



Key Points

What is it?

When working with Native American people to prevent suicide, it is paramount to focus on strengths and protective factors. This prevention paradigm requires that we partner with members of the Native communities we serve to ensure programs and services honor their Native ways and empower them to be change agents in their own lives and communities.

"It's really important to bring the community members into the work that you're doing. This empowers them, and makes your program a whole lot better at reducing suicide."

Doreen Bird, Program Specialist, University of New Mexico Health Sciences Center

Why is this issue important?

There are over 500 federally recognized tribes, all of which are different from one another. In addition, not all Native people are affiliated with a tribe or live on reservations; some live off reservation, and many live in urban settings. In fact, according to the 2000 U.S. Census, 64 percent of the approximately 4.1 million individuals that identify as Native American (alone or in combination with another race) reside in urban areas. Each of these Native groups is unique, and while some experience low or no suicides, others have very high rates of suicide.

We need to do a better job of preventing suicide among Native people, particularly among those most vulnerable. According to the [National Strategy for Suicide Prevention](#) (Objective 1.2), we are expected to "establish effective, sustainable, and collaborative suicide prevention programming" with Native populations.

What are the challenges to implementations?

- Among some Native people, it is taboo to talk about suicide, which can make it challenging to address this problem.
- All Native groups differ, so each requires a unique suicide prevention strategy that is tailored to its culture and needs in order for it to be effective. The saying "One size fits all" *does not* apply to Native people.
- One Native person will not be familiar with the idiosyncrasies and cultural norms of all the other Native groups.
- Developing true partnerships takes time and depends on trust.

How can we overcome those challenges?

- Focus prevention efforts on protective factors and the strengths of Native people.
- Develop partnerships with members of the Native groups that you serve, and work closely with them to plan, develop, and deliver programs and services that meet their needs, honors their unique cultural ways, and empowers their communities.
- To build trust among Native groups, get to know members in a more personal and human way (i.e., share a meal with them, listen to their stories).
- Connectedness is inherent to Native ways—learn about how the Native groups you serve view and experience connectedness, and use this understanding to inform prevention efforts.
- When evidence-based practices aren't appropriate, draw on practice-based evidence when developing programs and services for Native groups.

Suicide Prevention Resource Center

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