



Government Indigenous suicide prevention programs are a failure, NT elder David Cole says

AM By Sue Lannin

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The \$25 billion state and federal governments spend each year on Aboriginal programs has failed to stem high rates of youth suicide, an Indigenous elder from the Northern Territory says.

David Cole said Indigenous communities in the Top End have some of the highest rates of youth suicide in the world and funding should be redirected to grass roots Aboriginal organisations to stop the deaths.

Mr Cole established the Balunu Foundation which runs programs for troubled Indigenous teenagers and over the last seven years has worked with more than 650 young people.

"We actually haven't had one youth suicide [of a person] who's been through our program," he said.

"So we provide the evidence-based outcome that proves that healing through culture and building that foundation, that identity, that self-worth, that self-belief and building the foundation to allow for the kids to walk in both worlds is effective.

Call for culturally appropriate support services

A Productivity Commission report out yesterday found the suicide rate for Indigenous people under the age of 25 was almost four times the rate of non-Indigenous young people.

The commission's Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage 2014 report said the suicide rate for Indigenous people under 25 is 14.5 per 100,000 people, compared to 3.7 per 100,000 for the non-Indigenous community.

The suicide rate for 25 to 34 year olds in the Northern Territory is one of the highest rates in the world at 68.9 per 100,000, more than six times the non-Indigenous rate of 10.9 per 100,000.

The 2012 figures from the World Health Organisation show the South American country of Guyana had the highest male suicide rate in the world at 70.8 per 100,000 people.

Mr Cole said youth Indigenous suicide rates have increased because many young people are alienated from their culture.

"There's not enough culturally appropriate support services out there that reach the kids and provide them with the support that they need," he said.

"Far too many of our kids turn to substance abuse to escape the reality of their pain and their challenges and their trauma.

"The final attempt to escape that pain ultimately becomes suicide."

Citing 2010 figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics, he said that the Northern Territory had the highest suicide rates per capita in the world.

"In 1991, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders represented 5 per cent of the suicide population in the Territory, in 2010 that increased to 50 per cent," he said.



PHOTO: An Indigenous leader says the communities are concerned about the funding cuts announced by Tony Abbott's government. (AAP: Tracey Nearmy)

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Mr Cole said 10 to 24 year olds in the Territory faced the highest risk of suicide.

"In 1991, they represented 10 per cent of that 5 per cent Indigenous suicide population, in 2010 that increased to 80 per cent," he said.

'The statistics have gotten worse, not better'

Mr Cole was part of the Elders Report into Preventing Indigenous Self-Harm and Suicide which looked at what it called the unprecedented increase in youth suicide in the Top End.

The high rate of Indigenous suicide has seen the Australian Government set up the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Strategy.

But Mr Cole said suicide prevention needed to come from the community, not from Canberra.

"If you consider that in 2011, \$25.4 billion was spent on Indigenous affairs, we're talking about 2.6 per cent of the population," he said.

"To spend that sort of money on that amount of people and have negative outcomes is a failure on behalf of the Government.

"We need to ensure that those resources get to where they're going to be most effective and that's culturally healing through the community - controlled, owned and delivered by the people."

Mr Cole said he thought the Northern Territory Intervention - which was initiated by the Howard government in 2007 - worsened mental health problems.

"When we have an increase of suicide rates amongst our youth before, during and after the implementation of the intervention, it speaks for itself," he said.

"The statistics have gotten worse, not better."

The Indigenous leader said community organisations were also worried about the impact of the Abbott Government's budget cuts.

"We certainly can't afford to not have the resources directed to where they need to be and it needs to be with the community, it needs to be with culturally appropriate services," he said.

Mr Cole encouraged people to sign the bepartofthehealing.org petition to support the campaign for youth suicide programs led by Indigenous communities and Aboriginal elders.

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David Cole

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