



Indigenous suicide rate in Kimberley, among world's highest

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ELEANOR HALL: A decade-long audit has for the first time quantified the suicide rates among indigenous people in Western Australia's far north and it finds they're among the worst in the world.

The research reveals that Aboriginal people in the Kimberley are committing suicide at a rate seven times the national average.

And the study published in the Medical Journal of Australia is warning that the rates are set to rise rather than fall.

Anthony Stewart reports.

ANTHONY STEWART: Doctors, police officers, and community health workers across the Kimberley have been keeping a grim count over the last decade. Now for the first time they can reveal the shocking number of Indigenous people dying as a result of suicide.

MURRAY CHAPMAN: The rate of suicide in Indigenous population in the Kimberley is seven times that of the national average.

ANTHONY STEWART: That's Dr Murray Chapman, one of the authors of the review published in the Medical Journal of Australia.

It reveals there were 125 suicides in the Kimberley between 2005 and 2014. Of those, 102 were Aboriginal people. That's a rate of 74 deaths per 100,000 people

It confirms fears that the Kimberley has one of highest rates of suicide in the world.

MURRAY CHAPMAN: It would place us right at top or very close, particularly once you move into the younger age groups, where the rates soar again.

ANTHONY STEWART: In the last year of study, 2014, the rate of suicide neared an unprecedented level with 24 deaths over 12 months.

MURRAY CHAPMAN: It takes it to over 170 per 100,000, which would be roughly 17 times the national average. Fortunately that seems to be a little bit of an outlier. Over the last year and a half, rates have been lower. But if you look at the overall trend, it's still in an upward direction strongly.

ANTHONY STEWART: What's driving this rate of suicide?

MURRAY CHAPMAN: The biggest driver, one to focus on, is the inter-generational transmission of traumas from colonisation times. Then you can add on to that more contemporary issues around social inequality, ongoing racism, the effects of the introduction of alcohol, and now more recently other substances to the Indigenous population.

ANTHONY STEWART: The worst affected group is the young. Aboriginal people under the age of 30 accounted for 68 per cent of suicides.

Shockingly more than 70 per cent of people identified in the review had never presented to a mental health service before their deaths.

Dr Anita Campbell worked as GP in Broome and is one of study's authors.

ANITA CAMPBELL: Inter-generational trauma is being seen in impulsivity, and that's what we are seeing here in these suicide deaths is they are closely related to impulsivity.

ANTHONY STEWART: In layman's terms, what does that mean?

ANITA CAMPBELL: So basically it's not in the traditional way that we see suicide in non-Indigenous populations where people would present to mental health service saying they have feelings of self harm and they're wanting help. So we're finding that the symptoms and the presentations are very different in Indigenous communities.

ANTHONY STEWART: In a final note the report's authors have warned their statistic likely underestimate the scale of problem, given the difficulties associated with accessing healthcare in remote communities across the Kimberley.

ELEANOR HALL: Anthony Stewart reporting. And if you or anyone you know needs help please call Lifeline on 13 11 14.