

Youth, self-harm and suicide

Background

There is no universal definition of youth. For statistical purposes, the United Nations defines ‘youth’ as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. Many Member States as well as UN agencies have different definitions. Despite this lack of universal definition, there is a general agreement on the fact that youth represent a transitional period between childhood and adulthood.

Youth accounts for approximately 18% of the global population. This means that we have approximately one billion youth between 15 and 24 years. Taking into account that there are an estimated 370 million indigenous people in the world, there are approximately 67 million indigenous youth globally. This number may well be higher, since indigenous peoples often have higher proportions of youth than non-indigenous peoples in the same countries.

Geographic and cultural isolation limit many indigenous youths’ access to services. Indigenous youth are less likely to receive adequate health care, including mental health care. Historical injustices, as a result of colonization and dispossession of their lands, territories and resources that many indigenous peoples have suffered and continue to suffer has to a major extent not been resolved. This has had an adverse impact on indigenous peoples in many ways including on their physical and mental well-being, and in particular, upon indigenous youth, who are often frustrated at the additional challenges they face due to their distinct identity and culture.

These historical and present-day dynamics have threatened the cultural integrity of Indigenous communities and has a dramatic impact upon a wide range of inter-generational human rights. Economic, social, cultural and political marginalization has displaced many Indigenous youth and in particular, young Indigenous men. The marginalization of Indigenous peoples has, in many cases, triggered drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and a host of other traumatic conditions. These conditions are then ultimately suffered by Indigenous youth and present themselves in many forms, including self-harm and suicide.

The available data suggests that indigenous peoples experience disproportionately high rates of youth suicide. Although the reasons for youth suicide are complex and difficult to define, interference with, and destruction of, cultural structures has caused stress throughout subsequent generations and is a major contributor to suicidal behaviour. Indigenous youth today face the challenge of striking a balance between their place within their indigenous community, and within the mainstream society of the country in which they live. They may feel marginalized from both, resulting in a sense of socio-cultural isolation. This isolation, compounded by contemporary manifestations of discrimination, such as disproportionately high levels of poverty and unemployment, may contribute to the high rates of suicide experienced by certain indigenous peoples.

It should be noted that suicides are not only committed by youth and any measures to address youth self-harm and suicide must take into account that indigenous children can and sometimes do also take their lives.

Recommendations of the Permanent Forum

The Permanent Forum has, since its establishment made youth a priority. At its first session the Forum stated that it “...intends to make indigenous children and youth a focal point of its work in the years to come”.

Within this context, the Permanent Forum has repeatedly expressed its concern to the high rates of suicide among indigenous youth, having made a number of recommendations to the UN system calling for studies and dedicated workshops to address the issue. These recommendations have been addressed to Member States, UN programmes and specialized agencies, and indigenous peoples themselves. In particular, the Permanent Forum has called upon various UN bodies for further

research into various areas related to youth self-harm and suicide, including the prevalence and causes of suicide among indigenous youth; best practices for engaging indigenous youth and children on prevention of suicide; and the root causes of indigenous youth suicide and preventive strategies. A dedicated UN workshop or study on indigenous youth suicide has yet to be undertaken, despite the Permanent Forum's recommendations.

The Permanent Forum has also recommended that States take specific action with respect to this issue. Recommendations have called for incorporating indigenous youth perspectives into existing youth policies and plans with particular efforts to address suicide among indigenous youth. Additional recommendations have urged States to improve data collection; to allocate adequate resources for prevention; to develop programmes to revitalize languages, cultures and customs; and to develop training programmes on suicide prevention and mental health awareness.

Issues regarding indigenous self-harm and suicide were raised during the 2012 International Expert Group Meeting on Indigenous Youth. The meeting highlighted the need for States, the UN system and other actors to develop policies and programmes with an intercultural approach and to strengthen indigenous peoples' control over the development of measures to address youth self-harm and suicide. The report from that meeting makes a series of recommendations regarding steps needed to tackle this complex issue (for details see E/C.19/2013), many of which were reiterated by the Permanent Forum in its annual report (See E/2013/43, paras. 8, 9 and 18).

Questions to consider:

- What are the root causes of indigenous youth suicide and self-harm? What other factors contribute to this situation?
- How is the situation of indigenous youth different to that of non-indigenous youth?
- What advancements have been made in the area of preventing indigenous youth suicide and self-harm? What are ongoing obstacles?
- What data is available regarding indigenous self-harm and suicide? Where is further data needed and how can this be disaggregated in a way that is most useful to understand this issue?
- What are examples of best practices in addressing and preventing indigenous youth suicide and self-harm? What works and why? What doesn't work?
- How can the UN system help address this issue? How can the UN provide support to indigenous youth in this regard?