

CULTURE FORWARD



III. BACKGROUND: WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT NATIVE YOUTH SUICIDE

BACKGROUND

Many sources support the idea that suicide is a relatively new phenomenon across Indian Country. This is also true of the disproportionately higher rates among our Native youth that have received greater attention in recent decades. Ever since academia started tracking and writing about suicide rates in our communities, the patterns and trends have been distinct from other racial and ethnic groups. Research documented increases in suicide rates among Native communities starting around 1967. For many tribal nations, suicide is often described as a rare or even unheard of event prior to the 1960s. Some of the people with whom we spoke with in listening sessions to inform CULTURE FORWARD echoed these sentiments.

In general, stories embedded within our cultures and communities do not discuss or describe suicide, as such cultural conceptualizations of suicide likely did not exist to inform behavior or views of suicide as a socially viable option. Attention around suicide happening in Native communities by the U.S. federal government and mass media proliferated in 1968 when Senator Robert Kennedy, leading a Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education, visited a tribal community and learned of their concerns about losing their young ones to suicide. Calls for research on the subject were answered quickly, and soon the press was reporting stories about high rates of suicide among Native Americans — falsely generalizing across all communities. Preliminary studies focused on individual communities, some of which were experiencing high rates of suicide, although many were not. This led to erroneous stereotyping of suicide and perpetuated the failure to recognize the vast diversity of tribal nations across Indian Country.

Despite the limitations and lack of available data for suicide rates across tribal nations in the 20th century, some important historical

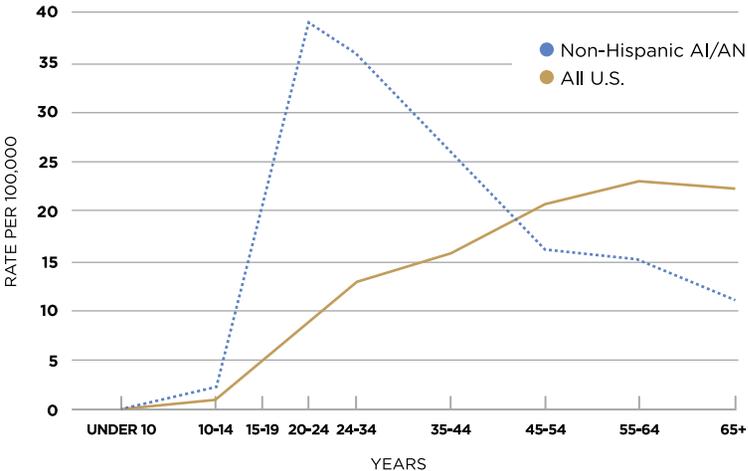
“[Suicide] wasn’t a part of us. I maintain personally that it’s a behavior that’s learned and we don’t realize that we’re mimicking or we’ve picked up this type of behavior.”

—Tribal Leader & Elder



Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli

Suicide Rate by Age for American Indians/Alaska Natives Compared to U.S. (Average 1965-1967)



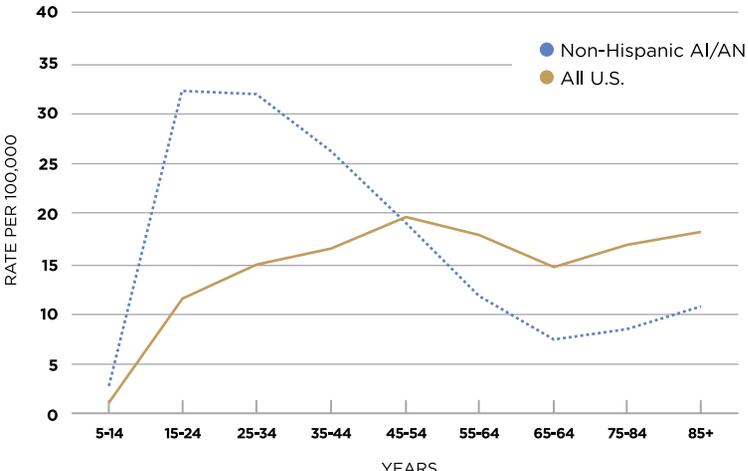
SOURCE: Ogden, M., Spector, M. I., & Hill, C. A. (1970). Suicides and homicides among Indians. *Public Health Reports*, 85(1), 75-80.

trends can be traced which mirror patterns we see today. Research from the 1960s to today shows that suicide in Native communities occurs mostly among youth, a pattern which stands in sharp contrast to suicide rates among the general U.S. population that experiences higher rates of suicide in middle and later life. In this same time period, Native suicide rates were significantly lower among older age groups. See comparative graphs on this page for suicide rates in the 1960s to today.

Important to keep in mind are the variations in suicide rates across tribes, regions (e.g., Northwest versus Southeast), geographies (e.g., urban versus rural) and time. These differences are masked by common presentations of overall rates of suicide in the U.S., which show that Native populations experience the highest rates of suicide.

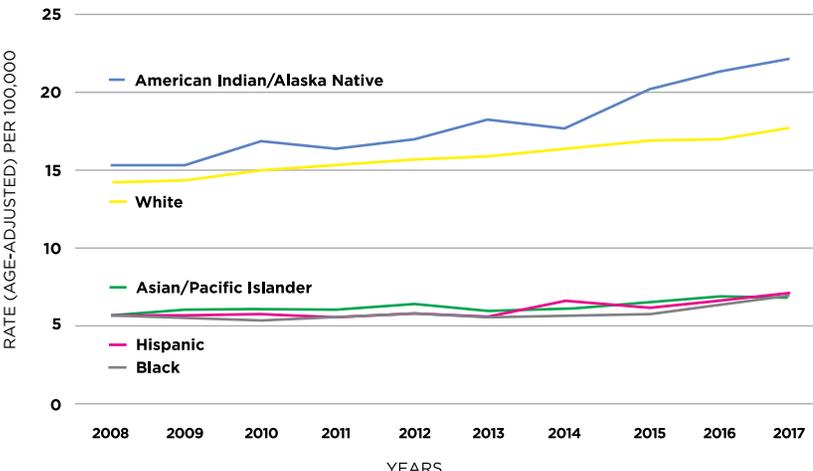
It is essential for each community to understand its own rates and patterns and not rely exclusively on national data.

Suicide Rate by Age for American Indians/Alaska Natives Compared to U.S. (Average 2008-2017)



SOURCE: CDC, 2017

Rate of Suicide by Race/Ethnicity, U.S. 2008-2017



SOURCE: CDC, 2017

RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

To better understand why suicide may occur, it is useful to consider risk and protective factors. Risk factors are associated with a higher chance of suicidal thoughts, attempts or deaths. Protective factors provide protection against suicide. Risk and protective factors can help a community identify program targets or help a provider consider if a person may be at higher risk. However, risk and protective factors do not affect everyone the same way, and must be understood in the contexts of individual lives. Suicidal thoughts and behaviors are complex, and risk and protective factors do not occur in isolation. Within Native communities, there are historical, social, cultural and political contexts to consider; and for every human being, individual, family and community level factors must be understood and addressed through comprehensive suicide prevention programming. Below are a list of suicide risk and protective factors that have been identified through community-based research in diverse Native American settings.

SUMMARY

The data presented in this section demonstrate that suicides in our Native communities occur in ways that are distinct from the general U.S. population. These differences underscore the need for unique approaches to preventing suicide. Tribal nations must leverage our inherent strengths to prevent suicide and utilize in-depth and holistic approaches that move beyond the numerical and superficial descriptions of our communities often imposed by Western science. The remainder of CULTURE FORWARD focuses on the intrinsic strengths rooted in Native cultures and communities to weave a new pathway for suicide prevention and beyond—toward a movement where our youth reclaim wellness for our communities and future generations.

Prevention of Native Suicide: Considering Risk and Protective Factors

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|  | <p>Risk Factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Historical trauma • Mental health issues • Substance use problems • Hopelessness • Poverty • Geographic isolation • Cultural loss • Chronic pain • Adverse childhood experiences | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family or friend suicide attempt or death • Difficulty coping with emotions and impulsivity • Relationship and/or family problems • Experiencing abuse and/or assault |  | <p>Protective Factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hope • Self-efficacy • Connectedness to family • Community belongingness • Identity and participation in tribal culture • Family living a traditional lifestyle • Self-determination • Support from tribal leaders • Tribal spirituality • Connectedness to community and lands • A culture of collective wellness within communities • Talking to family and friends about problems |
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