

Christmas a risky time for vulnerable according to indigenous expert

18 December 2014, by David Stacey



Christmas is a risky time for many people, young and old, who may be prone to depression and self-harm, according to an expert in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing.

National Senior Consultant to the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP), Bunuba and Gija woman Adele Cox said Indigenous Australians aged from 25 to 29 had the highest suicide rate in the nation - 91 per 100,000 people. The national suicide rate is 11 per 100,000.

Research shows that during the Christmas holiday period this age group in particular demonstrates a pronounced vulnerability - often they are parents who are not able to provide adequate tucker on the table on Christmas Day or who are not able to afford gifts for their children, Ms Cox said.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander youth aged 15 to 19 years are also more vulnerable to [severe depression](#) and suicide during the Christmas period. In general Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander females have a suicide rate six times higher than their non-Aboriginal counterparts, and

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Island male youth four and a half times higher than their non-Aboriginal counterparts.

Last year, in the Kimberley region alone sadly there was a significant increase in the suicide and self-injury rates during the Christmas period, with the loss of a 12 year-old on Christmas Eve.

"While Christmas is normally a time for celebration and giving, sadly, past experience has told us that a lot of our mob are vulnerable to depression and general distress which may lead to further suicides over this period," Ms Cox said.

"The increase in substance related violence and other disputes are upsetting for many people and families in 'the silly season' and we should be mindful of this as we get ready for the holidays.

"It is important that we are all on alert and provide supports and responses where we can to those people and families who are most vulnerable, and as such we should be vigilant at all times," Ms Cox said.

Indigenous Mental Health Commissioner, ATSISPEP Project Leader, Bardi woman, Professor Pat Dudgeon from The University of Western Australia said families and community leaders should keep a mindful watch on others, young and older, during the Christmas and summer period.

"There is much more stress around Christmas and the holiday season. There is a hype of what special foods, decorations, gifts to buy, which for many are beyond their budgets.

"For many people it can be an especially lonely period where they no longer have their loved ones around," Professor Dudgeon said.

"The spirit of Christmas should not be about consumerism, but about peace and goodwill. For

Indigenous people, cultural identity is the foundation of who we are. Our Elders have been fundamental in this process. They are our wisdom-keepers. They have seen the changes so dramatically incurred in their lifetime. They are the vital bridge between the modern world and Aboriginal culture."

Professor Dudgeon said that the Christmas and New Year holiday periods, festive for many but not for all, were periods where communities must keep together and stay solid to reduce any distress that some may otherwise endure if left alone.

Provided by University of Western Australia

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