

Community-led programs the key to reducing Indigenous suicide, experts say

ABC PM Show

MARK COLVIN: Indigenous leaders in Western Australia say the death of an 11-year-old Aboriginal boy in Geraldton highlights again the need for grassroots suicide prevention programs.

One Aboriginal leader in the Kimberley says one-size-fits-all programs to prevent suicide aren't working and that instead communities need to be empowered to help themselves.

From Perth, Anna Vidot reports.

ANNA VIDOT: The suicide of an 11-year-old boy has left the West Australian community of Geraldton reeling.

It's not the first time a child has taken their own life in Western Australia.

It's something communities in the Kimberley have had to deal with too.

IAN TRUST: When you look at the levels of suicide you know it's not sort of uncommon for, up in the Kimberleys, you know, 12-year-olds and so on to commit suicide. I know at least one or maybe two that have done it over the last few years in the Kimberleys.

ANNA VIDOT: Ian Trust is a community leader and founding chairman of the Wunan Foundation, a not-for-profit development organisation in the Kimberley.

He says suicide rates in his region are a huge concern, including among children.

IAN TRUST: But certainly sort of older people in their 20s, 30s and so on. I think we've had one of the highest suicide rates in Australia if not the world. So it's been a big issue here for a long time and it's an issue that isn't going away, you know, soon.

ANNA VIDOT: He says suicide prevention programs that aren't specifically designed for Indigenous communities aren't working. And that governments need to support programs that are community-led, and which tackle the complex reasons for Indigenous mental illness and poverty.

IAN TRUST: Suicide is a symptom of a fairly large problem. I think that when you're sort of marginalised, you know, we estimate that at least maybe 60 to 70 per cent of that Aboriginal population in the Kimberleys is living in poverty in terms of welfare dependency, and they've been in that sort of situation for a long time, in some cases three or four generations.

So I think that addressing the issue of suicide is that is something that you've got to address along with addressing that general issue of people's living conditions, poverty, education levels, amount of level of employment.

There are different government programs out there, I think, that try and do these things, but I think the missing link is really having Aboriginal people doing it themselves, and having you know sort of, it's an Aboriginal-run sort of initiative where people are sort of empowering their own people to start doing these things.

ANNA VIDOT: Psychologist Pat Dudgeon agrees.

PAT DUDGEON: The suicide rates aren't a new thing so I think we do need to try something different things now.

ANNA VIDOT: The University of Western Australia's Professor Pat Dudgeon is a national leader in Indigenous mental health and suicide prevention research.

PAT DUDGEON: There's two philosophical issues that need to inform whatever we do and that is that Indigenous people are culturally different. They do need a different type of approach.

The second issue is that with any group, it needs to be owned by the community and by the people themselves. I think unless they're a part of identifying what the issue is, coming up with the solution and they're empowered to deal with things, resources will be wasted and there'll be limited gains.

ANNA VIDOT: She says research from a Canadian team led by Professor Michael Chandler provides compelling evidence that self-determination works.

PAT DUDGEON: They found that communities with little suicide had certain characteristics and they were to do with self determination and cultural reclamation. For us, we were really excited when we discovered this because Indigenous people have been saying for years and years that things need to have some kind of cultural aspects or cultural acknowledgement.

ANNA VIDOT: Professor Dudgeon and her colleagues are preparing to launch a project that will develop the clearest picture yet of where suicide is a real issue for Indigenous communities and the reasons for that.

She says they'll also talk to communities to find out what they need to reduce suicides in their particular community. And despite the size of the problem, Pat Dudgeon is optimistic.

PAT DUDGEON: Look, I think that there is a change coming, and I hope that our projects do, will help that change.

MARK COLVIN: Psychologist Pat Dudgeon ending Anna Vidot's report.

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