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Arctic 200

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Decolonizing Inuit Mental Health

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Background

Inuit communities have among the highest suicide rates in the world, despite the Arctic's low population density.¹ The compounded effect of frequent suicides on small communities is such that members of these communities have widely come to see it as a normal, expected, or inevitable event.² Many find it puzzling how a situation like this could come to be, and its possible contributing factors are complex. Suicide rates in the Arctic initially spiked in the 1970s and 80s, around the time forced relocations and boarding school attendance were taking place in Canada and Greenland.³ The generation that incurred this type of colonial trauma are the parents and grandparents of today's youth, the primary victims of the current suicide epidemic. It's likely that previous colonial trauma was then acted out on the children of that generation, consistent with increased prevalence of domestic violence and substance abuse during this time. Disrupted communities lead to family dysfunction, which is closely correlated with suicidal ideation in those who grow up in unstable environments.⁴

¹ Rebecca Hersher, "The Arctic Suicides: It's Not The Dark That Kills You," NPR, April 21, 2016, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2016/04/21/474847921/the-arctic-suicides-its-not-the-dark-that-kills-you>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Eduardo Chachamovich et al., "Suicide among Inuit: Results from a Large, Epidemiologically Representative Follow-Back Study in Nunavut," *The Canadian Journal of Psychiatry* 60, no. 6 (2015): doi:10.1177/070674371506000605.

Rapid colonization of Inuit communities was also associated with diminishing social and economic importance of the Inuit way of life. Traditional subsistence activities were rendered increasingly unnecessary as a new, market-based economic system was put in place and wage labor became the main way to earn a living. Inuktitut was suppressed in favor of the colonizers' languages. In some cases, Inuit who adopted a "modern" lifestyle adopted with it a prejudice against other Inuit who continued in traditional ways.⁵ As such, Inuit culture, way of life, and identity largely became invisible. This invisibility brought with it a loneliness that persists today. It doesn't help that the rare mental health resources available to Inuit are usually available only in colonial languages, not Inuktitut. "Loneliness" was one of the main reasons cited by students at one Greenlandic school as to why someone might want to end their own life.⁶ This sense of loneliness may be exacerbated by climate change, which has brought unpredictable changes to tundra routes that Inuit have navigated for centuries. Sea ice may freeze and melt during odd times of the year and new, severe storms threaten to trap anyone unfortunate enough to be "out on the land" when one starts.⁷ This makes it especially difficult to hunt and especially dangerous for youth with no knowledge of how to navigate this changing environment to leave their communities. For youth in remote communities, this kind of isolation can leave them alone with already troubling thoughts and no outlet for pent up frustration, anxiety, and depression.

Arctic suicides also tend to occur in "clusters," meaning that one will set off a series of others in a short period of time, further exacerbating the impact on these small, close-knit communities.

Notable Successes

⁵ Rebecca Hersher, "The Arctic Suicides"

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Melody Schreiber, "Solving the Suicide Crisis in the Arctic Circle," Pacific Standard, March 23, 2018, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://psmag.com/environment/solving-the-suicide-crisis-in-the-arctic-circle>.

Although the statistics are troubling, there are plenty of success stories of Inuit communities coming together to promote mental, emotional, and physical healing. In Greenland, a young man who lost the majority of his peers to suicide started a support group for parents whose children had ended their own lives.⁸ This in and of itself was a groundbreaking development for mental healthcare in Greenland as the topic of suicide was so shameful and taboo that parents who had lost children to suicide could not acknowledge it to each other. Eventually, this support group started to host suicide prevention events open to the public, and then turned into Greenland's first suicide hotline – run by “middle-aged women who were good at listening,”⁹ many of whom had no formal education. Though crude by some standards, this system was successful in saving many lives.

In the remote community of Clyde River, Nunavut, residents put together a sort of community center called *Ilisaqsivik* – Inuktitut for “a place to know oneself.”¹⁰ It provides services from nutrition classes and a before-school breakfast program to free WiFi and a video recording studio to mental health services and hunting mentors. *Ilisaqsivik* actively promotes Inuit *Qaujimajatuqangit* and “*Inuuqatigiittiarniq*” (translated as “the healthy inter-connection of mind, body, spirit, and the environment”)¹¹ as essential to the healing process for the Clyde River community. The staff are community members who speak Inuktitut and the wisdom of elders is central to *Ilisaqsivik*'s vision and decision-making processes. The programs tend to stress land-based learning, teaching youth traditional skills to help them navigate their environment and providing them with experiential learning. Many of Clyde River's youth credit the connections

⁸ Rebecca Hersher, “The Arctic Suicides”

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ilisaqsivik*, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://ilisaqsivik.ca/>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

and skills they gained from Iisaaqivik for teaching them how to cope with life's difficulties in a healthy and self-respecting way.

Factors to Consider

These major successes have some notable characteristics in common: namely that the ideas originated within the community and involved the whole community, did not rely on colonial institutions, were provided in Inuktitut, and empowered individuals on a community-wide scale. Since many of the factors contributing to mentally unhealthy environments in the Arctic are closely related to colonialism, it is important that policies originating outside Inuit communities exercise caution to not further propagate colonial relationships, discourse, or dependencies.¹² Rather, successful help from the outside would contribute to an environment in which Inuit are empowered to heal themselves according to their own knowledge and methods.

Policy Recommendations

Nation states with Inuit populations should start social media initiatives to raise awareness of stories that did not end in suicide, provide funding for community-driven projects, and continue their commitments to protecting the Inuit right to practice their own culture and to protecting the environment.

Perhaps the first step in breaking down the barriers preventing Inuit from receiving adequate mental healthcare is to break the silence surrounding the topic of suicide. The intense shame surrounding the subject is a major obstacle in discussions of mental health and can leave those who are most vulnerable unable to seek help. Messages of successful healing and resilience should be spread to encourage more open discussions of mental health, as resilience has been

¹² Laurence J. Kirmayer et al., *Suicide Among Aboriginal People in Canada*, PDF, Ottawa: The Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2007.

shown to be just as “contagious” as the dreaded suicide clusters.¹³ To spread these messages widely without intruding on a sensitive topic, nation states and non-governmental organizations wishing to contribute to the cause of Inuit mental health should implement social media initiatives to expose Inuit youth to stories of those who chose not to end their lives. This will challenge the status quo notion implicit in silence – that suicide an inevitable result of suffering.

Even in communities that are working to provide mental health resources to their residents, securing funding for these resources can be prohibitive due to the high cost of living and few economic opportunities in extremely isolated communities. Nation states should provide monetary aid to the Inuit communities residing within their borders for the explicit purpose of funding community-driven wellness projects.

Reconnecting Inuit youth with their culture and place in the world is a common and commonly successful means of empowerment. Nation states can show their commitment to fostering Inuit mental health by taking measures to protect the Inuit right to practice their own culture and to fight climate change.

These solutions provide outside help to Inuit while giving them space to heal themselves. This space honors Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit values of resilience, self-sufficiency, and local knowledge, and minimizes a colonial dependency between Inuit and the outside government.

Barriers to Implementation

Suicide is an extremely delicate topic among Inuit. Using social media platforms to spread alternative messages has potential to be a gentle approach but could easily fail without proper understanding of the role suicide plays in Inuit culture and communities, especially in the

¹³ "About Suicide: For Journalists," American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, December 17, 2018, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/for-journalists/>.

aftermath of colonization. Inuit communities however self-determined may struggle with funding for wellness projects. Government funding can help kickstart such programs but may be unsustainable in the long run and interfere with Inuit self-sufficiency.