

# Addressing the crises of Indigenous suicide in Canada

*Dying To Please You* co-authors look to capitalism and colonialism as root causes, while *We Matter* empowers youth and Charlie Angus puts forward national plan

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Canadian society creates the conditions that cause people, especially Indigenous people, to kill themselves.

This is not likely what you'll hear from most professionals or advocates working on suicide prevention, but it is a foundational theme of the work by researchers Roland Chrisjohn (Oneida) and Shaunessy McKay (Mi'kmaq).

With a decades-old epidemic of suicides among the Indigenous population in Canada, Chrisjohn and McKay want their fellow Indigenous people to consider what needs to be done.

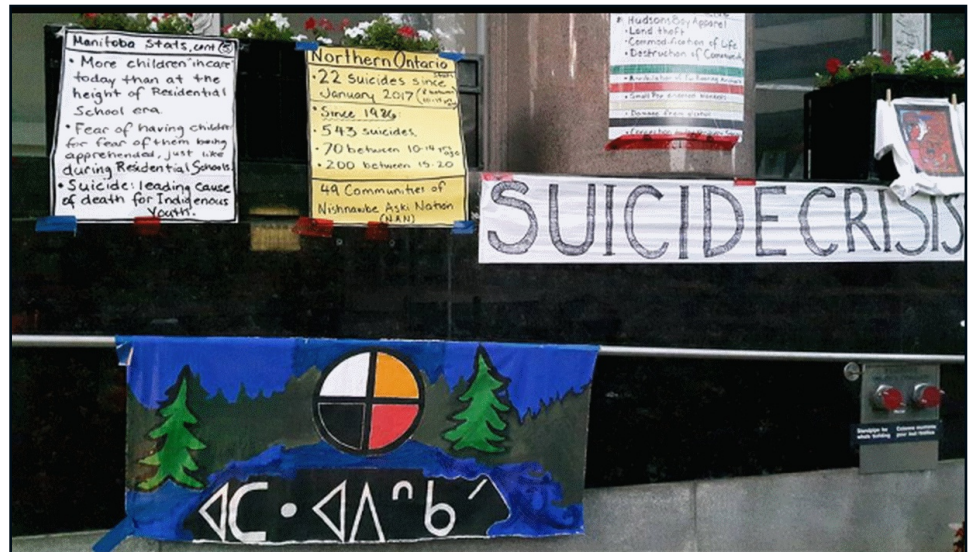
Their basic understanding of this situation, which they explore in their book *Dying To Please You: Indigenous Suicide in Contemporary Canada*, isn't new.

"Capitalism causes alienation; alienation causes oppression; oppression causes suicide." It's a conceptual equation they credit to the early writing of Karl Marx.

But Indigenous peoples also face a "double alienation," according to Chrisjohn and McKay. The imposition of capitalism requires an obliteration of traditional forms of life, which may still be in living memory but for the most part are not currently re-attainable.

## Rates of suicide

The available statistics on Indigenous suicide in Canada do not tell the full story. The best currently available data is dated or not comprehensive, and there are issues



#NOMIC Ground Zero occupation camped outside INAC Toronto from July to December 2017: #NotOneMoreIndigenousChild. Photo from their Facebook page.

around categorizing and identifying what is or isn't suicide. McKay, a student and research assistant at St. Thomas University, and Chrisjohn, a professor in Native Studies at the same institution who has done crucial work in making public the number of deaths in Canada's residential school system, write in their book to "take such data as 'informative' rather than 'definitive.'"

Federal government statistics show that the overall First Nations suicide rate was approximately two times the Canadian average in 2000, very similar to how it was two decades earlier. Some particular demographics fare worse: the suicide rate of First Nations youth (15–24 years) was five to seven times that of their non-Indigenous counterparts.

Among the Inuit, rates of suicide are even higher. In the four Inuit regions of Canada (Nunatsiavut, Nunavik, Nunavut, and the Inuvialuit

Settlement Region), suicide rates spanning 1999 to 2013 ranged from five to 25 times higher than those for the overall Canadian population. Again, rates among youth are even higher.

As in the general Canadian population, suicide rates for Indigenous males are approximately three times as high as for females. There is less complete data for two-spirit and Indigenous LGBTQ+ people, but they do have higher rates than their heterosexual and cisgender Indigenous counterparts.

For perspective, rates of Indigenous death by suicide are more than twice as high as those for murder, which is significant when considering the public attention and government inquiry on missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls.

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## Public outrage needed

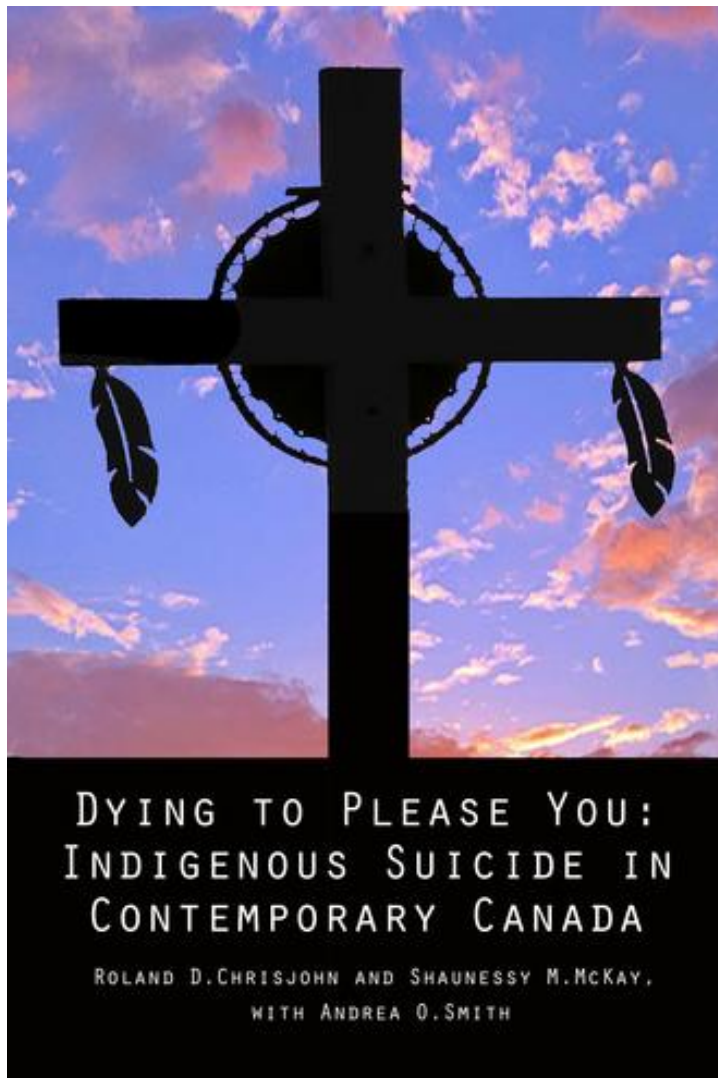
McKay draws a parallel between stopping the suicide crisis and the previous genocidal violence of residential schools.

“What shut down the residential schools [was that] people started hearing about what was happening and demanding that this behaviour be stopped. It wasn’t like the government realized how awful it was and then said, ‘Okay, I guess we have to stop this now.’ I mean, they knew all along. It was public and mainstream citizens’ outrage” that brought attention to the issues, she says.

“If the suicide crisis were discussed openly in the same way, something would have to be actually done about it.”

In *Dying To Please You*, Chrisjohn and McKay understand Indigenous suicides to be murders.

“Indigenous peoples in Canada ... are systematically mis-informed about the nature of the forces arrayed against us as individual human beings,” they write. “Does the mass of Indians who ‘commit suicide’ understand that this is a murder? Do they understand that their murder is being carried out by people under a façade of helping them?”



## Oppression drives suicide

The literature on Indigenous suicide is “lacking severely,” says McKay. “It’s very victim-blaming, it’s very insufficient.”

In their book, she and her co-author give a name to the victim-blaming: the Broken Indian Model.

“Simply, the model presumes that deficiencies or defects or shortcomings in us are responsible for our acts of suicide. The basic task of ‘suicide science,’ then, is to discover the responsible defect(s),” they write. These defects are described as “gremlins of the mind” that “have been given the names ‘depression,’ ‘despair,’ ‘hopelessness,’ ‘helplessness,’ and so on.”

“Personal individual solutions of therapists, of internalizing it, and that kind of stuff, is problematic,” explains McKay. “Our own view is that oppression is what’s causing the suicide.”

“The colonialism is the oppression: the imposition of a different form of life, an oppressive form of life, because it’s not just oppressive for us, it’s oppressive for everybody. It’s just more recent and more violent [for us],” she says.

“There’s still work involved to get Aboriginal people to conform to the mainstream, which means that we’ve not been colonized quite yet, it’s not over. In Labrador and in the Northern communities, it’s way more recent than it is in places much more urban. They can kind of see their culture being taken away. So it’s still very much here, it’s still very much now. This ‘post-colonial’ stuff is rhetoric.”

## ‘Refuse to die’

This colonial dynamic results in more than deaths by suicide, write Chrisjohn and McKay in their book. It also pushes Indigenous people into “helping to keep the great mass of Natives in line” for colonial society, or relegates them to “the margins of Canadian society.”

“If the colonizing forces make it impossible for you to live the way you do, then you have no choice but to conform or die, essentially,” says McKay.

Her advice to Indigenous peoples is to “just keep pushing and keep fighting and keep being brilliant. Keep pushing to get our communities back and our languages back, and don’t allow yourself to be ignored or marginalized. It’s important to make sure you’re heard.”

The book ends with “a plea [to Indigenous people] that you refuse to die, because that is a reaction, but it is also a reaction to educate yourself and do something about it,” says McKay.

Chrisjohn articulates it this way: “First, refuse to die, and then learn how you got to that window ledge, and then teach that knowledge to everyone you know.”

They stress the value of activism, stating that Idle No More was probably the single-most effective Indigenous

## ‘Refuse to die’ (continued)

suicide prevention intervention in recent memory, while also emphasizing community.

“An actual community is a big deal and it helps drastically,” says McKay. “Actually getting people together, helping each other, knowing your neighbours, and knowing that people are there for you when you need them — and it’s not just a kind of ‘everybody in for himself’ situation: it’s real, active, involved community.”

She also looks with hope to young people, who have the highest rates of suicide. “I think they have the potential to make real change and make a real difference, and see the issue for what it is instead of be clouded by whatever it is that has been clouding us before.”

### Stop listening to ‘experts’

While there are a number of collective efforts to address the suicide epidemic, many are based on approaches counter to what Chrisjohn and McKay propose.

“Shaunessy and I have no doubt none of the supposed ‘experts’ are going to pay us a moment’s attention. We don’t care. We’re trying to get Native peoples to stop listening to their oppressors. Someone who says [they are] there to help you isn’t necessarily helping you,” says Chrisjohn.

“Mainstream suicidology has admitted it isn’t doing very well with the mainstream, much less with groups of people they’re much less interested in, like us. It’s time the whole conversation changed, and drastically.”

The authors have had personal copies to distribute since 2014, and also made an electronic version freely available online when the official publication was delayed three years. The book originally received only sparing media attention limited to alternative media outlets, and almost none since its official release a year ago.

## INDIGENOUS YOUTH LEAD AND EMPOWER

### We Matter organization: Videos and more

There are many Indigenous initiatives in Canada to prevent suicide. On a national level is the organization We Matter.

Built around short video messages featuring a variety of (mostly younger) Indigenous individuals offering relatable encouragement and support to youth, the organization was founded by sister and brother Tunchai and Kelvin Redvers (Dene), who are originally from the Northwest Territories. It also leads workshops to empower youth as leaders in their communities and in their own struggles, and it recently released toolkits for youth, teachers, and support workers.

In January 2018, the organization held a two-day Hope Forum in Ottawa, bringing together 70 Indigenous youth from across the country. Part of the forum consisted of a two-hour session, livestreamed on Facebook, with special guests from government and elsewhere — including Minister of Indigenous Services Jane Philpott.

The youth presented a set of recommendations they’d collectively decided upon that morning, as well as engaged in personal sharing and discussion.

This was We Matter’s first foray into public policy advocacy, and they published a report on the experience.

### We Matter links:

*Website:* [www.WeMatterCampaign.org](http://www.WeMatterCampaign.org)

*Videos:* via website, or "We Matter Campaign" on YouTube

*Hope Forum report and Calls To Action:*

[www.wemattercampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/WM\\_HopeForum\\_SummaryReport\\_v05\\_Mar23.pdf](http://www.wemattercampaign.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/WM_HopeForum_SummaryReport_v05_Mar23.pdf)

*To get a toolkit for youth, teachers, or support workers:*

[www.wemattercampaign.org/Toolkits](http://www.wemattercampaign.org/Toolkits)

*Hope Forum livestream session, January 22 2018:*

[facebook.com/WeMatterCampaign/videos/1179190522214412](https://facebook.com/WeMatterCampaign/videos/1179190522214412)



### **Dying To Please You: Indigenous Suicide in Contemporary Canada**

*Publisher:* [www.Theytus.com](http://www.Theytus.com) — **Free download of full book in PDF:** <https://t.co/49eKYtTmDx> or long url: [researchgate.net/publication/319879077\\_DYING\\_TO\\_PLEASE\\_YOU\\_INDIGENOUS\\_SUICIDE\\_IN\\_CONTEMPORARY\\_CANADA](https://researchgate.net/publication/319879077_DYING_TO_PLEASE_YOU_INDIGENOUS_SUICIDE_IN_CONTEMPORARY_CANADA)

## Indigenous child welfare, foster care

Although not included in We Matter's official Calls to Action, some youth attending the forum said child welfare and foster care were important pieces of the crisis.

A few days later, Philpott hosted a previously planned emergency roundtable on child welfare that resulted in a six-part action plan. Then on Feb. 1, she responded on the federal government's behalf to the fifth ruling by the Canadian Human Rights Tribunal that the government was violating human rights in its inequitable provision of services to over 165,000 First Nations children on reserve.

Philpott withdrew the existing federal appeal of the tribunal's decision and said the government would comply with the tribunal's orders. Immediate action was taken to shift funding to services that support Indigenous children being kept with their families rather than placed in care, and \$1.4 billion over six years in new funding was announced in the federal budget.

However, Cindy Blackstock of the First Nations Child and Family Caring Society, which along with the Assembly of First Nations brought the case against the government, says that the \$1.4 billion has not yet been provided and it is still too early to determine the government's compliance with the tribunal's ruling. For now, the tribunal continues to have jurisdiction over the case.

### Links:

*Government six-point action plan, 26 January 2018:*

<https://t.co/TJft4iPXAM>

*Government action letter re CHRT, 01 February 2018:*

<https://t.co/XcKKpWVtCy>

*First Nations Child and Family Caring Society's webpage on Canadian Human Rights Tribunal:*

[www.fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness](http://www.fncaringsociety.com/i-am-witness)

### **IF IN NEED OF IMMEDIATE SUPPORTS:**

[www.KidsHelpPhone.ca](http://www.KidsHelpPhone.ca) 1-800-668-6868

[www.WeMatterCampaign.org/get-help](http://www.WeMatterCampaign.org/get-help)

First Nations and Inuit Hope for Wellness Helpline:

1-855-242-3310

Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention:

[www.suicideprevention.ca/need-help/](http://www.suicideprevention.ca/need-help/)

USA: [themighty.com/suicide-prevention-resources](http://themighty.com/suicide-prevention-resources)

International Association for Suicide Prevention:

[www.iasp.info/resources](http://www.iasp.info/resources)



## National Suicide Prevention Action Plan

Another potentially major step towards addressing factors related to Indigenous suicide is a private member's motion from NDP MP Charlie Angus, who already works closely with Blackstock as well as chiefs and communities in Northern Ontario responding to suicide crises.

Whether the motion for a National Suicide Prevention Action Plan will receive majority parliamentary support is yet to be seen. Private member's motions often don't, but NDP MP Romeo Saganash's Bill C-262 for measures to implement the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples did pass through all three hearings in the House of Commons and is currently before the Senate.

In justifying his proposed plan — which is for all people in Canada but contains sections specific to Indigenous peoples — Angus points to the success of Quebec's provincial strategy in significantly reducing suicide rates since its implementation in 1998. Nunavut launched its own suicide-prevention plan in 2011.

In June 2017, the Indigenous and Northern Affairs (INAN) parliamentary committee released a report on addressing Indigenous suicide. Both Angus and Saganash participated in the committee's work on the report.

That same month, Tanya Talaga, an award-winning Toronto Star investigative journalist and author of *Seven Fallen Feathers*, was awarded the Atkinson Fellowship in Public Policy for her proposal to examine suicide among Indigenous youth. She will present this work in this year's CBC Massey Lectures in five Canadian cities this fall, after which it will be broadcast on CBC Radio's Ideas.

### Links:

*Charlie Angus' private member's motion M-174:*

[www.charlieangus.ndp.ca/suicide-prevention-action-plan](http://www.charlieangus.ndp.ca/suicide-prevention-action-plan)

*INAN committee report on Indigenous suicide:*

[ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/INAN/report-9](http://ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/INAN/report-9)

*National Suicide Prevention Action Plan, launch video*

[cpac.ca/en/programs/headline-politics/episodes/62063533](http://cpac.ca/en/programs/headline-politics/episodes/62063533)

*or reposted at, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5bvXUIHlws](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5bvXUIHlws)*