with oneself and typically impairs the quality of relationships with others, and it is these relationships that are crucial to wellbeing (a point I will return to later in discussing solutions).

# Framing Indigenous Suicide

Given that the rate of suicide in the Indigenous population is more than double the rate of the general population, any factors that may make Indigenous suicide different are worthy of mention. While I believe the underlying dynamics of suicide are mostly the same for all people, there are some factors that seem more pertinent to Indigenous Australians—not because they necessarily contribute to the higher rate of Indigenous suicide, but because they frame how Indigenous suicide is viewed and discussed, and hence influence the solutions that are proposed. Specifically, I wish to discuss:

    1) colonisation and trauma;
    2) sexual abuse;
    3) culture and (dis)connectedness;
    4) self-determination; and
    5) remoteness.

An understanding of these factors can point to some ways forward.

## Colonisation and trauma

It is indisputable that events of the past dramatically changed the lives of those Indigenous people who witnessed colonisation. Whether through violence or disease, many Indigenous lives were

lost, while for those who survived, a new world began, with customs and language lost. As disruptive as colonisation was, however, we are never victims of the past but only ever victims of our view of the past, as so many Indigenous people have proven (some of whom are quoted in this paper). It is not the past that sustains or causes some Indigenous people to live in deplorable conditions today, yet it is the past that is often blamed. For instance, a 2018 parliamentary report on mental health in remote areas[21] states that among the drivers of suicide for Indigenous Australians is despair caused by a history of dispossession, combined with the social and economic conditions in which Indigenous Australians now live.

While it is not too difficult to see how social and economic conditions such as poverty, unemployment, etc., can contribute to suicide, the claim that despair is caused by dispossession (a reference to colonisation) is not clear. This is an example of what often happens in academic writings and government reports—a claim is made and then is repeatedly cited by other authors. If cited enough, it then takes on an aura of unquestionable truth.

All races and civilisations have a past of being conquered and dispossessed. While that past may make some contribution to problems seen today, it is not a direct cause. And, more importantly, it is not something that can be changed, so to focus on it diverts energy from solutions that can make a real difference. As the Indigenous Canadian writer Calvin Helin has noted:

> The problem with always looking back is that there is nothing we can do about what has already happened. How can the constructive future of Indigenous nations be founded on festering grievances of the past? Should we not be focussing on positive, forward-looking solutions to a new policy, a new economy, a fresh outlook, rather than being anchored entirely in rancorous injustice of the past (no matter how justified such views are)? How is dwelling on historical injustices going to lift indigenous people out of the morass of social and political pathologies? … We should be asking, 'What pragmatic steps can we take now to make the lives of ordinary indigenous people better? It

should be obvious that we must begin moving forward and start looking for real solutions'.[22]

With regard to Indigenous Australians, Judy Atkinson has stated that "trauma of historical events associated with colonisation of Indigenous land can pass to children (intergenerational trauma)".[23] But how is this trauma passed on? She cites Eduardo Duran and Bonnie Duran's suggestion that historical trauma is passed on by the same mechanisms by which culture is generally transmitted from one generation to the next.[24]

However, cultures are not destiny—they can change—and bad aspects, or aspects that may have at one time served a purpose, can fade away or be discontinued or modified as required. The renowned psychologist, Abraham Maslow[25], remarked that culture is only a necessary cause of human nature and not a sufficient cause. And so it is with past trauma. Today's large proportion of thriving Indigenous Australians decries any bid for a doctrine of inescapable trauma to be the narrative that explains Indigenous problems.

While the past is clearly relevant, humans have the unique capacity to adapt, evolve, and prosper. It is perhaps more correct to say that trauma in one generation provides an opportunity for response in the next generation, where that response can either be adaptive or maladaptive. For example, the son of an alcoholic can say that using alcohol to solve problems was all he has ever known so that's why he too became an alcoholic. Meanwhile his twin brother says that having seen how alcohol can ruin lives, he learned to never touch it. Each brother can provide a plausible story based on their recollections of the past that explains his current behaviours.

## Sexual abuse

Indigenous children are far more likely to experience trauma because of the prevalence of—and relative silence about—child abuse in some Indigenous communities. Consider the words of then Western Australian Police Commissioner Karl O'Callaghan in 2015:

How would you react if your 11-year-old daughter had a sexually transmitted infection? How would you take the

news that your daughter is up to 10 times more likely to be the victim of sexual abuse than others in her class? How would you feel if she was sexually abused and no one bothered to report it? To most of us these situations are unthinkable and it would be difficult to fathom how we would react to them. This is the plight of hundreds of Aboriginal children in remote communities throughout Australia and this is only half of the story.[26]

UK experts note that: "Children who experience physical, sexual, and emotional abuse or neglect are at least two to three times more likely to attempt suicide in later life, according to the largest research review carried out of the topic."[27] Indeed, Pat Dudgeon told *The Australian* that sexual abuse has the strongest connection with repeated suicide attempts "because it is closely associated with feelings of shame and internal attributions of blame".[28]

Providing sound advice, Warren Mundine has stated: "Child abuse will destroy Indigenous society. It's up to us—our mobs—to end the abuse and the silence".[29]

## Culture and (dis)connectedness

The Healing Foundation last year argued that: "By returning to our culture and building strength in our identities we can stop the cycle of trauma and bring about positive intergenerational healing."[30] Such sentiments are common. But what exactly does 'returning to our culture' mean? Is it the culture of our great grandparents? While I believe that it is fine to be proud of one's Indigenous ancestry, it is another matter to build an identity around it and elevate it above what it actually is. To do so further reinforces an 'us and them' mentality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, which is essentially separatism—rather than the needed connection and unity.

For many Indigenous people, realisation of this connection and unity will be difficult when their 'leaders' are constantly pushing the message—whether it be by calling for constitutional recognition, a treaty, or whatever—that they are separate from non-Indigenous Australians. This realisation of our connectedness with others is

foundational to sound mental health. Australian social researcher Hugh Mackay argues that "The starting point [for a good life] is the recognition that we are all inseparably part of each other and that our human destiny is to accept and nurture our connection."[31]

## Self-determination

The Creative Spirits webpage describes self-determination as 'Aboriginal people taking care of their own affairs'.[32] It has been popular rhetoric in Aboriginal affairs for many years. As the late Sol Bellear wrote: "If we want to shift Aboriginal disadvantage, then self-determination is the only way to achieve that."[33] In 2016, then chairman of the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation, Matthew Cooke, wrote in *The Australian*:

> Now more than ever, self-determination must feature front and centre. It is imperative that Aboriginal communities and indigenous controlled medical services are empowered to develop and run programs for Aboriginal people that are culturally appropriate and reach those who desperately need support. We know it's the only model that works.[34]

While not explicitly using the term self-determination, the Productivity Commission's recent report into mental health indicates they have bought into the self-determination paradigm when they note in regard to Indigenous suicide specifically: "Commissioning bodies should ensure that Indigenous organisations are the preferred providers of suicide prevention activities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people".[35] Such thinking continues the 'us and them' mentality.

Think of other groups and how self-determination might apply to them. Do family members seek assistance only from within their family when they require assistance or have a problem to solve? Do employees or employers seek assistance only from within their organisation when they require assistance or have a problem to solve? To expect that the needs of a group should only be met by members of that group is misguided. Indeed, this limitation increases the chances

of getting poorer help or advice because the advice comes from a limited pool.

It must also be asked: how well has the self-determination approach worked for Indigenous Australians? Alison Anderson has stated: "The idea that separate development was the answer provided hope for many and jobs for an increasingly powerful few. However, it has failed".[36] Noting the failure of the self-determination paradigm, Indigenous adviser Wesley Aird wrote: "It is about time Indigenous Australians had access to the same level of sophistication instead of being relegated to 'culturally-appropriate service' which is usually a euphemism for 'service of a lesser standard'."[37]

Nobody would be opposed to Indigenous Australians accessing services managed by Indigenous Australians, if the service providers are competent (indigeneity is not a requirement for competence). Certainly, many of these Indigenous service providers are highly competent and some outstanding. A distinguishing feature of their attitude and work ethic, is that like Alison Anderson, they "see people. Not categories, divisions, or races".[38] Further, the people seeking services should have a free choice and not feel compelled to access only those services with the Aboriginal label. Individuals having a choice is an expression of the fundamental human need for a sense of autonomy, which results in real self-determination.

## Remoteness

Too often when discussing Indigenous affairs, people are lumped into one category when in reality there is great diversity among Indigenous people in terms of their outlook on life, their culture, and the problems they face. Probably the most important difference is the remote/urban divide.[39] While many people identifying as Indigenous today are doing quite well, there is still a significant portion who are not. Some have not been successful in adapting to Westernised living, but nor do they live a traditional life. It is this group that government should focus most on helping. Indeed, many of those in this 'lost' group live in rural and remote areas, where suicide rates are generally highest.

The situation was well summarised in a 2013 article in *The Australian* by Nicholas Rothwell appropriately entitled 'Place, not race, is key to the gap':

> When Tony Abbott outlined his blueprint for indigenous affairs [he] broke new ground by highlighting the distinction between remote and urban Aboriginal societies, their circumstances and their needs. In a few words, his speech challenged the chief fantasy that shapes national policy on indigenous affairs: the notion that all Australians who identify as Aboriginal belong to a single community of interest and should be included in the same measures of progress and wellbeing   that Aboriginal Australia can be understood as an undivided whole. In fact there are two quite separate indigenous domains   these two worlds are travelling apart fast in terms of economic profiles, educational attainments, wellbeing … and the failure to distinguish plainly between them makes it impossible to see the full scale of the social crisis unfolding in remote Australia.[40]

In short, it is important to distinguish between those Indigenous people living in remote communities and those living in urban areas. As a 2019 systematic review of suicide among Indigenous youth stated: "Residents of rural and remote communities face a unique combination of factors which are believed to contribute to low rates of access to mental health services and the high rate of suicide".[41] In addition, in many remote communities, adults are not working and children are not in school. As previously discussed, education and jobs are important 'upstream' factors that contribute to community stability and viability. Without this, there is maladaptive behaviour, emotional frustration and pain, and suicide. Add some alcohol and drugs to the mix, and you have a perfect storm for dysfunction and destruction.

I am all for investing in those communities that are potentially viable, but many are not. For those that are not, tough decisions need to be made. Consider the words of high achieving Indigenous Australian, Stan Grant in a Sky News interview in 2015:

> We have become a more urbanised world; we live longer because of it, we have greater access to jobs and education, health … [My family] moved around wherever my dad could get work because he had to work to put food on the table … I was fortunate enough to … go to university … have a career that has taken me around the world. And my cultural connection, my spiritual connection, and my family connection to that land is as strong today as it was growing up, and I am no different to other people in that, we can have that … It requires a really hard discussion in the Indigenous community as well who sometimes fall prey to this idea that we need to keep people in remote communities because that's where the real blackfellas are and that makes me feel better about my identity. That's fine if you are living in a city like I am with the opportunities I have had. It's not too fine for the kid who's growing up there to make me feel stronger about who I am and my identity.[42]

Grant is correct that responding to the plight faced by too many Indigenous Australians living in remote areas requires a hard discussion. Tough decisions need to be made, because not all remote communities may prove to be economically viable. But before we consider closing down these communities (sometimes referred to as having "institutionalised ghetto status"[43]), it is worth heeding Warren Mundine's advice. Mundine argues that there are jobs in remote areas, but most are not done by locals and that there is also work that doesn't get done. He further states: "Economic development doesn't require massive projects. And it certainly doesn't require community-based initiatives. Most economies in the world have been built by individuals making a go of it and starting small".[44]

# Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are grounded in a strengths-based approach. By this, I mean that the state of hopelessness and helplessness that leads a person to suicide is seen not as an inherent feature of Indigenous Australians, but the product of the aforementioned problems. A strengths-based approach assumes that when conditions are right, people mostly do okay—as thousands of Indigenous Australians prove every day.

Similar to the earlier discussion of the factors impacting on suicide, some of the recommendations relate to the external provision of solutions, while others are more internally-focussed.

The externally-focussed recommendations are generally interdependent and require government intervention to varying degrees. If adopted, they will *enable* people to:

1) live in safe and clean environments,
2) have access to modern services, and
3) possess the necessary skills to function in 21st Century Australia.

The internally-focussed recommendations are those that *empower* people to do more than just be 'okay', but to thrive. They too, are generally interdependent, and relate to the inner state of a person and the need to:

1) develop a robust sense of self-worth,
2) engage in activities that individuals personally find meaningful,
3) practise personal responsibility.

## Safe and clean environments

When people live in clean environments, they have a sense of pride and are more likely to take care of them. Whether it be their home, street, neighbourhood, or community, caring for one's surroundings gives a sense of purpose, which promotes good mental health. It also promotes a sense of belonging and helps community members connect. It's no surprise that communities where adults are working and children are in school are generally clean and safe communities.

Continued feelings of being unsafe breed a sense of helplessness and hopelessness. When this happens, people are likely to flee if they can, or become the aggressor and threaten the safety of others. And if neither of these options are viable, then ending one's own life might be seen as the only option left.

## Access to modern services

People need and deserve access to quality services such as medical services, libraries, other sources of recreation, and other services/ facilities that most of us take for granted. For any group of Australians to be cut off from such services is to instil in them the belief that they are cut off from other Australians and do not matter. Access to modern services, as well as having practical benefits, further reinstates the need and opportunity for connectedness with others.

## Possession of the necessary skills
## to function in 21st century Australia

Few Indigenous people these days possess the necessary skills to live completely off the land, so adults need to be working or learning, and the children in school. The workplace and the classroom are where people can learn valuable skills and apply them. Hugh Mackay has stated that skills are our passport to usefulness.[45] Having skills that make us useful empower us to better manage life's difficulties and contribute towards having purpose and meaning (discussed below). To lack the core skills needed for functioning in modern-day Australia leads to over-dependency on others, which undermines one's sense of self-worth.

## Developing a robust sense of self-worth

People who do not see their true value are likely to think that others do not value them[46] which only further contributes to feelings of disconnectedness. Indigenous people must be encouraged to see themselves as having inherent worth, not because they are Aboriginal, but simply because they just are who they are. This is more likely when they see themselves as people first, Indigenous second. The obsession with identity politics sometimes makes this difficult.

Feeling good about ourselves allows us to more easily connect with others, and this essentially is our purpose in life. Gerry Georgatos has argued that "Suicide prevention should not be focused alone on reducing risk factors but just as focused, if not more so, on increasing protective factors. The most powerful protective factors include building a connectedness with other people—they do not need to be about direct and targeted support."[47] People more easily connect with others when they do not view life through the prism of Indigenous vs non-Indigenous.

## Engaging in activities that individuals personally find meaningful

This essentially relates to work and engaging in activities that make a difference in the lives of others. Hugh Mackay has stated that "Work gives us something to do, something that proves we are useful."[48] When people feel useful, they are less likely to experience feelings of hopelessness or helplessness.

People are at an advantage when they work in a job that taps their skills, passions, or talents. Of course, this is not always possible, but people can and should engage in other non-work-related activities that they find meaningful as well. However, having a job has the added advantage of generating income. Moreover, non-work-related activities are the kind that individuals typically *choose* to engage in, as opposed to being forced or coerced into doing. When people engage in activities they personally find meaningful, they experience autonomy and begin to see purpose in their lives, and this is highly motivating.

## Practising personal responsibility

In the late 1950s when Black Americans were still having their houses bombed, Martin Luther King Jr.[49] advised that they must act now to lift themselves up by their own bootstraps. Such language may have seemed tough, but the consequences for not assuming an active role in improving one's life were even tougher. A generation later, Black American Shelby Steele stated that "personal responsibility is the bricks and mortar of power."[50] This does not mean that governments do not have a role to play, but that the greatest resource for both preventing and healing psychological pain lies within us as individuals. While it is not expected that people must go it alone, they must at least have some preparedness to assume some responsibility for their own well-being. When people realise that there is much that they personally can do to effect change in their lives, they are more likely to focus on what they themselves can do and let go of the misplaced hope that government should fix all their problems.

Suggesting that people can play an active role in bringing about change in their lives is often met with criticism. For example, Wax has stated, any suggestion that progress may require self-help "inevitably gives rise to the accusation of blaming the victim".[51] Suggesting to Indigenous Australians that they are in a position to be actively involved in contributing towards a solution to the problems they face is in no way 'blaming the victim' as is commonly suggested. Rather, it is the foundation of empowerment and autonomy.

# Conclusion

The high rate of suicide among Indigenous Australians has rightly been described as a crisis. Despite much well-intentioned effort from government and vast public goodwill, too many Indigenous lives continue to be lost. Clearly, a fresh approach is required to arrest this crisis. To be successful, this approach should:

- Start with the premise that the causes and solutions for Indigenous suicide are fundamentally the same as non-Indigenous suicide.
- Recognise there are a set of factors that make death by suicide more likely for Indigenous Australians.
- Place greater emphasis on early intervention (upstream approach) rather than suicide-specific programs (downstream approach).
- Focus on rural and remote areas where risk of suicide is greatest.
- Not assume that only Indigenous people are best placed to address Indigenous suicide, but recognise that non-Indigenous people can be just as helpful in solving this crisis.

When acted on, the aforementioned points will enable the specific recommendations discussed in this paper to be better focussed so they make a real difference on the ground. These recommendations should enable Indigenous people to:

- Live in safe and clean environments.
- Have access to modern services.
- Possess the necessary skills to function in the twenty-first century.
- Develop a robust sense of self-worth.
- Engage in activities that individuals personally find meaningful.
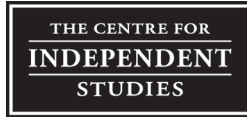- Practise personal responsibility.

# **Endnotes**

1    There were 195 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who died by suicide in 2019. See ABS (2020), Causes of Death: Australia 2019, Cat No 3303.3, 23 October, https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/health/causes-death/causes-death-australia/latest-release

2    See Australian Government, Productivity Commission (2020), *Mental Health Productivity Commission Inquiry Report, Volume 1*, 30 June, No 95, Figure 9.5, p. 414, https://www.pc.gov.au/inquiries/completed/mental-health/report/mental-health.pdf

3    Dickson, J., Cruise, K., McCall, C., & Taylor, P. (2019). A Systematic Review of the Antecedents and Prevalence of Suicide, Self-Harm and Suicide Ideation in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Youth. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(17). doi:10.3390/ijerph16173154, (p. 21).

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# Indigenous suicide: Finding a catalyst for action

This paper aims to provide a catalyst for the actions needed to address the crisis of Indigenous suicide. It begins by examining a major barrier to addressing Indigenous suicide—the politicisation not only of Indigenous suicide, but all Indigenous issues—before discussing some of the likely causes of suicide, and factors that make Indigenous suicide qualitatively different from non-Indigenous suicides. It then summarises possible solutions based on this discussion.

Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics found there were 27.1 Indigenous suicide deaths per 100,000 persons in 2019, compared with 12.9 non-Indigenous suicides per 100,000 people in the same time period. A reduction in the suicide rate among Indigenous Australians was included as a specific target area when the Closing the Gap initiative was updated in July 2020.

The most recent Productivity Commission report on mental health stated that "suicide is the fifth leading cause of death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, compared with the twelfth for non-Indigenous people".

A 2019 systemic review argued that the term "crisis" is appropriate, given that young Indigenous Australians not only die by suicide at significantly higher rates than their non-Indigenous peers, but also do so at an increasingly younger age, particularly in remote areas.

**Anthony Dillon** identifies as a part-Aboriginal Australian and is a researcher with the Institute for Positive Psychology and Education at Australian Catholic University.