Suicide in Indian Country

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A review of suicide in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) communities found that successful suicide prevention programs used in these communities generally (1) address risk factors while “building individual self-efficacy and positive self-image,” (2) “are strength-based and culturally sensitive,” and (3) include traditional healing practices as well as cultural/spiritual development.

After reviewing the literature, the authors conclude that AI/AN suicide prevention programs need to (1) partner with community groups and institutions, (2) educate and involve parents, health and mental health workers, public health officials, and policymakers, and (3) take into account the community’s traditions and cultural practices. They also conclude that “insufficient empirical evaluation has been conducted on AI/AN suicide prevention and intervention programs” and that additional research on suicide prevention in AI/AN communities is needed.

The literature revealed that AI/AN people have the highest suicide rates of any ethnic group in the United States. The general risk factors for suicide (e.g. mental illness) are compounded by the effects of historical trauma including high rates of poverty, substance abuse, and chronic medical conditions, a lack of access to health care and behavioral health care services, loss of traditional culture, and barriers to help-seeking. Examples of barriers to help-seeking are a desire to be self-reliant and the perception of mental health services as “an external agent that is not part of tribal community.”


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