



VOICES OF THE PEOPLE: The National Empowerment Project

Promoting cultural, social and emotional wellbeing to reduce distress and prevent suicide in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Key Points

- The National Empowerment Project (NEP) is an innovative Aboriginal-led suicide prevention project that has worked with eight Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (herein Aboriginal) communities across Australia since 2012. Its purpose was to firstly consult with communities to: identify their needs and the factors contributing to the high levels of psychological distress and suicide in these communities; and empower communities to take action to address these issues and promote positive social and emotional wellbeing.
- Phase Two of NEP is supporting communities to find the resources to implement an empowerment program that was considered a critical strategy to strengthening people's cultural, social and emotional wellbeing. In so doing, the project aims to increase the resilience of individuals and families by minimising risk and increasing protective factors in these communities.
- The NEP utilised a community participatory action research (PAR) approach that was critical to the appropriateness and effectiveness of its processes and the outcomes. It also demonstrates a practical, culturally respectful approach for service providers and policy makers to work with Aboriginal communities.
- The NEP allowed for the diversity among communities to be acknowledged and for each community to identify their own issues, yet all participants across the 8 communities identified a similar set of issues and factors impacting on the wellbeing of individuals, families and the community. All communities shared a concern for the impact of drugs, alcohol and violence and gave priority to meeting the needs of young people.

All individuals, families and communities identified the need for programs to address family or community violence and drug and alcohol misuse. They identified the need for shared activities to strengthen/restore connections within and between families and a sense of community. They also wanted programs that provided opportunities to strengthen and empower individuals.

- The NEP consultations – which brought Aboriginal peoples' voices to the fore – makes a substantial contribution to identifying the challenges that communities are dealing with and some of the solutions. The emphasis on restoring and enhancing cultural strength and identity, and requests for culturally specific programs, reinforces the value people place on these as effective ways of overcoming high levels of psychological distress. The priority accorded to programs and resources that focus on healing and strengthening people's connectedness to family, community and culture also marks an important difference between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing.
- The community perspectives identified throughout the NEP consultations identified parameters for how programs and services should be established and operate in communities: that they should be designed and delivered with the guidance and involvement of the community; they should employ and build the capacity of local people; and be culturally appropriate.

Background

In May 2012, the Department of Health entered into a funding agreement with the School of Indigenous Studies at the University of Western Australia, for the implementation of the NEP. The purpose of the NEP was to work with eight communities to identify the key factors impacting negatively on the social and emotional wellbeing of individuals, families and the community, as part of a suicide prevention initiative. At the same time, each community was asked to identify strategies to strengthen the cultural, social and emotional wellbeing of individuals, families and the community. The eight communities across Australia were selected through an initial consultation process to represent the cultural, geographic, social and historical diversity experienced among Aboriginal communities. The communities were Narrogin, Perth and Northam/Toodyay in Western Australia; Cherbourg and Kuranda in Queensland; Toomelah and Redfern in New South Wales; and, Mildura in Victoria.

This national Project expanded on the earlier research of the Kimberley Empowerment Project and its recommendations for empowerment, healing and leadership programs as a tool and first step for preventing suicide and psychological distress (on this see Hear our Voices Report Dudgeon et al., 2012). Both projects are responding to the devastating impact of adverse social determinants and disadvantage on individuals, families and communities across Australia as seen in ongoing high rates of psychological distress and suicide. The NEP was also a response to the lack of appropriate mental health and related programs in communities, and the growing demand for early intervention programs to deal with social and emotional problems, such as family violence and substance abuse, as well as mental health issues such as anxiety and depression.

Research Method

The NEP is an exemplar of the results that can be achieved using a PAR process with Aboriginal communities. PAR focuses on developing community capacity to engage in developing, conducting, disseminating and translating/ implementing research. PAR aims to ensure research is responsive to community needs, is conducted in a culturally appropriate manner and is beneficial to the community. This empowerment-based research approach gives a voice to communities and is an inclusive way for Aboriginal people to identify the factors impacting on their social and emotional wellbeing. PAR also supports individuals to identify broad pathways to restore and strengthen connections to Aboriginal-specific domains of social and emotional wellbeing, including connection to culture, family and country and to see themselves as agents of social change.

The PAR approach enabled participants from the eight communities to develop their own understandings of the complex factors impacting on their social and emotional wellbeing and identify responses to address these issues. Critically, these were informed by the conceptual framework provided by the Aboriginal-specific domains of social and emotional wellbeing (Gee et al, 2014).

The NEP team engaged in building relationships with the communities and established formal relationships with local partner organisations that were predominantly Aboriginal community controlled. Two people from each community were selected and trained as community consultant co-researchers and carried out focus groups and interviews with approximately 40 community participants in each site. Such an approach represents a best practice example of community-based research with Aboriginal peoples and exemplifies the ethical standards, values and goals of the National Health and Medical Research Council.

Key Findings

The NEP consultations reinforce the extensive evidence regarding the range of social determinants negatively impacting on Aboriginal and Torres Islander people's mental health and social and emotional wellbeing.

The eight communities were very different in size, location, history and levels of remoteness, yet all identified a similar range of challenges and issues impacting negatively on their social and emotional wellbeing.

While the priority allocated by each community varied, the main issues identified by all as impacting negatively on their social and emotional wellbeing included: problems with youth; family disharmony, feuding and violence; substance abuse; mental health issues; racism; and, a lack of education, training, employment, suitable housing, transport and appropriate services. The findings also highlight how these circumstances do not occur in isolation, but rather concurrently and cumulatively.

Across all the communities people are concerned about excessive use of drugs and alcohol, escalating fighting between family groups and between younger generations, and the impact this has on people's wellbeing and mental health. The ways that violence manifests in the communities was extensive. Many saw their communities as unstable with unpredictable levels of violence often as a result of excessive alcohol use. An inability for families to communicate effectively with each other was another issue seen as negatively impacting on peoples' daily lives.

All eight communities identified a similar set of strategies to strengthen the cultural, social and emotional wellbeing of individuals, families and their communities.

These are:

- For individuals: restore and strengthen connections to culture, family and community; focus on youth; focus on health; offer life skills programs (e.g. communication, self-esteem, mentors, role models).
- For families: restore and strengthen connections within and between families through shared activities (to restore sense of community); offer life skills programs (e.g. communication, dealing with conflict, healthy lifestyle); provide access to education/training and transport.
- For communities: focus on youth (e.g. provide activities, drop in centres, camps, connect to elders, health promotion and education sessions, parenting programs, restore sporting competitions); restore and strengthen sense of community through shared activities (e.g. hosting community events such as fun days, competitions, projects); support self-determination; men's and women's groups; provide access to employment, education, housing and transport.

Significantly, all participants across all sites identified the need for programs to address family violence and drug and alcohol abuse, as essential to strengthening individual, family and community social and emotional wellbeing.

Policy Implications

The findings from the NEP consultations support the evidence of several national surveys that report high numbers of Aboriginal people experiencing high to very high psychological distress levels, and alarming rates of suicide and attempted suicide in their communities (ABS, 2014; National Mental Health Commission, 2013). The NEP also identified that Aboriginal communities in 2013 are continuing to report the same challenges they have been reporting for a number of years, particularly a lack of basic services, access issues and frustrations with external service providers. This suggests that elements of policy and program development may have some disconnect from what Aboriginal people identify as a priority and as appropriate for their needs.

Policy-makers accept that enhancing social and emotional wellbeing is critical to closing the gap in health outcomes. Similarly, the evidence regarding the impact of historical, political, economic and social determinants on poor health, wellbeing and rates of psychological distress and suicide is well established. Continued work is therefore required to ensure that programs and services are delivered in consultation or through engagement with the community, or by community people themselves and consistent with community needs.

Aboriginal people have been suggesting for some time that there is a need to do things differently. The evidence base provided by the NEP data gives access to the lived experience of Aboriginal people and to their ideas about what is required from government. It is a resource for governments to be better informed about how to tackle some of the issues impacting on Aboriginal communities and how it can achieve its goals, including better school retention, enhanced capacity for employment, and people living healthy, meaningful lives in safe and vibrant communities.

The NEP consultations highlight the need for programs focusing on healing from stress and trauma, and empowering people to regain a sense of control and mastery over their lives. These are critical to strengthening people's resilience and social and emotional wellbeing. Providing people with tools for addressing their stress and trauma and reducing levels of violence and tension in their communities are also necessary first steps for communities to address some of the issues underlying the drugs, alcohol and violence issues impacting on families, and to creating environments where children can thrive.

The NEP confirms that governments must ensure Aboriginal peoples' access to a range of basic services, as well as the need for more culturally appropriate programs designed in partnership with communities, that are responsive to the local context and decision making processes in which they are delivered, including the employment of local people. Ultimately, it is these factors that Aboriginal people see as critical to addressing some of the key issues contributing to high levels of psychological distress and suicide in their families and communities, and to creating a positive future for their children and young people.

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Further Information

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The full report for this project can be found at www.nationalempowermentproject.org.au

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