

June 5, 2013

Nunavut youth saturated in the realities of suicide

When her parents' drinking, her brother's beatings and a close friend's suicide got too much for 17-year-old Carol,* she did what hundreds of young Inuit across Nunavut have done since the territory was created. She formulated a plan to kill herself.

Carol intended to go home, during the day, when she knew she'd be alone in the house. She had ready access to ropes and electrical wiring.

"I was thinking to actually just hang myself," the petite, pretty young woman said in an interview with *CMAJ*. She spoke early in 2013, just three weeks after she made her suicide plan. "I'd probably do it in my room, or in the bathroom, or in the closet."

A family friend had killed herself that way. It seemed like a method Carol could also use to end her pain.

"I was going through so much crap with my family — I was just telling myself, 'I've had enough'."

But then Carol thought about leaving her family forever, and her friends. She picked up the phone and called one of them.

"I said 'Yo — I need to talk'," she remembers.

After the conversation, she left the house, crying. Away from the ropes and the wires. Away from the violence.

Since Nunavut was created in 1999, close to 400 Inuit have killed themselves, according to data that researcher Jack Hicks collected from the files of coroners in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories for his upcoming PhD dissertation for the University of Greenland, in Nuuk. The majority, 305 as of the end of May 2013, were aged 10 to 29. Overall, the incidence of suicide among Inuit in Nunavut is 10 times that of the Canadian population.

Sexual and physical abuse of children, depression, substance abuse, and impulsiveness and aggressiveness were all major factors in the lives of 120 Inuit who committed suicide between 2003 and 2006, as [a study released June 5](#) documents.

Although the Government of Nunavut does not track attempted suicides, Royal Canadian Mounted Police calls to respond to people expressing suicidal intent or attempting to kill themselves total more than 1000 per year, says Natan Obed, director of the Department of Social and Cultural Development at Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. Nunavut Tunngavik is the organization administering Inuit responsibilities under the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement.

The sheer number of suicides and attempted suicides in the territory mean children in Nunavut grow up in a world saturated with the knowledge of how suicide happens, says Obed, the father of two young boys.

"What this means for a person who lives in the territory, a person who grows up in Nunavut, is that you know somebody who died by suicide. You probably have a family member who died by suicide. You have probably talked to somebody who is threatening to attempt suicide. You probably have been in close proximity to a death, whether it is finding a body, or helping your friend who has lost a loved one grieve," Obed says.

Moreover, because of Nunavut's sparse population and the connected nature of its families, young people have heard and participated in discussions about the means people choose to kill themselves: by hanging, shooting or overdosing.

The experience in Nunavut corresponds to the findings in [a study published in CMAJ](#) that concluded exposure to suicide among adolescents predicts suicidal ideation and attempts — the “contagion” effect.

“It’s not like living in southern Canada,” says Obed, who has lived in Iqaluit, Nunavut and other Inuit communities outside the territory. “Here, it’s an on-going sadness that people live with, of all the potential that’s been lost, and all the love that they’ve had for people that somehow didn’t translate into people choosing to live and to be part of their communities.”

Obed wants a different future for his sons — and for all the Carols in the territory. He was instrumental in creating the [Nunavut Suicide Prevention Strategy](#) and its subsequent [Action Plan](#), along with Hicks, Steve McVarnock, the former RCMP chief superintendent in Iqaluit, officials with the territory’s Department of Health and Social Services, and members of the Embrace Life Council. The strategy was tabled in the legislature in October 2010, and the plan launched in September 2011.

It’s too soon to say yet whether the Government of Nunavut will meet its responsibilities in rolling out measures contained in the Action Plan, which sets out timelines that expire Mar. 31, 2014. There are troubling signs that all is not on course. Nonetheless, some prevention measures are paying off for some youth.

One such informal prevention program is a youth drop-in centre that the City of Iqaluit runs on the site of the former Arctic Winter Games. Counsellors greet the 30–40 youth who arrive daily, after school and on the weekends. They feed them, since many have scant food at home. They talk with them and involve them in volunteer activities in the community. Most importantly, they listen.

By the time she talked to *CMAJ* about her suicide plan, Carol was feeling stronger. She had talked to a mentor at the drop-in centre. She had moved out — although she hadn’t told her parents yet. Apparently, they didn’t notice she had left home.

She volunteers at community events. She dreams of going to college.

And she has her own ideas about what Nunavut needs to prevent suicides: a team approach to prevention that involves peer-to-peer counselling, and the ability to talk about suicides in schools as they occur. Currently, the discussion of a death is often limited to an announcement over the public-address system and two minutes of silence.

“We need more role models, and a lot of good parenting skills,” Carol says. “Also, we need people to trust.” — Laura Eggertson, Iqaluit, Nunavut

**CMAJ* has used a pseudonym to protect the identity of this minor.

DOI:10.1503/cmaj.109-4519

Editor’s note: This is the second of a four-part series on suicide in Nunavut, Canada at [cmaj.ca](#). See “First psychological autopsy of Nunavut Inuit shows high rates of childhood abuse, depression.”

Laura Eggertson received a 2012 Michener–Deacon Fellowship for Investigative Journalism, which supported her travel and the research into this series of articles about suicide by Inuit and First Nations youth.

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