

Northern Suicide : Death Among Alaskans

by Neil Davis

Research on the causes of death among northerners reveals some disturbing trends. Among those who live in the northern half of Alaska the proportion of violent death by suicide is three and one-half times the proportion in the United States as a whole. Furthermore, among Natives in northern Alaska the suicide rate during the years 1970 to 1974 increased to a figure two and one-half times that which had occurred in the years 1960 to 1964. In 1975, the U.S. suicide rate was thirteen per hundred thousand; in all of Alaska the rate was eighteen per hundred thousand.

Among the statistics on suicide provided to me by Mr. Brandt Stickel of Northern Alaska Health Resources, a private corporation, is a curious one in the difference between the sexes. Native and non-Native suicide rates among northern Alaska males in the age group 15 to 24 is roughly twice that of peers in the United States, but among females in the same age group the rate is ten times the U.S. rate in the peer group.

Statistics on the rate of suicide attempts are less certain than those on actual suicides. However, they do indicate that among northern Natives the attempt rate is at least one and one-half times the rate in urban areas, and nearly ten times the rate in Los Angeles.

At the same time that the rate of suicide is increasing in northern Alaska, the rate of identified alcohol abuse is rising; the rate during 1977 was three times the rate in 1971. It seems that the rising alcohol abuse and suicide rates are related.

Dr. Jim Cole, a staff counselor at the University

of Alaska, Fairbanks, notes that the suicide rate among college students is 50% higher than the rate among young adults as a whole. One way to help reduce the number of suicides is for people to be alert to patterns of change that are indicative of someone under

activities or friends, 4) loss of weight, 5) disturbed sleep, 6) drop in academic or work performance, 7) accident proneness, 8) giving away of possessions, and 9) direct or indirect comments that indicate a person might be contemplating suicide.

ists who deal with human behavior do not yet understand the reasons why special problems with suicide of community is the under- and alcoholism exist in the North. They do suspect that rapid cultural change with its consequent loss of sense of community is the underlying cause.

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special duress and, therefore, in the need of help. Things to look for, according to Dr. Cole, are: 1) an abrupt change in personality, 2) signs of prolonged depression, loss of drive and mental or physical sluggishness, 3) loss of interest in

Some of these signs show up among most everyone on occasion, so it is when clusters of the clues are evident that one should be most concerned.

Anthropologists, psychologists and other scient-