

# Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention

## Fact Sheet 2

### Indigenous Suicide Deaths 1981 to 2018

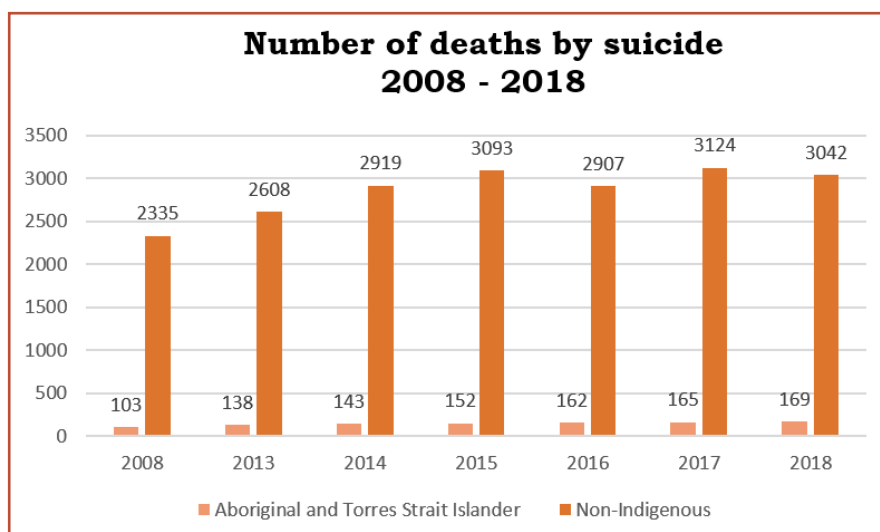
Suicide was not known in traditional Aboriginal society suggesting it is a relatively recent phenomenon since colonisation—emerging as an issue in the 1960s<sup>1,2</sup>. The 1970s saw suicide rates and suicidal behaviour increase and by the 1980s the situation became endemic in some Aboriginal communities. By the 1990s suicide was a significant contributor to early preventable deaths among Aboriginal people. This fact sheet shows the increasing Indigenous suicide rates over the past 50 years and presents data on Indigenous suicide over the last decade.

#### The 1980s and 1990s

Indigenous suicide data from prior to the 2000s is limited. A study of Northern Territory (NT) suicide deaths 1981 - 2002 reported that in 1981 the suicide rate for Indigenous men was one third the rate of non-Indigenous men; while the suicide rate for Indigenous women was zero. However, over the 1980s and 1990s annual increases of 17.4% in suicide deaths among Indigenous males, and 25.8% for Indigenous females, were reported - resulting in an **800%** increase for NT Indigenous males in suicide deaths by 2002<sup>3</sup>, and dramatic increases for Indigenous female suicide.

#### The last 10 years

Since 2008, Indigenous suicide numbers nationally (ie QLD, NT, NSW, SA & WA) counted by the Australian Bureau of Statistics has increased by around 65%, as set out below.



Over 2008 - 2018 the number of reported Indigenous suicide deaths has increased by about **65%**

#### The increase in the Indigenous suicide rate over 2008—18

The significant increase in the Indigenous population over the past 50-years does not explain the increasing rate of Indigenous suicide over the past ten years (equating to 24.1 deaths per 100,000 in 2018). Over 2008 - 2018, the ABS reports a 21% increase in the Indigenous suicide rate compared to a 15% rise in the total Australian population<sup>4</sup>. In 2018 the Indigenous suicide death rate is over double the non-Indigenous population: the male rate being 2.1 times as high; and the female 2.3 times as high. In 2018, suicide accounted for 5.5% of Indigenous deaths overall, compared to 2% of non-Indigenous deaths. The death rate from intentional self-harm among Indigenous people was 1.9 higher than that for non-Indigenous people.

## Key characteristics of Indigenous suicide in 2018

**Gender** Just over three quarters of Indigenous suicide deaths were of males (76.3%) with rates rising. Indigenous female suicide rates (23.7%) were also increasing.

Suicide was the fifth leading cause of death for Aboriginal people, the second leading cause of death for Indigenous males; the seventh for Indigenous females.

**Age** The average age of suicide deaths for Indigenous women was 28.3 years; 29.8 years for men. The median age was 29.5 years, compared to 45.4 years in the non-Indigenous population.

The rates of suicide among Indigenous children and young people is a particular concern and is significantly higher than rates among their non-Indigenous peers in 2018 as discussed in Fact Sheet 3.

**In 2018  
the  
Indigenous  
suicide  
rate is over  
double that  
of other  
Australians**

**There has been a 22% increase in the Indigenous rate suicide over 2008 – 2018**

## Why has Indigenous suicide increased over the last 50 years?

The answer remains an ongoing research challenge. However, as discussed in Fact Sheets 3 and 4, Indigenous suicide today is associated with underlying intergenerational trauma in the Indigenous population stemming from colonisation, and the disadvantaged conditions and significant challenges still faced by many Indigenous communities, families and individuals.

## What can be done to reduce Indigenous suicide?

Understanding the differences in the characteristics of suicide deaths among Indigenous Australians compared to non-Indigenous Australians is important for developing strategies that can prevent future suicide deaths. It is also important to understand which groups within the Indigenous population appear to be at greater risk. These may include young people and people with lived experience of suicide, LGBTQI and people who experience homelessness.

An overview of the increasing trends in suicide over the past fifty years confirms the need to adopt community-led solutions detailed in the *ATSISPEP Solutions that Work* and outlined in [Fact Sheet 5](#).

There also needs to be a revision and implementation of the National Indigenous Suicide Prevention Strategy 2013 as well as a commitment to implement the *National Strategic Framework for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' Mental Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing 2017-2023*.

More information about suicide prevention and additional factsheets are available on the [CBPATISIP](#) website.

### References:

1. Elliott-Farrelly, Terri. Australian Aboriginal Suicide: The Need for an Aboriginal Suicidology? [online]. [Australian e-Journal for the Advancement of Mental Health](#), Vol. 3, No. 3, 2004: 138-145.
2. Hunter, E., Milroy, H. (2006). '[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide in Context](#)', *Archives in Suicide Research*; 2006, 10(2): 141-157.
3. Measey, M., Qin Li, S., Parker, R., et al. (2006). [Suicide in the Northern Territory, 1981–2002](#), *Med J Aust* 2006; 185 (6): 315-319. | | doi: 10.5694/j.1326-5377.2006.tb00585.x
4. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (2018). '[Intentional self-harm in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples](#)', *Causes of Death Australia 2017*. ABS Cat. No. 3303.0.

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