

CULTURE FORWARD



VIII. SELF-DETERMINATION EMPOWERS US TO FIGHT

SECTION OVERVIEW

- ▶ Tribal sovereignty can be leveraged to address youth suicide in our communities.
- ▶ Research shows that self-determination can be a protective factor against youth suicide.
- ▶ Tribal leaders have an important role to play in addressing suicide prevention for Native youth.

“Hundreds of treaties, along with the Supreme Court, the President and Congress, have repeatedly affirmed that tribal nations retain their inherent powers of self-government. These treaties, executive orders and laws have created a fundamental contract between tribes and the United States. Tribal nations are located within the geographic borders of the United States, while each tribal nation exercises its own sovereignty.”

—National Congress of American Indians

INTRODUCTION

We are nations within a nation—sovereign tribal nations with formal relationships with the U.S. government. Tribal sovereignty means the authority to self-govern. The National Congress of American Indians (NCAI) advocates for this right as a crucial means that can be used to address youth suicide. In 2013, NCAI passed a resolution called “Building Tribal Capacity to End High Rates of Suicide” that encouraged stakeholders to engage in partnerships to continue to restore culture and community balance and secure the future for Native youth.

Tribal leaders have a responsibility to take action to prevent youth suicide in our communities. They are the leaders of our communities and should be at the forefront of suicide prevention. One of the ways tribal leaders can demonstrate self-determination and sovereignty when it comes to suicide prevention is by leading the development of suicide prevention efforts. One of the most successful community-based Native youth suicide prevention programs, the Zuni Life Skills Curriculum (now adapted by many other Native communities and called the American Indian Life Skills Curriculum), was borne out of tribal leaders’ concern over rising rates of youth suicide and their disconnection from Zuni traditions.

Importantly, tribal leaders need to listen, support and show up for our Native youth, including allowing them to lead community suicide prevention efforts.

HOW DOES SELF-DETERMINATION HELP PREVENT NATIVE YOUTH FROM SUICIDE?

Empirical research shows that perceived caring from tribal leaders is protective against suicidal thoughts for Native youth. Powerful stories from our youth coupled with research show the impact tribal leaders have in protecting our Native youth. We have the power to help our youth who are struggling now and to make a difference in the lives of those yet to come.

STORIES ABOUT HOW SELF-DETERMINATION EMPOWERS US TO FIGHT AND PREVENTS SUICIDE

A Tribally Mandated Community-Based Suicide Surveillance System

Following a spike in youth suicide in 2001, the White Mountain Apache Tribal Council passed a tribal resolution that mandates anyone living or working on the reservation to report all self-harm and suicidal behavior (suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, binge substance use, non-suicidal self-injury, suicide deaths) to a central data registry. A team of White Mountain Apache community mental health specialists, the Celebrating Life team, follows up with each report made to the system. They fill important gaps in care for community members who need support, educate schools and all community agencies about the mandate and procedures, provide suicide prevention education and outreach activities and form key partnerships to develop and sustain Apache community-based prevention and intervention solutions. This community-based public health approach, made possible by the White Mountain Apache Tribe exercising self-determination and sovereignty, has shown significant reductions in suicide attempts and deaths in the community.

Indigenous Self-Governance Promotes Suicide Prevention

Research conducted with First Nations communities in Canada has also shown that cultural connections and exercise of self-governance are connected with decreased First Nations youth suicide. Rather than focusing solely on high rates of suicide in Indigenous communities, this group of researchers took a broader look at this issue. They recognized that different communities have varying rates of suicide and asked: what strengths do communities have where suicide rates are low? Using data that were available to them, researchers looked at a variety of factors that could contribute to cultural continuity—tangible things that would project to youth that their culture and identity continues through time. Many of these factors related to self-governance, including First Nations communities' involvement in land claims negotiations, control over health, safety, education and development of community cultural facilities. Researchers found that these factors were related to decreased suicide rates (see the figure below).

Self-Determination: Impact On Youth Suicide

	Youth Suicide Rates		Youth Suicide Rates
Increased involvement in land claims negotiations	▼	Less involvement in land claims negotiations	▲
More self-governance	▼	Less self-governance	▲
More cultural facilities available	▼	Fewer cultural facilities available	▲

Collaborative Hubs to Reduce the Burden of Suicide Among American Indian and Alaska Native Youth

This initiative seeks to expand the reach of culturally relevant interventions that promote community-based solutions to prevent Native youth suicide. This work is being conducted across three hubs working with Alaska Native, Southwest and Southern Plains and Urban Native communities. The hubs engage with tribal governments and local Native health boards to use research to drive policy decisions and build capacity of Indigenous staff to lead culturally-appropriate programs that honor the sovereignty of tribal nations.

WHAT CAN OUR COMMUNITIES DO NOW?

- ▶ Tribal leadership can consider passing tribal resolutions or mandates that address Native youth suicide prevention.
- ▶ As voiced by youth, tribal leaders should meet with youth councils and attend important youth community events (e.g., basketball games, cultural events) to show their support and care for their community's youth.
- ▶ Tribal leaders can consider dedicating a division or interagency council to youth suicide prevention. Remember to include youth leaders in these efforts.

LEARN MORE HERE:

National Indian Health Board. (2009). Healthy Indian Country Initiative Promising Prevention Practices Resource Guide. Retrieved from: <https://www.sprc.org/resources-programs/healthy-indian-country-initiative-promising-prevention-practices-resource-guide>

National Institute of Mental Health. (2018). Collaborative Hubs to Reduce the Burden of Suicide among American Indian and Alaska Native Youth. Retrieved from: <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/about/organization/od/odwd/ai-an/index.shtml>

National Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention. (2019). Hope for Life Day Toolkit. Retrieved from: <https://theactionalliance.org/communities/american-indian-alaska-native/hope-life-day-toolkit>



Photo Credit: National Congress of American Indians



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Photo Credit: Ed Cunicelli