

Call for radical change after 13 young Indigenous suicides in Kimberley region

Inquest hears five of the deaths over less than four years in WA's far north were children aged between 10 and 13



Broome cemetery. Inquest hearings will be heard in Perth, Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and Kununurra. Photograph: Janine Israel for the Guardian

Australian Associated Press

26 June 2017

The tragic death of a 10-year-old girl at a remote Aboriginal community is one of 13 suicides by young Indigenous people in Western Australia's far north in the past three and a half years, prompting calls for radical change.

The deaths in the Kimberley region between November 2012 and March last year are the subject of a multi-stage inquest, presided over by WA state coroner Ros Fogliani, which began in Perth on Monday.

Other hearings will be held over coming weeks in Broome, Fitzroy Crossing, Halls Creek and Kununurra, and will include visits to Aboriginal communities.

The WA coroner's court has heard five of the dead were children aged between 10 and 13, and Fogliani warned some evidence would be disturbing and heartbreaking.

Counsel assisting the coroner Philip Urquhart said it was unacceptable youth suicide in Indigenous communities had reached such alarming levels in a developed country.

Urquhart said there had been more than 700 recommendations and actions arising from 40 inquiries into Aboriginal youth suicide and related factors, such as family violence and child abuse, over the past 14 years and yet the problem remained.

The inquest will look at what can be done to reduce such avoidable deaths, and Urquhart suggested a radical change in approach is needed.

“Why has it got to this? Is it because the recommendations from the past have been implemented and are not working? Is it because recommendations haven’t been implemented? If that is so, is it because of a lack of resources? Or a lack of motivation, you governments?” he asked.

“If there ever was a time for change, it is now.”

The first stage of the inquest will hear from Dr James Fitzpatrick, who believes there is a strong link between foetal alcohol spectrum disorder and suicide, as its sufferers behave impulsively.

The inquest will also hear how Aboriginal communities experience extremely high levels of bereavement stress and has already touched on the tragic death of a 23-year-old man who lost five family members in five years before he took his own life.

“Imitation and what is called contagion can be contributors to Aboriginal youth suicide,” Urquhart said in his opening address.

Bardi woman Prof Patricia Dudgeon, a psychologist and research fellow at the University of Western Australia’s School of Indigenous Studies, said it was incredible one region in WA accounted for half of all Aboriginal suicides.

She said suicide was a problem in indigenous communities in colonised nations such as New Zealand and Canada, and the impact of forced removals from families and communities could not be underestimated.

Paternalism, the belated recognition of Aboriginal people as citizens, poverty and ongoing racism had all affected Indigenous wellbeing, and there were no simple solutions, she said.

“If you treat people as second-rate citizens and you knock the stuffing out of them for generations and generations, there will be consequences,” Dudgeon said.