

Suicide and American Indians/ Alaskan Natives

- Between 2003 and 2007 there were eight reported suicides among Native Americans in Tennessee, at a rate of 8.03 per 100,000. This is lower than the national American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) rate of 11.8 per 100,000, which itself is slightly higher than the overall U.S rate of 11.1 per 100,000.
- During this period, suicide was the sixth-leading cause of death among Native Americans in Tennessee, whereas it was the eighth-leading cause nationally. Nationally, suicide is the second-leading cause of death for Native Americans and Alaska Natives between the ages of 10 and 34.
- Suffocation—hanging, asphyxiation, etc.—is the leading method of death within this population group. Nationally, it accounts for 42% of all AI/AN suicide deaths between 2003 and 2007, and six of the eight deaths reported in Tennessee during that timeframe.
- From 2003 to 2007, the suicide rate for AI/AN males aged 10-24 was 23.5 per 100,000—almost twice the rate for white males the same age and roughly three times the rates for black, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Hispanic age cohorts.
- Compared with other racial and ethnic groups, AI/AN youth have a higher incidence of mental health disorders related to suicide, such as anxiety, substance abuse, and depression.
- Mental health services are not easily accessible to large segments of the AI/AN population due to lack of funding on the state and federal level. Available services often do not account for the unique sociocultural issues of this group, and there are few evidence-based programs that are adapted for AI/AN cultures. Furthermore, those services that do serve Native Americans are prone to professional shortages and high turnover. Hence, members of this group tend to underutilize mental health services and discontinue therapy.
- According to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, Native Americans continue to experience higher rates of poverty, poor educational achievement, substandard housing, and disease. Additionally, elements of acculturation—mission and boarding schools, weakened parental influence, and dislocation from native lands—have undermined tribal unity and have removed many safeguards against suicide that Native American culture might have ordinarily provided.
- The most significant protective factors against suicide attempts among Native American youth are discussion of problems with family or friends and connectedness to family.
- Research indicates that culturally sensitive programs that strengthen family ties, especially those that address substance abuse, have the potential to protect against suicide among Native American adolescents.
- A study of American Indians living on reservations found that tribal spiritual orientation was a strong protective factor; individuals with a strong tribal spiritual orientation were half as likely to report a suicide attempt in their lifetimes.

In this fact sheet, the term "American Indians and Alaska Natives" includes many racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. TSPN has opted to use the term because most data and research uses this category. When specific sources refer to Native Americans, that term is used.

Sources: Tennessee Department of Health; US Department of Health and Human Services; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; *Journal of School Health*; *Trauma, Violence, and Abuse*; *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights; *Aggression and Violent Behavior*; Suicide Prevention Resource Center; *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*; *Social Science and Medicine*.