

What Will it Take for Them to Hear Us?: Reacting and Not Reacting to Inuit Youth Suicide

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Abstract

Suicide among Inuit youth is a preventable public health crisis, but the question is: a crisis for whom? For non-Indigenous people in Canada, it may be known that suicide is a significant issue in Inuit communities. Regardless, what is the impact of reading that, in some areas, the rates for suicide are 25 times higher than the Canadian average, and in one small village of 1,800 up to 11 young Inuit died by suicide in one year? This is a decades-old issue, where one Inuk youth finally asked: What will it take for them to hear us? This article gets to the root of why we may not be listening, names what barriers there are to change, and elevates the voices of Inuit youth who are leading the way. It is through them that Inuit youth suicide can become a more meaningful, relevant and pressing concern for us all.

Keywords: Inuit; Suicide; Youth.

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A Note on Ignorance

It must first be said that I identify myself as a White settler in what is now Canada, and that I am not Inuit. I do not speak for the perspectives and experiences of Inuit, nor do I represent all non-Inuit in an experience of almost complete ignorance about Inuit knowledges, histories and cultures. However, I must believe that my reality is shared by many out there, and so I feel compelled to locate myself in this way.

I should share that I personally came upon my ignorance of Inuit quite naturally (which is to say that I was socialized in a space and time where Inuit were made to be invisible and largely irrelevant, especially in comparison to First Nations and Métis people in Canada). It also troubles me to say that as an academic, I went through an Indigenous Studies program and focused my graduate and doctoral research exclusively on how non-Indigenous people learn about and perceive Indigenous communities, and I still had almost no knowledge of, exposure to, or experience working in and with Inuit communities.

One might ask then, why I am writing about this subject? The answer is abundantly clear: this matters to me. It matters to me as a person who lives in Canada, and as a person who tries to live in relationship with Indigenous peoples and take responsibility for the things that we all share.

I am humbled to learn more, and to confront my own lack of knowing and, perhaps at many times in the past, a lack of caring about Inuit communities. As such, I look upon this article and this topic as a call to action for myself and others to learn differently, think differently and act differently about themselves in relation to all Indigenous communities, but towards Inuit most specifically. The imperative here cannot be overemphasized. As much as we might not feel this way, those of us in Canada are connected to and complicit in this issue, and we must act – because this is truly a matter of life and death.

Talking About Suicide

When thinking and talking about suicide, the issue of stigma is real – where the words we use and the meaning we attach to them becomes so important. Not only can language around suicide affirm our own judgments, it can make people who may be suffering less likely to reach out for help (Mental Health Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 45). Terms like ‘committed suicide’ infer a transgression; ‘completed suicide’ and ‘successful’ or ‘failed’ attempts presume a value can be attached to the act itself.

This article attempts to take a different approach, to describe suicide without judgement. Suicide is an emotional topic, in some instances taboo, but for many “suicide is a deeply troubling event that challenges our assumptions about the meaning and value of life and leaves a wake of pain and perplexity among the families and friends of those who end their lives” (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2007, p. xv). If one of the biggest barriers in addressing it is the disquieting nature of suicide in general, and our uncomfortableness in acknowledging and talking about it more specifically, we must begin by shining a light on this issue.

When we do this, we can discuss its causes and impacts more openly and collectively contemplate how we can each provide support and take action.

Overview

Suicide among Inuit youth is a “preventable public health crisis” (Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami [ITK], 2016b), but the question is: a crisis for whom? For non-Indigenous people in Canada, it may be known that suicide is a significant issue in Inuit communities. Regardless, what is the impact to read that in some areas the rates for suicide are 25 times higher than the Canadian average (ITK, 2018), and in one small village of nearly 1,800, at least 11 young Inuit died by suicide in one year? (Bernstein, 2018) This is a decades-old issue, where one Inuk youth finally asked: “What will it take for them to hear us?” (Bernstein, 2018).

This article focuses on how Inuit and Inuit youth suicide may be perceived by many in Canada, with the latter half of the paper shifting the narrative to solutions proposed by Inuit communities and the youth themselves. Throughout the article I use a narrative device of ‘we’ and ‘us’ to describe reactions and actions relating to Inuit youth suicide. This is not to suggest that all people are equally complicit in this issue (Inuit and other Indigenous people, or racialized settlers, may not be part of this collective) but rather to acknowledge a shared experience and perhaps joint commitment to change.

While serious, this topic does not need to be discussed solely with negativity – for if the youth themselves speak about hope and resilience, we must do so as well. Even though many of the forces that influence Inuit youth to die by suicide are bigger than themselves or, in many ways, beyond their control, this topic cannot and should not be divorced from Inuit youth.

It is through those young people’s voices, experiences and leadership that we are most likely to see lasting change. There is a common phrase that has been spoken about

Indigenous youth mental health and suicide, which is that youth are ‘dying to be heard.’ By attempting to take a strengths-based and solution-focused approach to the topic of Inuit youth suicide, by challenging non-Inuit to think twice about this issue, it is my hope that we can all acknowledge that while the loss of life is a tremendous tragedy, it can also be an opportunity to make change for ourselves and others.

Background

We know that our ancestors had relatively low rates of suicide. Life could be difficult in the past but the challenges our people faced were very different than those facing families today. Our ancestors were strong and resilient, and persevered through hardship, which is why we are here. We must provide our people who are struggling - especially our young people - with the support they need to be strong and resilient throughout their lives. (ITK, 2016b, p. 3)

Suicide in Inuit communities is so prevalent that Inuk journalist Ossie Michelin (2019) shares that: “Grieving has become part of our culture; it’s what we do now. ...We face our tragedies head on, again and again...” (para. 11). If suicide has been so persistent that it has become part of the culture for Inuit, it has also become so normalized that it can be consistently ignored by many in Canada.

I only decided to write about this topic when I recently read a news article about Inuit youth suicide. Much like many other Canadians, the issue was not front of mind. I must acknowledge though and take responsibility for the fact that I am not like other people in Canada; in the academic, professional and personal work I do, I am acutely aware of the ongoing nature of colonization and I work against the effects of systemic racism on Inuit communities. I am very aware of the issue of Inuit youth suicide, but despite all of this, I was still not spurred into action until I read that article.

Where my focus remains on Indigenous communities in Canada, this is not the case for many others (whether they are recently arrived in Canada, or their families have been here for generations). Indigenous scholar Susan Dion (2009) asks: “Why is it that Canadians can care about the disasters around the world, why do they care about people

across the oceans but they do not care about the Indians living right here in Canada?” (p. iv).

Whether we hear Inuit speak about the issue of suicide, see it reported in news media, or learn about it second-hand or in school, what might cause this issue to resonate or not? Much like asking, ‘*What will it take for them to hear us?*’, there is a long history in Canada of Indigenous voices being silenced or going unheard. “We have been speaking back to non-Aboriginal people since their arrival in our land, but what do they hear when we speak?” (Dion, 2009, p. 10).

The most pointed question I can ask in this article is not what do we hear, but what does it mean and how does it affect us that Inuit die by suicide 25 times more often than others in Canada?

If we decide that Inuit youth suicide is indeed an epidemic, if we take to heart the disproportionality and let it affect us, we can reach a tipping point where change is an absolute necessity – not just for the benefit of Inuit, but for all of us. Since success in getting government attention is often measured in getting public attention (Miller, 2000, p. 408), we can elevate the voices of Inuit youth and advocates who speak out on this issue, and use our own platforms and spheres of influence to not let this issue be forgotten until the next news cycle.

Statistics

The Inuit population is young and growing, with 33% under the age of 15 compared to 17% of the total population of Canada” (ITK, 2018, p. 9). Unlike many other Indigenous people in Canada (where the urban population is much higher), only “Twenty-seven percent (27%) of Inuit...live outside of Inuit Nunangat (*‘where Inuit live’*)” (Tungasuvvingat Inuit, 2016, p. 4). “Inuit traditional lands [include] Nunavut, Nunavik (northern Québec), Nunatsiavut (Labrador), and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (ISR) of the Northwest Territories (Statistics Canada, 2015, as cited in Tungasuvvingat Inuit, 2016, p. 4).

Most Inuit reside in Inuit Nunangat, which “includes 51 communities and encompasses roughly 35 percent of Canada’s landmass and 50 percent of its coastline” (ITK, 2018, p. 2). Despite the Arctic being far removed from most people’s minds and daily lived experiences, to understand that Inuit Nunangat comprises more than one-

third of Canada means there is much we can learn about that space and who lives there.

According to Statistics Canada, in 2017 Inuit had the lowest average life expectancy in the country. The Canadian average for men is 79 and women is 83; for Inuit, the average life expectancy for men is 64 and for women, 73. Does this 10 to 15-year gap mean that we don't tend to live past our 60s and 70s? Anyone spends time in our communities will tell you that while there may be many, many youth (we also have the youngest population average in the country) there is no shortage of Elders. What is responsible for this discrepancy is the fact that so many of us die tragically young. (Michelin, 2018, para. 4)

Rates for suicide in some regions of Inuit Nunangat have both increased and decreased dramatically over the years, where in other regions the suicide rate has remained much the same – though in those cases still over five and ten times the Canadian national average. In Nunatsiavut – an area connected to Labrador – the rate is 24 times that of Canadians (ITK, 2018, p. 18). Per ITK, from 1991 to 2013, the suicide rates were as follows:

Region	1991-2003	2009-13	Variance
Nunatsiavut	238.8/100,000	275.3/100,000	+36.5
Nunavut	119.7/100,000	116.7/100,000	-3.0
Nunavik	181.2/100,000	113.5/100,000	-67.7
ISR	61.4/100,000	60.4/100,000	-1.0
Canada	11.9/100,000	11.3/100,000	-0.6

“Youth suicide is of high concern for Inuit since suicide rates for Inuit youth are among the highest in the world, at 11 times the Canadian national average” (Statistics Canada, 2008, as cited in ITK, 2018, p. 19). While less information is available about Inuit youth suicide rates in urban centres, the number of Inuit in urban centres are generally underreported, and therefore the experiences of Inuit youth may not be well known. The “Inuit population in Ottawa is four times larger than the Statistics Canada estimate. [They are] youthful..., with more than 40 percent of adults under the age of 35” (Tungasuvvingat Inuit, 2017, p. 7).

Despite less available information, a smaller total population, and perhaps fewer total suicides in Ottawa and other urban centres where Inuit live (e.g. Montréal, Edmonton, Yellowknife), the effects of suicide are still felt for many who live in towns and cities; “more than

three quarters of the Inuit adult population living in Ottawa reported that they had a close friend or family member who had committed suicide” (Tungasuvvingat Inuit, 2017, p. 10).

Perspectives on Inuit

Like many other Indigenous communities, there are a limited number of venues where non-Indigenous people tend to learn about Indigenous peoples, cultures and histories. Family, school and media are generally the spaces where Indigenous people (and the perceived issues that they experience) are discussed.

In Ontario, the education system's curriculum and policies do little to help non-Indigenous people understand the histories and cultures of Inuit and the impacts of colonization, which mostly took place in the last 60-70 years (Snowball, 2009; Snowball, 2014). Unlike First Nations and Métis communities who have been experiencing and resisting the effects of colonization for hundreds of years, Inuit were largely not exposed to Europeans and their desires for control and expansion during that same timeframe. Though it is not the focus of this article to go over the history of colonization and decolonization in Inuit communities, everyone in Canada should at least be familiar with the following issues, which have had the most pervasively negative impacts on Inuit communities: Residential schools, forced relocation of communities, the coordinated dog slaughter, and enumeration of Inuit.

Inuit...have experienced very high levels of historical trauma due to colonial policies such as residential schools and forced relocation. Current discriminatory practices, including racism in social services, health care and high levels of child protection agency involvement contribute to an ongoing cycle of poverty and trauma. Additional barriers to health care... contribute to a high burden of chronic disease and physical and emotional pain. (Tungasuvvingat Inuit, 2017, p. 6)

One of the most critical perspectives that one can have on colonization and decolonization in the Canadian context is that they are both ongoing processes in tension with one another. It is difficult to rationalize that Canada is a post-colonial state when the effects, legacies and impacts of colonization on Inuit communities are so real. Instead of arguing whether colonization is active and ongoing, we should question whether or not many in Canada have a

relationship to Inuit beyond a passive acknowledgement of hardship or a cursory knowledge of ‘the facts’.

To this end, noted non-Indigenous historian J. R. Miller (2000) posits that the “nature of a relationship between two peoples of different backgrounds is largely determined by the reasons they have for interacting” (p. xii). If Canadians’ relationship to Inuit is simply based on what we learn about in school and read in the news, it would be difficult to perceive Inuit from anything other than a perspective of deficiency and defectiveness. “When viewing one group as having less, it is easy to internalize them as inferior in a hierarchy” (Bishop, 2001, p. 84).

Lacking relationship to Inuit communities and with limited sources of knowledge and exposure, we become convinced of stereotypes, which can easily become prejudices. “Stereotyping supports the separation between people, and creates a dichotomous us/them mentality” (Bishop, 2001, p. 85). In this way, not only do the narratives in society and media impact non-Inuit, they also impact Inuit communities, and in particular Inuit youth. “So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything – that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive – that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness” (Freire, 1970, p. 63).

Not only should we be asking ourselves how we perceive Inuit, based on media and what we learn, but also what do Inuit read about themselves? If a common criticism of major media outlets is that they are less inclined to report on the ‘good news’, it is understandable that one of the only subjects that the media covers in relation to Inuit communities is youth suicide.

However, suicide and mental illness are not, and cannot be, the only story about Inuit youth that we hear and tell ourselves. Inuit people, communities and cultures are not and have never been defined by non-Inuit, but we should not be so naive to think that these representations do not have an impact – on both ourselves and Inuit youth.

Making Inuit Youth Suicide a Meaningful, Relevant and Pressing Concern

In the time that I have been working on issues concerning how non-Indigenous people perceive and relate to Indigenous communities, I have been consistently struck by one major unanswerable question: Why should Canadians care? There is of course the moral and ethical argument. There are also fiscal arguments that can be made, though if any of these reasons were effective or

compelling enough, disproportionalities like Inuit youth suicide simply would not exist.

Thinking through those arguments, it is clear to me that the means to affecting change in decolonization is to determine how *meaningful, relevant* and *pressing* an issue is to non-Indigenous people. Further, the issue needs to be obvious, the solution or contribution to a solution clearly laid out, and above all not presented as a cost. On a moral and ethical level, few would argue that Inuit youth suicide is meaningful. For those who are knowledgeable of Indigenous policy and program delivery, they might also admit that the financial cost and economic impact of suicide is high, and therefore meaningful in a different way. Where we start to see slippage is on relevance – as mentioned, apart from some media and what we are taught in schools, what relationship do non-Indigenous people generally have to Inuit? Most Canadians live far away from Inuit Nunangat, and as such the realities of many Inuit are far removed from places like Toronto, for example. Lastly, Inuit youth suicide is not and has not been a pressing concern for almost anyone other than Inuit, it seems. Put another way, Inuit youth suicide has not been made to be a priority.

Meaningful

In the public mind, there has been no epitomizing moment of genocidal crisis or mass human rights violations that would trigger a need for transitional justice mechanisms (Regan, 2010, p. 10).

Of course, people care about the lives of Inuit youth. One would be hard pressed to find someone who reads about the disproportionate suicide rates in Inuit communities and is not stirred and disturbed on a human, personal level. On the spectrum of political issues – in a supposed time of truth and reconciliation in Canada – the issue of Inuit youth suicide can take up greater space in our hearts and minds.

Residential schools have become a powerful symbol for non-Indigenous people to rally around, that teaches us about the depth and impact of colonization, but in most ways this is considered a ‘past’ issue for Canadians. Perhaps it is time for us to take the empathy, grief and outrage we feel for residential schools and translate it to a phenomenon which is happening still, that is in many ways caused by those same schools.

Relevant

When we hear and read about Inuit youth suicide, it is difficult to not think that this is a problem for ‘them’, and that it is not ‘about me’. When we hear about distant tragedies within the boundaries of Canada, there is a “dis-associative ‘splitting-off’ in which listening accords no need to take on a sense of responsibility” (Simon, 2009, p. 5). However, if we can acknowledge that someone is in fact responsible for this issue - meaning that they caused it, and/or they must help solve it, we can better understand our role. As beneficiaries and inheritors of colonization, many in Canada do not contemplate how they might be complicit or connected to issues like Inuit youth suicide, nor do we always contemplate our agency and ability to influence change, because in many ways “settlers themselves are colonized and often cannot perceive the systems of control” (Barker, 2006, p. 64) that allow issues like Inuit youth suicide to persist.

Pressing

If you know that this is happening and do nothing about it, then you must intend it to continue (Johnson, 2007, p. 32).

Even for issues that we believe deeply in, but are still not ‘about us’, we are often selective of the causes to which we dedicate time and space. Everyone has busy lives and concerns of their own, perhaps even serious mental health concerns for their own children and families. If one does choose to get involved, to act, there often comes a question: *But what can I do?* “Undoing inequality...is a risky and uncomfortable act because we need to disrupt the way things are ‘normally’ done. This involves serious (and frequently threatening) effort to interrogate our privilege as well as our powerlessness...” (Ng, 2003, as cited in Curry-Stevens, 2007, p. 37). Making Inuit youth suicide an issue of priority can look different to different people, or at different times. To remember, to bear witness, to share, to write articles, to reach out to elected officials – these actions and others are ways to acknowledge that this issue is a pressing one, and to help others see things the same way.

Compassion, Guilt and Shame

There are three complicating factors to making Inuit youth suicide meaningful, relevant and pressing: compassion, guilt, and shame – which often results in apology.

It is possible that when confronted with Inuit youth suicide, and many other issues relating to Indigenous communities, that Canadians experience a sense of apathy and hopelessness, that the issue is too big and beyond their

means to change. If we care so much and so often, and nothing changes, what is the impact? Caring too much and too often – compassion fatigue, without noticeable change – can lead us to be closed off from engaging and acting further.

Part of the natural process for many non-Indigenous people in learning about these issues is to feel guilt, which can “be conceptualized along a continuum, from an emotional experience of inadequacy and responsibility that evolves from learning about privilege, which may then intensify, causing [people] to be immobilized and unable to motivate themselves to act” (Curry-Stevens, 2007, p. 42).

From guilt and inadequacy often comes shame, where “the recognition of shame – or shame as a form of recognition – comes with conditions and limits” (Ahmed, 2005, p. 72). What is the productive value of guilt and shame, though, and what is the common outcome? An apology. In the case of the apology in 2008 for Canada’s role in residential schools, and the recent federal apology for the treatment of Inuit with tuberculosis, it is important to explore what ‘apologizers get from apologizing’ (Mackey, 2009, p. 3).

Apology may be an acceptable process, but there are some things that are “outside the bounds of forgiveness” (Mackey, 2009, p. 4). There is also an expectation that things will change after an apology is made, and perhaps most importantly, that the apology needs to be believed and accepted.

Bringing the Issue Closer to Home

I once overheard a snide remark from someone saying, ‘If I lived up there, I’d want to kill myself too’ (Michelin, 2019, para. 10).

Perhaps the attention, or lack of attention paid to the prevalence of Inuit youth suicide is that the people and communities of Inuit Nunangat are just too far away from many of us, and that we cannot even imagine ourselves in Inuit communities.

With a population of around 12,000 people in Nunavik (an area of 443,684 sq. km, or the northern third of Quebec) between January and October 2018 there had been 13 suicides (Bernstein, 2018). Because no comparable community of non-Inuit covers such a large land mass, it is at least relevant to ask ourselves that if a community in Ontario with the same population as

Nunavik – say, Uxbridge – were to have 13 suicides in a 10 month span, what would our reaction be?

Uxbridge, Ontario is just 75 km Northeast of Toronto. If the people who died by suicide were ‘our people’ and they lived so close to many of us, would the circumstances change? What would be the response from community members, or the municipal, provincial and federal government? What would the media and social media responses be? Perhaps most importantly, how would the friends and family of those who were lost feel – would they feel heard, supported and comforted to know that everyone took this situation seriously and that it would not happen again?

The losses experienced in Nunavik are devastating, and the example of Uxbridge may help to illustrate a point of comparison, but we should acknowledge that of those 13 people who died, 11 of them came from a very small community of Puvirnituk, and all of them were under the age of 30 (Bernstein, 2018). Puvirnituk has fewer than 1,800 residents and covers 111.5 sq. km.

For sake of comparison again, the village of Tweed, Ontario has a population of 1,701 and is located roughly halfway between Toronto (the provincial capital) and Ottawa (the national capital). If we woke up to the morning news and found out that even five people had died by suicide in Tweed over the course of 10 months, it would (a) be more likely to be a big news story and (b) we might collectively react with at least a baseline of curiosity and some concern. If we found out that 11 people had died by suicide in Tweed in that timeframe, and that it was in fact a year-over-year occurrence, how then would we react?

Differential Reactions to Murder and Suicide

When the City of Toronto experienced a record-setting number of homicides in 2018, 96 murders in total (Toronto Star), the narrative in local media centred on memorializing the victims, achieving justice and finding solutions. Much like suicide in Inuit communities, this is not a new issue but rather something that ebbs and flows, year over year. From 2009-2018, the fewest number of homicides in Toronto was 51 (Toronto Police Service, 2019). Much like suicide in the North, murder in Toronto has become normalized. However, in a city of 2.8 million people, a loss of 96 by homicide equates to 0.0034% of the population per year. Even one death is shocking, but 96 murders in Toronto compared to the 13 losses in Nunavik (0.0072% of the population) must give us pause.

The narrative around suicides is less clear than murder, and the solutions are even more ambiguous. Does murder require justice, but suicide does not? The perception of suicide is often that the victim and perpetrator are the same person, but in both cases the motive may be unclear. We can acknowledge that many historical, environmental, and social factors can lead individuals to suicide, just as they can influence those who take another person’s life. Like unravelling why Toronto experienced so many murders, so too must we find ways to explain and address why some communities experience suicide disproportionately and so frequently.

The same helplessness, malaise and indifference that many feel in regard to Inuit youth suicide can be felt by those who read about – but may not be directly affected by – murder in Toronto. The key issue here is to invest and really listen to those Inuit and organizations who speak about this issue, because they know the issues and they can see the way forward.

Inuit Solutions to Inuit Problems

In the context of the recent suicides in Nunavik, a representative from the local school board spoke about how suicide was affecting the young people:

The school board for Nunavik said it is doing its best to handle the immediate crisis by sending psychologists to the schools where children have lost friends and family. They’ve also called an emergency meeting... with Inuit leaders, public service workers and elected government officials. Harriet Keleutak, general director of the school board, said she doesn’t want her community’s children to have to learn to cope with suicide. She wants them to be able to enjoy living. (Bernstein, 2018, para. 17-19)

Keleutak further enforced that “It’s trauma repeating over and over. It happened during the residential school era, it’s happening again in the form of foster care” (Bernstein, 2018, para. 21). To ask children to cope with suicide, and to make a statement about those children being able to enjoy living – what are other contexts in which we hear and see this? In what other contexts would this reality be acceptable to us?

Mary Simon, Canada’s former ambassador for circumpolar affairs and Inuit rights advocate, stated: “When you look at the lives that are being lost through suicide, it is a state of emergency. If it was happening

anywhere else in Canada, I don't think that we would be standing aside and watching it happen" (Bernstein, 2018, para. 9).

Simon learned late in 2018 that her 22-year old niece had died by suicide, and shared: "There's a stillness in the community [Kuujjuag, Nunavik]. Nobody's really talking about it. People are on high alert, wondering where it's going to happen next" (Bernstein, 2018, para. 5).

Ossie Michelin (2019) relates that the closeness that causes intense grief and clusters of suicides can also be the greatest strength for communities: "Our communities are tightly knit with kinships, families, and ancestors connecting us all in a web of relationships. When someone dies, it plucks at that web and we all feel it" (para. 3).

Our roots run deep, our families have been friends for generations, the Land is beautiful, and when we participate in our culture with our community we know that this is where we belong. Sometimes we have to leave our communities for our own well-being, but for many, that is not an option. (Michelin, 2019, para. 10)

Suicide Prevention

Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK), the national representative body for Inuit in Inuit Nunangat and across Canada, released a Strategy and Action Plan for 2016-2019, which listed five priorities:

- (1) Suicide prevention; (2) Inuit education;
- (3) Addressing family violence; (4) Reconciliation; and (5) Inuit language promotion, preservation and revitalization (ITK, 2016a, p. 7).

As part of its commitment on the first priority, ITK released a National Inuit Suicide Prevention Strategy (NISPS) in 2016 which goes into great detail on how suicide among Inuit can be prevented and eliminated. Their six focus areas are:

- (1) Create social equity; (2) Create cultural continuity; (3) Nurture healthy Inuit children from birth; (4) Ensure access to a continuum of mental wellness services for Inuit; (5) Heal unresolved trauma and grief; and (6) Mobilize Inuit knowledge for resilience and suicide prevention (ITK, 2016b, p. 28).

All six priorities are important, though so much in the last five depend on the first: 'creating social equity.' Inuit and organizations like ITK and Tungasuvvingat Inuit (TI), in Ontario, are best situated to inform, support and implement those five priority areas. Creating social equity and the conditions for equity to exist, however, is work for everyone. We cannot truly achieve equity without naming and understanding inequity. Equity sounds good, but what is the problem that we are trying to solve? For one, we can name and understand issues around ignorance and indifference about Inuit youth suicide, or about Inuit in general. What are the structural or systemic factors that have allowed Inuit youth to continue to die at such alarming rates, year after year?

Clearly, interventions with funding and service delivery have either not been properly directed or sufficient over the years. Perhaps they did not focus enough on prevention, or Inuit were not enabled or empowered to drive the interventions. It is difficult to level a critique without knowing the ins and outs of this issue over the years, but one thing is obvious - what we are doing is not working.

Risk and Protective Factors

ITK (2019a) recently released a resource on defining risk and protective factors to address suicide in Inuit communities. Identifying the risk factors and enforcing the protective factors are important in the prevention of youth suicide, but also in the support and treatment provided in emergency situations.

Risk	Protective
<i>Historical Trauma:</i> Impacts of colonialism, residential schools, relocations, dog slaughter	<i>Cultural Continuity:</i> Strongly grounded in Inuit language, culture and history
<i>Community Distress:</i> Social inequities including crowded housing, food insecurity, lack of access to services	<i>Social Equity:</i> Adequate economic, educational, health and other resources support and foster resilience
<i>Wounded Family:</i> Intergenerational trauma, family violence, family history of suicide	<i>Family Strength:</i> Safe, supportive and nurturing homes

<p><i>Traumatic Stress and Early Adversity:</i> Experiencing acute or toxic stress in the womb, witnessing or experiencing physical or sexual abuse</p>	<p><i>Healthy Development:</i> Providing children with safe environments that nurture social and emotional development</p>
<p><i>Mental Distress:</i> Depression, substance misuse, mental health disorder, self-harm</p>	<p><i>Mental Wellness:</i> Access to Inuit-specific mental health services and supports</p>
<p><i>Acute Stress or Loss:</i> Recent loss, intoxication, access to means, hopelessness, isolation</p>	<p><i>Coping with Acute Stress:</i> Ability to cope with distress, access to social supports and resources</p>

Young Leaders

We know that Inuit youth are disproportionately affected by suicide, but Inuit youth are also disproportionately taking up leadership positions to name the causes and impacts of suicide, and to raise awareness. Both the National Inuit Youth Council, operated through ITK, and the Qarjuit Youth Council in Nunavik have made statements on suicide and named it as a strategic priority which needs to be addressed.

National Inuit Youth Council

The National Inuit Youth Council (NIYC) was established by the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada, now known as Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami (ITK) in 1993 to provide guidance and input into issues of interest for Inuit youth in Canada. Each NIYC representative is tasked with voicing the concerns and ideas of Inuit youth from their respective regions, with the elected President serving as the National voice of Inuit youth. (ITK, 2019b, para. 2)

Qarjuit Youth Council

The Qarjuit Youth Council, with representatives from Nunavik, have made mental health and suicide a focus of their work in their 2016-2021 Strategic Plan. They have committed to:

Regain our sense of well-being as young Inuit, confident in our culture, language and abilities. We have to break the cycle of depression, suicide and social dysfunction.

So our first priority is mental health (Qarjuit Youth Council, 2016, p. 4-5).

They went on to explain further that education, particularly mental health awareness, for both youth and the older generations was a necessity.

Youth clearly emphasized that mental health awareness should be more exposed to Inuit youth and future generations to come. Mental health should be taught to older generations as well. ...The available resources and infrastructure are also inadequate for the real needs of youth within each community. Thus, mental health is linked to the alarming rates of youth suicide in our region. Education is a form of suicide prevention so it's crucial to start from there. (Qarjuit Youth Council, 2016, p. 14)

For the youth themselves, this article introduces four youth who are all coming at the issue of youth suicide from different spaces; they are each leaders, whether they are advocates, suicide prevention professionals, program coordinators, or elected representatives.

Nigel Adams

Speaking to CBC News about the recent suicides in Nunavik, young Inuk Nigel Adams could not help but be frustrated by the inaction of government and general lack of awareness:

He feels like the problem is being swept under the rug by the Canadian government. 'What will it take for them to hear us? I am beyond f--king tired. I'm sorry for my French but it's got to a point where I can't keep my mouth shut anymore' (Bernstein, 2018, para. 14-15).

As an advocate for Inuit youth, that interview was not his first - nor will it be his last - attempt to gain public and government attention to the issue:

'I've appeared on CTV News, CBC News, Global News, the Montreal Gazette, and I'm trying to do more for us to be heard. What do we do as Inuit? How do we get the support' (Bernstein, 2018, para. 16).

Alicia Aragutak

Alicia Aragutak, 27, is the chair of the Nunavik suicide prevention committee, in operation since 2009 (Abboud, 2018). When asked about the recent suicides in Nunavik, she said:

‘It’s not striking because I’ve been in this field for the past five years. These issues, they’ve been talked about a lot in previous years’... ‘A lot of the issues [around suicide] are repetitive, and they’re coming back’ (Abboud, 2018, para. 22-23).

Aragutak shares that communication barriers between her committee and Nunavik decision-makers are a key problem. While she finds the suicide prevention work to be a challenge, she is inspired to find solutions to long-standing problems:

‘It forces you to become hybrid: what are new ways to look at? What are we missing? How do we improve?’... ‘It puts you in a position where you have to really try new things and really start networking’ (Abboud, 2018, para. 28).

Despite the crippling issue of youth suicide in Nunavik, Aragutak admits that she is optimistic that those in the region “will find a solution to end the hopelessness and despair that lead so many young Inuit to suicide” (Abboud, 2018, para. 31).

‘The population in Nunavik is so young. It’s really, really time to invest in these younger generations’... ‘I’m part of the younger generation, and we have no choice to be optimistic. The will is there and I’m just very, very hopeful good things will happen from here’ (Abboud, 2018, para. 32-33).

Lucasi Iyaituk

Lucasi Iyaituk shares that one day he wants to be the mayor of Puvirnituk, he wants to be a leader. Iyaituk serves as a coordinator of the youth centre in Puvirnituk, and at 18, states that he is the youngest program coordinator in Nunavik (Abboud, 2018).

‘We play ping-pong, tournaments, Inuit games’... ‘I love being with the kids. They make me happy, and they are important’... ‘They’re the future leaders’ (Abboud, 2018, para. 6-8).

In his role, Lucasi works to keep those who drop in busy (Abboud, 2018), knowing that many of the children and youth in Puvirnituk are affected by the same concerns as those who died by suicide, and would also be deeply connected to those who were lost.

Maatalii Okalik

Maatalii Okalik is an Indspire laureate, and recipient of the Qullit Nunavut Status of Women Council’s Outstanding Young Woman Award, and shares that her vision is “to ensure that Inuit live the same quality of life as fellow Canadians” (Thompson, 2017, para. 3). As a young leader, and former President of the National Inuit Youth Council, she acknowledges that for Inuit to achieve a greater quality of life requires addressing entrenched social problems based in Canada’s colonial past.

One of the first steps to bring Canadians to a common understanding is that there are a number of social inequities that we face on a daily basis, whether it be education, whether it be housing, food insecurity, cultural access, cultural continuum or access to equitable and quality health care. We’re in the deficit in all of those areas, which contributes greatly to our quality of life on a daily basis, coupled with the identity crisis. To me it just doesn’t make sense for Inuit in our particular communities to be living in Third-World conditions. There should be a priority of Canada to address that inequity. It would be a proactive measure that would prevent some of the dire statistics, including our suicide rates. (Thompson, 2017, para. 9)

She also envisions a more active role from the federal government to help prevent suicides and work with Inuit to revitalize languages and cultural practices. Other factors she points to, that may relate to youth mental health and the persistence of suicide, are the lack of high-speed internet connections and expensive air travel to and from Inuit communities (Thompson, 2017).

‘The more Inuit youth are aware of what happened in the last three generations, the more prepared they will be to make critical decisions about their own lives in a positive way’ (Ducharme, 2017, para. 16).

What Can We Do?

Getting Out of Our Own Way: A Policy Approach

We discovered that we could not be the cure if we were the disease (Battiste, 2000, p. xvii).

There is a standard approach to the design and implementation of government policy and social programming, which is that one group often defines and attempts to create the solutions to a social problem disproportionately experienced by a marginalized or disadvantaged group or population. In this work, there may be instances of community partnerships, consultations or co-development, but Indigenous policy through Canadian governments is almost always driven, developed and owned by non-Indigenous people.

In response to the recent suicides in Nunavik, Canada's former Minister of Indigenous Services, Jane Philpott, released a statement of remorse:

'I am deeply concerned about the recent loss of young lives by suicide in Nunavik'... 'My heart goes out to the families. My officials have reached out to the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services to offer additional supports as needed during this difficult time' (Bernstein, 2018, para. 33-34)

If additional supports were needed to address the loss of life, were there sufficient supports made available to prevent suicide and promote life in the first place? To take nothing away from the likely real sadness of the former Minister, we must move beyond concern at this point.

A serious question needs to be asked, that if Inuit were given full autonomy to articulate the issue, plan for, and address the suicide epidemic that is in many communities, would the issue persist in the way that it has? We have seen how Inuit organizations like ITK have made it a priority, and have heard Inuit youth raise their voices. It may not be that Inuit communities can do this on their own, but if we get out of our own way, we might have a chance to get this right.

Based on data from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a study found that the estimated average cost of suicide is approximately \$1.3M USD, much of which includes lost productivity (which would skew lower based on the average income of Inuit compared to

the Canadian population, though for youth the opportunity cost is truly unknown) (Shepard, Gurewich, Lwin, Reed Jr, & Silverman, 2015). The study also found that every \$1 spent on therapeutic interventions and linkages between care providers ended up saving \$2.5 in the cost of suicides (Shepard et al., 2015).

If even a fraction of this cost could have been spent on prevention and support for those young people who took their own lives, outcomes would be much different. Funding, policies and programs are not the whole problem though, nor are they the whole solution – it is how we spend the money, who is involved in developing the policies, and who facilitates the programs that may have the more lasting effect.

It is certainly not the intent of this article to propose how Inuit youth suicide can be reduced or eliminated; there are countless people who have struggled with this issue for decades who are infinitely more qualified and better positioned than me. The notion that I am continually trying to bring to the forefront is that, clearly, what we have been doing is not working, and the social and political will seems to be lacking to dramatically effect change.

Looking Within, Looking to the North

When we think about Inuit youth suicide, Inuit are the objects of our experience. It can be difficult to shift from this self-centred position, to consider Inuit beyond the context of Canada and colonization. Instead of considering what we think about Inuit, perhaps we should consider what Inuit might think of us.

Nunavik journalist Zebedee Nungak refers to perspective reversal as Qallunology – 'the study of white folks' where Nungak argues that 'because only Europeans get to be Eskimologists, theoretically only Inuit should be allowed to be Qallunologists' (Rasmussen, 2001, p. 113).

Qallunology comes from the Inuktitut word Qallunaat, which is often used to describe White people or outsiders. "The primary purpose of Qallunology is to get white folks to examine and change their destructive behavior" (Rasmussen, 2001, p. 113). Now, this is not to say that all Qallunaat contribute to the destruction of Inuit society, but self-reflexivity is certainly an achievable goal.

In many cases with reconciliation and decolonization work, "we avoid looking too closely at ourselves and the

collective responsibility we bear for the colonial status quo” (Regan, 2010, p. 11). To look within and contemplate how we are situated in the issue of Inuit youth suicide can be deeply unsettling.

As witnesses and allies, we are not always required to have the answers. “Part of finding is getting lost, and when you are lost you start to open up and listen” (Tafoya, 1995, p. 11). In this way, the “objective is not always to have [people] figure it out, but to be overwhelmed” (Dion, 2009, p. 184). If we open ourselves up to listening, to hearing, and to caring, we might create the conditions for this issue to take root.

However, caring can be a double-edged sword, for “when [Canadians] express sorrow and sympathy... they also confirm their ‘own humanitarian character’ and consequently end up feeling good about feeling bad” (Simon, 2009, p. 133). As mentioned above, there is no real productive value in guilt or shame, but to care, to show solidarity and to center the voices and perspectives of Inuit, “this is the very meaning of integrity: having the mental toughness and emotional strength to stand up for what we believe is right” (Alfred, 2011, p. 5).

Inuit communities do not need to be fixed, but there is power in each of us to reconcile this issue with ourselves when we hear and read about issues like Inuit youth suicide. However, “doing the work of exposure is both political and emotional work, and is not over in the moment of hearing” (Ahmed, 2005, p. 83). At the moment, there is not a high level of expectation on most people in Canada to raise their voices on this issue, but does that not make the opportunity that much more compelling, and perhaps the unexpected response that much more likely to resonate? This article does not prescribe what actions we should take, but I would encourage anyone to just do *something*. “Ultimately, to do nothing is itself failure; to risk oneself and become unsettled is a success in and of itself” (Barker, 2010, p. 329).

On the long and winding road which is the relationship between Inuit and non-Indigenous people in Canada, it is obvious that our interactions, interventions and oppressions have caused each of our communities to be the way that they are today. Unfortunately, “we have no idea what the colonized would have been without colonization, but we certainly see what has happened as a result of it” (Memmi, 1965, p. 114). In this same way, we will never know what or who those 11 Inuit youth from Puvirnituk would have been, or the next 11 youth who will die by suicide across Inuit Nunangat.

Inuit youth suicide is a preventable public health crisis, a *meaningful, relevant* and *pressing* crisis, in fact. Even if we start with the knowledge of nothing more than that Inuit youth are dying too young, too suddenly, and far more often than almost any other population in the entire world, “with [this] newfound knowledge comes an obligation to act – ...to share this knowledge with others and to integrate it into our everyday work and civic [lives]” (Regan, 2010, p. 55). If we do that, we might finally see change. For what would happen if an Inuk youth died by suicide, it plucked at that web of kinships, and we all felt it?

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