Addressing Suicide Within Indigenous Communities

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Pre-European Contact
Spanish Era
1565-1898

U.S. Naval Administration
1898-1941
1944-1950
Japanese Occupation
1941-1944

The Organic Act
1950 to present
Non-Self-Governing Territories

Suicide Rates: Guam & US Mainland
1990-2007

Year
Suicide Incidence Rates (per 100,000)

Guam
U.S. mainland
Western Explanations for Suicide

• Suicide ideation and attempts viewed as symptoms of a Major Depressive Episode
• Item 9 of the Beck Depression Inventory:
  – “thoughts of killing oneself”
• Stress-Diathesis Model

Given that untreated major depression is the main cause of suicide in children and adolescents, and that suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-to-24 year-olds, there is an urgent need for effective antidepressant treatments. Although many medications have been tested, only [Fluoxetine/Prozac] has proven effective in testing done to date.

- John Mann, Columbia University Medical Center
Ethnographic Studies of Suicide in Micronesia

Traditional Men's Houses

History of Suicides in Guam
From the Year 1861

On 2 November of this year, a widower sentenced to prison for theft about a year and a half ago seems to have removed something from the home of a relative. According to rumors, he ran away to the monte because he was afraid of being reported to the governor. The cuadrilleros (rural guards) searched for him and found him hanging from a dog tree in a place, or area, called Lalo. According to their testimonies, the guards heard him shouting nonsensical insults and, according to the doctor, the rope, or cord, seems to have been prepared with care and premeditation.

From the Year 1863

On 16 April of this year, a soldier from the Compania de Dotacion of these islands named Rafael Fiona, about twenty years old and who had been absent from roll-call, was sentenced to build, or repair, the anaje (rear section) of the casa de mata. Far from doing what he had been ordered to do, he was absent again from roll-call. The captain of the alta compania (high company) informed the governor, don Felipe Maria de la Corte, who ordered Rafael confined to the barracks for eight days. The unfortunate Fiona prepared a strong thin cord of balibago and asked the sergeant-of-the-day for permission to go to the usual place to relieve himself. As neither the sergeant nor any other soldier noticed signs of desperation or insanity, he was permitted to do so. Finding himself alone, he tied the rope to the beam under the skylight in the barracks where the soldiers relieve themselves. He placed a trough under the beam, climbed on it, put the noose around his neck, pushed the trough aside, and hanged himself. When he did not return by 7:30, a soldier went to investigate and found him hanging. They took him down at once but it was too late as he was already dead. There was an investigation but the testimony did not show the least sign of insanity.
From the Year 1866

Yesterday, 29 June, on the feast of the apostles Peter and Paul, Jose Palomo, married to Maria Castro, hanged himself at his rancho in Japuto. It is believed he did it out of desperation. His body was buried at the place where he committed suicide.

From the Year 1868

During the night of 1-2 August, a paten was taken from the church cupboard. I was unable to learn who had taken it and I orally reported the theft to the governor. Today, 4 August, at about 3:30 pm, don Ignacio Aguon came to me and said, “Your Reverence, I bring you this from the governor. It was found on Vicente Charsaga who was hanging from a coconut tree in the place called Muyao. When I discovered him, I found the stolen paten.” He was buried at the place he hanged himself.
From the Year 1870

This morning, 13 June, the body of the militia artilleryman Ramon Valenzuela was found hanging by a rope from a branch of a dog tree near the top of the hillside that reaches toward the monte behind the house of Dolores de la Cruz. He was married and had five children. Several reasons have been expressed that might have caused the unfortunate man to commit such a horrible crime. Some say that, as an artilleryman, his superior had threatened him with twenty-five lashes because he had forgotten to comply with an order. Others attribute the threat to the fact that he had offered a cow to his superior, but his wife would not permit him to give it away. Others attribute it to his wife’s flirtations. No one knows the true cause, only the results. The fact is he tied the rope to a branch that was approximately a vara and a half (4 ½ feet) above the ground and, as there was a substantial slope to the level of the ground, he forced himself to fall toward the incline, thereby hanging himself. On the tenth he had left his house without a hat, carrying only the rope, or cord. The body was already in a state of decomposition when it was found. He was buried at the foot of the same tree. According to reports, he was a conscientious man.

From the Year 1873

On the fifteenth of this month of August, Mariano Borja, a soldier of the Dotacion, abandoned his guard duty. He was about twenty-five years old, an orphan, and unmarried. He had been accused of stealing a pair of pants, a coat, and a handkerchief. Perhaps, he was ashamed of the deed. He asked permission to go eat but fled to the montes instead. As soon as this was discovered, orders were issued to find him. Yesterday, the twenty-first, between 8:00 and 9:00 pm, the governor was informed that a man had been found dead. Instructions were given to determine whether or not it was true, and today, the twenty-second, the unfortunate Mariano de Borja was found hanging from an orange or lemon tree in the place called Sinengson.
From the Year 1882

On the twenty-third of the month of December, the body of Antonio Pereda, a young boy eleven or twelve years of age, born in Inarajan, was found hanging from a tree in one of the rice fields in the pueblo of Inarajan.

History of Suicides in Guam
Away with prestige, I agree to be like a brother to you and to go down to hell with you.

-Alfonso, 1679

Later the missionaries told of one man who was so desperate to remain on his island that he fled to the interior, beating his wife and leaving her seriously injured when she refused to accompany him. Pursued by Spaniards, as he scrambled up the heights of the island, he eventually despaired of eluding them and hanged himself.

-Francis Hezel
History of Suicides in Guam

The deadly diseases that ravaged populations across the Pacific and the consequences of these traumatic events have left a legacy of despair that undoubtedly underlies such phenomena as the “suicide epidemic” in Micronesia.

-Michael Salzman, 2006
Intergenerational Trauma

Soul Wound

The core suffering by indigenous peoples who have undergone violent and oppressive colonization for several centuries.

Cultural Continuity

If simple job or marital stability is enough to heighten one’s risk for suicide, then what are the prospects for self-harm when one’s own culture is officially condemned, one’s religion is criminalized, one’s language is forbidden, and one’s right to rear and educate one’s children is suspended?

-Michael Chandler, 1998
Suicide Rates Among Other Indigenous Peoples

Conclusion
Native Narratives from the Pacific

Native Narratives from America
Preventing Suicide Among Indigenous Peoples on College Campuses

Working Together with Indigenous Peoples to Prevent Suicide on your College Campus