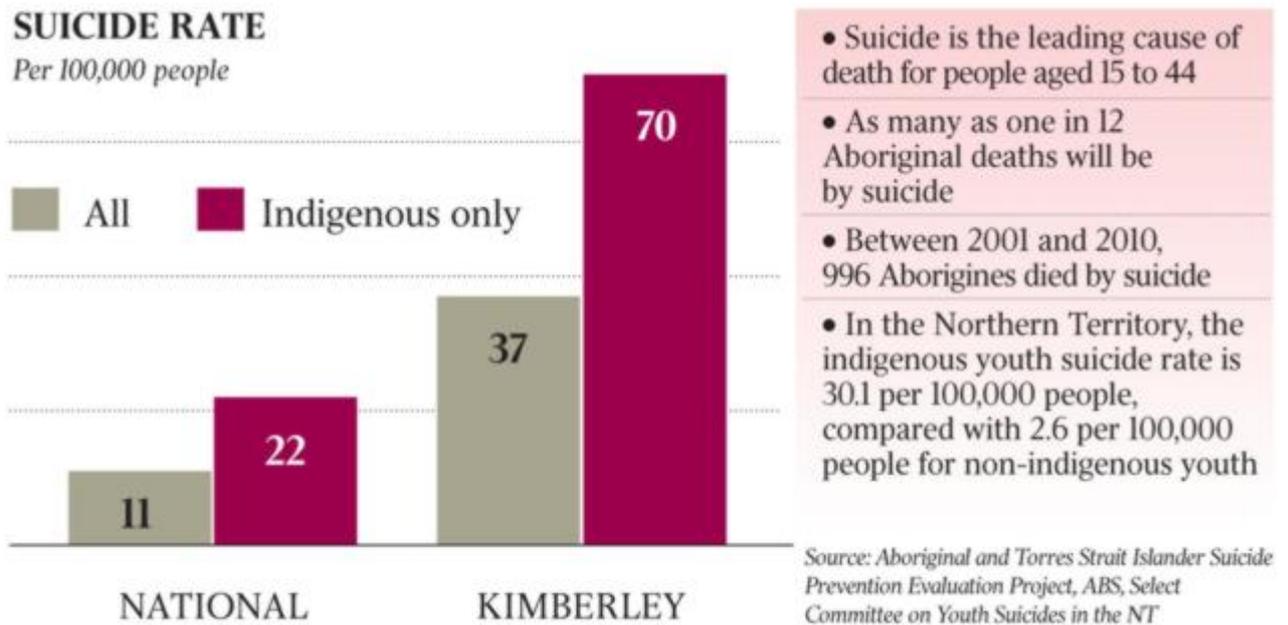


A nation shamed when child sees suicide as the solution



REMOTE Australia is in the grip of a suicide epidemic that is taking the lives of children as young as eight years old, with Aboriginal towns in the Kimberley now suffering the highest rates of suicide in the world.

As the West Australian port city of Geraldton yesterday buried 11-year-old Peter Little, who was found hanging from a tree in nearby bush by another child, indigenous leaders called for urgent action to address a growing crisis that will see as many as one in 12 Aboriginal deaths caused by suicide.

“We are talking about an epidemic,” said Tony Abbott’s chief indigenous adviser, Warren Mundine. “Quite frankly, you are looking at a society in collapse. I am a father and I just cannot get it through my head that at the age of eight or nine a child can’t see a future for themselves. It’s unimaginable.”

Figures compiled by the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project reveal the rate of Aboriginal suicide in the Kimberley is as high as 70 deaths per 100,000 people, more than six times the national rate. The latest World Health Organisation data shows Guyana, in South America, has the highest country rate of 44 deaths per 100,000 people. Though the official rate of Aboriginal suicide in Australia is one in every 24 deaths, a researcher at the evaluation project, Gerry Georgatos, has put the figure at -

between one in 12 and one in 16 deaths, given the high number of suicides that are put down to other causes.

“What we have is a rising crisis and the Kimberley is sadly beginning to reach the numbers it reached in 2007, 2008 and 2009,” Mr Georgatos told *The Weekend Australian*. “The impoverishment of remote communities has increased, we have tough sentencing regimes and mandatory jailing. One in 13 adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males in WA is in prison: that’s the world’s highest jailing rate.”

As the suicide rate grows, Aboriginal leaders in the Kimberley are growing increasingly frustrated at the millions of dollars in funding for mental health research and service delivery that is being wasted on the ground.

The West Australian government has been accused of gross complacency on indigenous suicide despite the rising number of deaths and the heavy focus on the issue that sprang from the inquiries of coroner Alistair Hope, who delivered a major report in 2008 into a string of deaths in the Kimberley. Numerous summits have been held following suicide spates in remote communities in the years since.

Community leaders such as Wes Morris, who runs the award-winning Yirimam Project in the Kimberley, are labelling the state government’s response to the Aboriginal suicide crisis “pathetic”. Mr Morris said state governments of both political persuasions had failed to understand that “cultural wounds require cultural healing” and had continued with poorly targeted policies devised by “white fellas” that only exacerbated the problem.

The Yirimam Project was initiated by Aboriginal elders in 1997 through the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Cultural Centre. Elders take young people into the bush to help them develop a sense of their cultural heritage, which builds self-esteem and identity.

In his report on Aboriginal suicides in 2008, Mr Hope hailed the success of Yirimam in saving lives and recommended it be expanded to the entire Kimberley.

Mr Morris said yesterday this had proved impossible because the state government had refused to provide funding, despite the group’s repeated applications. He said the program survived on modest funding of about \$350,000 a year from the commonwealth government and private donors.

Mr Hope also recommended the government put in place a leadership structure in the Department of Indigenous Affairs “which will command the

respect of other government agencies and Aboriginal people". The department's budget has only increased from \$28 million to \$34m in the past six years.

WA Mental Health Minister Helen Morton said the government had "demonstrated its commitment to work with Aboriginal communities" to address the issue of suicide and said the Aboriginal youth suicide rate had "significantly declined" since 2011. Ms Morton said a new suicide-prevention strategy was being developed after the expiration of the prevention strategy that ran from 2009 until last year.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda called for more to be done. "It seems to me we've almost become immune to the shock," he said. "We need to be shocked out of our complacency. We've become desensitised where we need to be outraged. I find it hard to comprehend what life must be like for a child where suicide is the only option available to them."

Aboriginal senator Nova Peris said indigenous youth suicide required urgent action. "Support programs are being slashed, child-abuse reports are up 30 per cent but child abuse investigations have been cut," she said. "The juvenile justice system is in crisis and only 1 per cent of child sexual-abuse reports are being substantiated. All these factors contribute to increased risks of youth suicide. The problem is being ignored."