

Suicide Problem in Baffin - A Report

I, rightly or wrongly, assume that recent events in Broughton Island, coupled with the resulting publicity from all branches of the media, are the major focus of the "Suicide Problem."

The Broughton Island situation should firstly be put in its proper perspective. The community, of approximately 400 people, is relatively young having been established as a settlement site in 1957. Inuit families moved there from Pangnirtung, Clyde River and "abandoned" Kivitoo to help build the DEW Line Station. A Federal Administrative Office opened in 1958, to be followed by a Bay Store in 1960. The settlement became "permanent" in 1964, when DIAND closed down the settlement of Padloping Island, 96 kilometers away, and brought its people to the new community of Broughton Island. Hamlet Status was achieved in 1979. Consequently, the history and traditions of Broughton Island are a combination of four different communities and people, a situation which is still very apparent today. There is little feeling of a cohesive, supportive and dynamic community; rather, there is a distinct feeling of a - three - family "power struggle."

As regards teenage suicide and attempted suicide, there are several factors which virtually every Baffin community shares with Broughton Island:

- 1) [REDACTED]
- 2) [REDACTED]
- 3) [REDACTED]

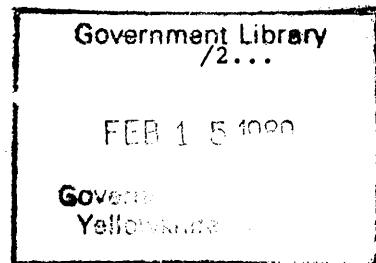
Ordinarily, the expansion of opportunity is desirable and is accepted by the residents of most communities albeit, with many associated adjustment problems being experienced by both young people and "older" people however,

[REDACTED]

In an attempt to establish why Broughton Island seems unable to handle/deal with their adolescent problem, it was necessary to meet with representatives from every committee in the community in order to obtain a diverse range of feed-back. These initial discussions were initiated by Lisa Kooneeliusie, Hal Roberts, (Area Supervisor) and myself. Numerous meetings were held with the following groups:

Youth Committee

A group of approximately ten young people (age range from 15-25 years) who have a liaison member in the person of one of the Inuit school teachers who himself is in his 20's. This group have no "formal" status but convened in order to discuss "Youth problems", and have their views fed back to "formal" committees. All members of this committee volunteer their services.





Hamlet Council

[REDACTED SECTION]

Elders Committee

This is more of a social club than a formalized committee, which meets one evening every two weeks. On the occasion of my stay in Broughton Island they asked that I attend a special meeting of their group to address the recent suicide attempts. The elders range in age from mid-sixties to 98 years.

Drug and Alcohol Committee

[REDACTED SECTION] having had several core-staff changes/resignations lately. At present there is one salaried post-holder, paid by the Drug and Alcohol Committee, and designated as Youth Counsellor. The Alcohol and Drug Counsellor resigned her full-time post. This position is currently vacant. This position is being covered on a voluntary basis (very part-time) by the local part time Court Worker.

Other Committees and Individuals who were consulted and who have expressed concern about the suicide problem:

- Education Committee Doug McLean - School Principal
- Health Committee Maura Green - Teacher
- Corporal Ken Walker/
R.C.M.P. Martha Mewkingak - Adult Educator
- Housing Association Jaypatee Nookiguak - G.L.O.
- Tiluqutik
- Co-op Tulugak
- Recreation Committee
- Church Committee
- Social Assistance Appeals Committee
- Radio Society
- Gretchen Sangster - R.N. (Nursing Station)
- Diane Heidel - R.N. (Nursing Station)

Having met and heard the views of many of the above groups and individuals it was felt that the most active and vocal group was the Youth Committee. At a meeting in the 26th of November, attended by Committee members and Lisa Kooneeliusie (Community Social Service Worker), Hal Roberts (Area Supervisor) and me, the Youth Committee members agreed to become the catalysts for initiating general public awareness and, if possible, action. It was decided to hold an initial meeting, meeting with representatives from all the above-listed committees. The purpose of this meeting being to discuss the immediate crisis and to hopefully arrange a plan of action to deal with the problem on both an immediate and long-term basis.

At this stage it seems appropriate to name the members of the Youth Committee whose efforts in organizing this large meeting, despite some opposition, and for generally putting forth tremendous effort in trying to understand and actually do something about the problems in the community was a credit to the young people of Broughton Island.

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YOUTH COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Matt NEWKINGA - Chairman & Liaison with Dep't of Education.
Alice QIYOUTA
Solomonie POISEY
Johnny POISEY
Colanie KAKKEE
Levi KOONEELUISIE
Sam NEWKINGA (absent)
Michael NOOKIGUAK (Co-Opted member)



The Public Meeting was held in the School (thanks to Mr D.McLean - Principal), on Saturday, 28th November, 1987, and was attended by approximately 60 people, including the Mayor and several Councillors. Chaired by the members of the Youth Committee, the meeting lasted 4½ hours, with only a 10min break!

The meeting produced several interesting points, Firstly, it served a cathartic purpose for many people who had experienced suicide/att.suicide within their own families. Several individuals expressed their deep feelings of loss and resulting helplessness, virtually pleading with the group to take this problem seriously and try to find Community solutions.

Many (expected) suggestions were made, including: more jobs; more job opportunities for young people; training opportunities which would allow the youth to have more prospects; more housing, overcrowding was cited as a factor; and more recreational facilities.

A lack of control and guidance from parents, Elders and the Church was an issue which was given a great deal of discussion time. It was expressed by many that the Youth have "lost direction" and do not respect their elders "or follow advice". These comments produced much support, but was also countered by several Elders who suggested that the adult population have "also lost direction" and are perhaps unable/unwilling to offer advice to a group of young people who are alien in terms of their expectations and values - very different to those of their parents and Elders. After much debate, a general agreement was reached: That "older" people are both afraid of, and for, the young people. It was admitted that parents and Elders do not understand the new values and culture which has been adopted by the Youth, and that they feel they have very little to offer in the way of relevant advice. In support of this feeling, some young people expressed their own confusion over the new values and culture/expectations and the resulting feelings of isolation from parents and Elders, who represent stability and the "old ways". They agreed (young and old) that much more communication between the generations would help reciprocal understanding, and perhaps offer ways for a viable compromise between the "old & the new".

One interesting, and not unexpected, question was directed at me as the perceived Government Representative : "What is the Government going to do about this problem and the other problems which have been mentioned??".

My response was something along the following lines: "The community of Broughton Island has, at this meeting and during several other meetings which I have attended, acknowledged that the problem of Teenage Suicide is a Community problem. Further, it would seem that the "problem" is not solely that of young people, rather, it seems to be a problem which is experienced by all 3 generations. In this community, there are approximately 12 Committees, not including the Hamlet Council, who are dedicated to improving the lifestyle and prospects of all residents. The Government's role in this matter would best seem to be described as facilitator/enabler i.e. From this meeting and others, I have been told that trained Counsellors who understand the people of Broughton Island, are a major part of the long-term solution. As a representative of the Department of Social Services, I am prepared to commit the Department to help train any person(s) nominated by the Community, or who volunteer, in the areas of Family and Individual Counselling. This offer is made as a direct result of a need which has been identified, and agreed upon, by the Community as a whole. I fully intend to commence this training as soon as potential trainees have been identified to me. I would also respectfully urge that this meeting not be considered the final forum for discussion, rather that it be seen as the first of many/regular such meetings."

The response to these suggestions was extremely positive, and the group confirmed that they, under the auspices of the Hamlet Council & the Youth Committee, would immediately identify Counsellor Trainees and would also hold regular meetings to consider and assess progress.

The remainder of the marathon session was mainly a continuing forum for concerned individuals to further express their grief and, occasionally anger, at the waste of young lives. Overall, I felt that the meeting was beneficial in that it helped publicly identify some of the problems which had only been expressed privately beforehand.

Following this Public Meeting, numerous individuals and Committees asked to discuss matters in further detail with me. Please see attached Record of Meetings.

SUMMARY OF MEETINGS

During my many hours of discussion with individuals and groups, several factors emerged as being of particular significance:

1. Parental control/authority has largely been relinquished. Many parents and Elders stated that they no longer have control over their children. It was both stated and implied that older boys in particular had no respect for their parents, and paid no heed to advice; in fact actively rejected. This has led to parents being reluctant or afraid to discipline their children.
2. The Elders feel that, in this particular community, their role is redundant. One very angry gentleman expressed his frustration at the Hamlet Council for being "Young, ambitious and greedy", with little interest in the problems of the community.
3. The young people themselves expressed a definite fear of the future. Their adolescent ambivalence to Authority was very obvious and, because of the "suicide problem", they feel that "the adults" should re-assert their authority and start to counsel their children.
4. Interestingly, at no time was I made to feel that I was being asked to solve the problem; nor did the Department receive "blame" for recent events. The overall picture I gained was one of a Community in trouble, with no formal (or even informal) leadership to take any initiative - apart from the Youth Committee.
5. Professional groups within the Community. By these groups I refer to the Nursing, Education, RCMP and Social Services staff. Many meetings were held with all these individuals, and I was impressed by the commitment and concern expressed by them.

As a group, they represent virtually all support services available to the community and, as such, do not see themselves (rightly so in my opinion) as the "solution" to the problems of the community. They agreed that any help, advice or support which the community required, would be willingly given.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS.

As stated earlier in this report, Broughton Island shares many problems in common with other Baffin Communities. There must therefore be other contributing factors which allow the Youth to see and accept suicide as a viable expression of their feelings.

I hesitate to attempt to define these factors but, would suggest that the 5 points mentioned in the Summary may indeed be significant at this stage.

As to recommendations ???

1. Training of Counsellors.

This process has already started. Following the Public Meeting on the 28th Nov., 8 residents of Broughton Island came forward and expressed an interest in training. In view of this enthusiasm, I held the first Basic Counselling Training session on December 4th - for 2½ hrs. This is being followed-up by a week-long Training Session in Broughton, run by the Rev. Jim Bell, sponsored by this Dep't. It is also hoped that this writer will have the opportunity to follow-up, on a regular basis, the training of these 8 counsellors to bring them up to a level which will benefit their friends, family and fellow residents.

2. Role of Educators.

The role of the Education Department (School), I feel to be crucial in terms of the social, cultural and educational development of children and young people in Broughton. The school curriculum, as I understand it, allows for a mixture of Inuit & Qallunaag input. Perhaps the school system should (somehow) explain to their pupils that cross-cultural education CAN be confusing and frightening at times. They must also bear in mind that this confusion and fear extends hugely to the parents of these pupils and that it may be appropriate to hold "classes" for the parents, explaining what the education system is trying to do for, & with, their children. More importantly perhaps, it may need to be emphasised what the school system is NOT trying to do; and that is, to undermine parental authority.

**CHRONOLOGICAL RECORD OF MEETINGS/EVENTS - BROUGHTON ISLAND
Wednesday, November 25 - Friday, December 11, 1987**

Wednesday, November 25th

4pm. Depart Iqaluit with Hal Roberts, (Area Supervisor, Pangnirtung)
5:30pm. Arrive Broughton Island - Met by Lisa Kooneeliusie, (Community Social Service Worker).
7-9pm. Attended Youth Committee Meeting.

Thursday, November 26th

9am-12md Meeting with R.C.M.P. and Nursing Station staff.
3pm-7pm Meeting with Youth Committee.
7pm-8pm Council Meeting.
8pm-10pm Meeting with Youth Committee (continued)

Friday, November 27th

9am-11am Meeting with school principal.
1pm-2pm Meeting with Mayor.
4pm-6pm Meeting with Hamlet Secretary/Manager.
7pm-10pm Meeting with Youth Committee.

Saturday, November 28th

1pm-2pm "Pre-Public Meeting" with Youth Committee.
2pm-6:30pm Public Meeting: Chaired by Youth Committee.

Sunday, November 29th

10am Lisa Kooneeliusie and Hal Roberts depart for Pangnirtung.
10am-12md Meeting with R.C.M.P.

Monday, November 30th

8:30am-4pm Social Assistance Day!
4pm-7pm S/A curtailed. Ken Webster and R.C.M.P. called to deal with suicide hanging of 15 year old male.
7pm-10pm Meeting with Adult Educator Coordinator.

Tuesday, December 1st

9am-4:30pm Social Assistance Day.
4:30-6:30 Meeting with Hamlet Secretary/Manager

Wednesday, December 2nd

10am-12md Meeting with R.C.M.P. and Nursing staff.
7pm-10pm Lecture to Elders' Committee and discussion on aspects of "Suicide Problem".

Thursday, December 3rd

5pm Lisa Kooneeliusie (C.S.S.W.) returned from Pangnirtung.
7pm-10pm Meeting with Psychiatrists from Clark Institute.

Friday, December 4th

1pm-3:30pm Counsellor Training
7pm-11:30pm Public Meeting: Chaired by Mayor, and Televised and recorded.

Saturday, December 5th

1pm-3pm Counselling Session: Adolescent

My beliefs are strongly that the parents and Elders need more counselling in order to feel comfortable and to understand that they are still of value to their young people, who despite their resistance and anger, very definitely need parents and Elders to resume a guidance role.

Only when this happens, do I believe that equilibrium will be re-established in Broughton Island. The eternal problems of Housing, Employment, Recreation etc, etc will still be there but, as a community working together again, at least they will be no worse off than other Baffin communities.

In closing, I would respectfully ask the reader to consider "The Adolescent Process" and "Group Dynamics" when thinking about the "Broughton Island Problem".

This report is a reflection of the thoughts of the writer, Ken Webster, and is not necessarily representative of the Department of Social Services policy; nor is it representative of the policy of any other organisation.

Ken Webster,
Iqaluit, N.W.T.,
February, 1988.

COMMUNITY MEETING - BROUGHTON ISLAND

Just a summary of what young people are saying.

We young people have different lives it is not the same any more how it used to be, that our parents used to live completely different than now I believe what the older people are saying but they dont seem to have that much authority anymore. As white people come up north things are changing fast. We tried their lifestye and they try the Inuit lifestye this is the change I see we are now living in the future we young people want to do our own things and for our own future but we do not know how I like the old ways that they talk about and I want to do it but we cannot go back to the past In our community we can learn about having jobs by hearing them We can start change for the better but that will take work and it will take a long progress being young is hard especially when there are no jobs to look forward to We young people need jobs to keep us from getting bored sometimes it is hard being young and the future seems so glum I have tried to help other people who have lost their loved ones It is hard being young especially trying to get jobs this is very important and sometimes these suicides happen because of lack of jobs or not seeming to have a future I know there are other things to do from getting bored but having a job is very important to me as a young person Being young we want to do our own things alot we live without parents and then we have our own rules but we still want to do our own things with our own lives

I know what people want from us (from us young people) We have to work together about our future we young people seem like we dont respect our elders enough we have to change we have to work harder I personally think that we need help I have lost friends We need to be told how we can help other people we have to learn more about helping other people we have to help each other together young and old Even if it is small things we cant put ourselves off It is evident that we have to help each other and we have to keep in mind the old ways we can learn from them even though it is different today for us the younger generation we young people are strong and we have to keep working to keep strong we are not controlled by bad things we do not have to think that way that we are being controlled by bad ways We should lead together young and old and talk with each other about solving problems Talking about the old ways we have to work with each other I am sorry for us committing suicide before there was there even a suicide report I amglad that I was loved and that I did not commit suicide we young people are part of the good future and I want to plan for the future with you young people and work together

The meeting has been taking long enough that we should move on to another item there will be times that

Tape Ends!

Sunday, December 6th

10am-11am Counselling Session: Parents of Adolescent

Monday, December 7th

8am-9pm Interviews for P.D.Rs and P.S.Rs.

Tuesday, December 8th

8am-10pm Interviews and typing of Court Reports.
Lisa Kooneeliusie (C.S.S.W) off sick.

Wednesday, December 9th

8am-8pm Court all day.
Lisa Kooneeliusie off sick.
8:30pm-10:30 Meeting with R.C.M.P.

Thursday, December 10th

9am-5pm Supervision day with Social Worker.
Meeting with Government Liaison Officer.

Friday, December 11th

10am Depart Broughton Island.