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**Our communities in crisis**

**Russell Skelton**

*April 19, 2012*

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**Death in the Kimberley**

Russell Skelton reports on the suicide epidemic that is gripping Mowanjum, in Australia's far north west.

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**Amid the west's mining boom, indigenous families face losing a generation.**

IT CAME without warning, triggered by something as trivial as a teenage boy demanding that his brother hand over his mobile phone. It was the 16-year-old's birthday, and he was celebrating by drinking steadily all day, as he did most days. The tiff, really nothing more than a simple squabble between brothers, ended in the early hours of the next morning when the darkest of impulses overwhelmed the child.

An 8-year-old girl raised the alarm. She had sighted the boy's lifeless body hanging from a tree behind the church in the abandoned playground. After several hours police and emergency services arrived, conducted a brief investigation and had the body removed.

As the sun climbed into the sky, scores of children looked on in silence. Witnesses said the grieving and sobbing rolled through the tiny community of Mowanjum like a thick black cloud. In this one small place, just a 10 minute drive from the thriving mining hub of Derby in West Kimberley, there have been six deaths by suicide in six months.

Mowanjum community leader Gary Umbagai at the gates of the town.
Photo Glenn Campbell

'Nobody comes to investigate why this is happening': Mowanjum community leader Gary Umbagai at the entrance to the town. *Photo: Glenn Campbell*

Gary Umbagai, council chairman and mineworker, openly despairs about the rising death toll and community dysfunction. "There is something dreadfully wrong in our community, but what can we do?" Mowanjum and Derby he adds, have the highest youth suicide rates in Australia, possibly the world.

"There is a terrible crisis here, but nobody in authority except the police acts as if there is a crisis." *The Age* visited Mowanjum this month with the permission of the traditional owners and after being alerted to the community's desperate plight by health workers troubled by what they believe is chronic official indifference.

In January, a 20-year-old surrendered his life after his partner locked him out because he was drunk and violent. In March, a 44-year-old newly unemployed mineworker hanged himself. In yet another incident, a young girl vanished into the bush only to be found days later, also the victim of an apparent uncontrollable impulse after a relationship went wrong.

Umbagai says he has lost count of attempted suicides. A document obtained by *The Age* reveals that in a four-month period from July last year, 18 females and 22 males were admitted to the Derby hospital, for self-harm, attempted hanging, overdosing and suicidal thoughts. Most cases involved indigenous people and excessive alcohol consumption. The number of young Aboriginal people taking their own lives may be higher as some deaths, such as a recent road fatality, have been classified as accidental.

In Mowanjum, signs of trauma are everywhere. After each episode of self-harm, the tree related to the incident is cut down at the request of the victim's family, who don't wish to be reminded of tragedy and fear "copycat" behaviour: the small community is littered with hacked tree trunks. One young man is openly referred to as "the hangman" because of the scars around his neck. Another young girl who attempted to take her life on Saturday - her latest in many attempts - is watched closely. "We are deeply worried about her," her elderly mother confided. "It is a miracle she is alive, but we cannot watch her all the time."

Mowanjum is the epicentre for an extraordinary spike of indigenous suicide across the Kimberley. In the past 12 months there have been 25 suicide deaths in the region, 21 in the west around Derby and Mowanjum. The number of "completed" indigenous suicides last year exceeded the Australian Defence Force fatalities in Afghanistan.

In New South Wales, which has Australia's largest indigenous population, the youth suicide rate is one in 100,000. In the Northern Territory, where a parliamentary inquiry was set up to investigate the causes of and responses to youth suicide, the rate is 30 deaths in 100,000. In the Kimberley, with an Aboriginal population of around 16,000, the estimated rate is an astonishing and unprecedented one death in 1200.

Gary Umbagai worries about the impact of profound trauma on his community of just 350. "Police come and investigate, that is their job. It takes a long time before the body is handed over to the ambulance. Kids hear the commotion. Everybody is distressed and crying. We have kids five and six witnessing these events and you worry what affect it is having on them.

"Kids grow up thinking this is normal and that any little problem can be solved this way. There is virtually no grief counselling, nobody comes to investigate why this is happening in Mowanjum. So much money is being spent on suicide prevention in the Kimberley, but we don't see it. I don't think bureaucrats in Perth or Canberra understand how bad it is, what we are facing."

Despite the deaths, no effective suicide prevention strategy has been put in place in Mowanjum. Steve Austin, Mowanjum CEO, notes that the West Australian government is spending $150 million on a new Derby jail while the federal government spends millions more annually maintaining the Curtin Immigration Detention Centre nearby. "We have made applications for a youth co-ordinator to keep kids occupied with programs, but they have all been rejected. We get back a generic letter saying we don't meet the criteria. We get no help."

Austin says the applications for funding were made to the WA Victims of Crime authority and the federal Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs without success. "It is as if the bureaucrats don't have any idea of what we are up against. I wrote to [Indigenous Affairs Minister] Jenny Macklin when we lost our CDEP [publicly funded community employment programs] and her office did not acknowledge our letter."

According to the community council, savage cuts to CDEP in 2009 coincided with the wave of suicides. Austin says the number of people employed fell from 140 to around 30. All attempts to have funding restored, including a direct appeal to Macklin and the Derby Indigenous Coordination Centre have so far failed.

Umbagai says the lack of a positive response has left families feeling haunted and fearful. Some even believe the community has been cursed, but he says the underlying reasons are all too apparent. "When they took away our CDEP, more people started drinking. In every death the victim has been intoxicated. Our community is supposed to be dry, but we cannot enforce the ban. The WA government took away our authority to run night patrols. The police do their best, but they cannot be here all the time."

Zoe Evans, co-ordinator of the Standby Suicide Response Service operating out of Broome knows Mowanjum and its people and has friends in the community. She says her Broome-based team visits every community immediately after a suicide to provide support and to organise activities. But she says counselling is not always possible because often people are consumed by grief and want to be alone.

Although the service is funded by the Commonwealth Department of Health it is a shoestring operation with two full-time workers to cover an area the size of a small European country. With attempted suicides sometimes occurring daily and vast distances to cover, the service has little capacity to develop preventative programs.

IN MOWANJUM children start drinking from as young as 11. On any given evening cars loaded with under-age drinkers and driven by older men head for Derby to pick up grog, often bought under the counter from unscrupulous traders for $150 a slab. Gary Umbagai says alcohol abuse means children go hungry, often begging food from relatives. In the homes of drinkers children get little sleep and find it hard to regularly attend school. He is surprised that child protection services are not more vigilant when it is obvious children are being abused and neglected.

Heather Umbagai, Gary's 57-year-old Worra Worra mother who lost her other son Radki to suicide, says that during her childhood on the mission there was far more interaction with the bush. "When I was young it was a peaceful time. We grew up with a solid education even though we had been moved off our traditional land."

That changed about 12 years ago when chronic drinking took hold. That led in turn to a breakdown in traditional authority and culture. Today, she says young people are not much interested in ceremony and the Dreaming. They slip into a culture of substance abuse at the expense of education. Drinking and teenage motherhood has also compromised good parenting. "Young people have freedom of movement, and old folks are afraid to discipline them because they fear they will go and commit suicide."

A proud, perceptive woman, she says when her son took his life five years ago after he was refused the keys to the family car because he was drunk and unlicensed, sadness and depression followed. Her health declined, renal failure set in. "I never had any counselling of any kind. Mental health authorities did not come out, government services did not come out. I know because I was one of the victims."

She decided to speak to *The Age* so authorities could grasp the acute trauma that has taken hold and the failure of mental heath authorities to constructively intervene.

Ironically, there appears to be no shortage of programs or money to address suicide in the Kimberley yet the deaths keep coming. In 2006 there were 13 deaths in 13 months at Fitzroy Crossing. Wes Morris, co-ordinator of the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, says there have been two key coronial investigations into suicide, the latest being the 2008 investigation into 22 deaths at Balgo.

He says the findings of State Coroner Alastair Hope, who made a scathing assessment of the performance of departments and agencies involved in providing services to disadvantaged communities, have been largely ignored. Hope found the system of providing funds for Aboriginal programs was "seriously flawed" and agencies were not monitored or audited despite a failure to curb suicide.

Morris doubts that the multimillion-dollar regional partnership agreement signed between Canberra and the WA government will have any real impact on the chronic suicide rate. As for the new $30 million mental health facility in Broome, a two-hour drive from Mowanjum, he questions its effectiveness because the "causes of indigenous suicide are culturally based" and not necessarily linked to mental wellbeing.

For Heather Umbagai the pain of her son's suicide is undiminished. She wonders what she could have done to prevent her son's death. "I remember it like it was yesterday. He said 'All right Mum I will see you in the resurrection.' That was his last words to me.

"I should have followed him, I should never have let him go and do that thing. Kids today are doing more daring things than kids of other generations. Sometimes you wonder if they are looking for attention, sometimes you wonder what was lacking in their lives. But no matter which way you look at it alcohol is always involved.

"In Mowanjum we try to comfort each other, because there is nobody else. For three years I was like a zombie because there was nobody to help me through the grief."

**Russell Skelton is a contributing editor.**