

# Jobs and education the key to tackling Aboriginal suicide

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ABORIGINAL people have a greater stake in suicide prevention than most because they are disproportionately affected by suicide. They are already more likely to have poorer health, be welfare dependent, and live in unsafe and unclean environments. These problems, along with suicide, are most likely symptoms of a deeper underlying problem.

Suicide is the end of a chain of events. While much attention is given to this final link of the chain, far too little is given to the other links that contribute to suicide.

A link not often considered is the poisonous message that governments are responsible for Aboriginal suicides — as they are, allegedly, for all problems facing Aboriginal Australians. Such messages only communicate to people: “You are powerless to bring about change in your life. You must wait till the government makes things better.”

Sadly, while waiting, people die.

While no two suicides are the same, suicide is always preceded by some form of emotional pain. Common underlying causes of this emotional pain are low self-worth, no sense of meaning or purpose, and feelings of disconnectedness. These are problems suicide interventions must address. They are difficult problems, which is why more attention is often given to second-order issues like booing by football crowds.

A successful intervention to reducing suicides must frame it as the outcome of a failure to meet the fundamental human needs of high self-worth, a sense of purpose, and a feeling of connectedness with others.

However, people can feel unworthy and isolated even in the most caring of environments. Any intervention can only ever hope to maximise the chances of a person not going down the path of suicide. There are no guarantees.

One of the most effective ways of addressing these fundamental human needs is through education and employment. Both education and employment provide individuals with opportunities for connecting with others, contributing to the good of others, learning, and growing.

Learning and work were important features of traditional Aboriginal society, so nothing new is being suggested here.

What I find most disturbing when discussing suicide among Aboriginal people is it is cast as an “Aboriginal problem”. We actually have a “people problem”. Place any race in any part of Australia where education and job opportunities are few and they will lose their sense of purpose and self-worth and connectedness. Add to the equation drugs and alcohol and all hope, motivation, determination, and resilience fly out the window.

When framed as an “Aboriginal problem” too often the well-educated “city cousins” suggest the remedy to suicide is “more culture” rather than more quality education and greater employment opportunities.

It is time to move forward. We need solutions that align the people with where the opportunities are.

Let’s follow the lead of successful Aboriginal people who have paved the way. We know what works. Let’s not be distracted by what does not work. Life is too precious.