

Australia: Eleven-year-old Aboriginal boy commits suicide

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Two months ago, Peter Little, an 11-year-old Aboriginal boy, tragically committed suicide in the Western Australian city of Geraldton. While the death was met with shock and an outpouring of grief from his family, friends and Aboriginal community, the federal and state governments have remained largely silent. Media reports on the suicide were cursory.

Little was playing with other children outside his grandparent's house at around 5 p.m. on October 19. It is believed that there was a disagreement between the children. Little told one of the children that he was going to kill himself and walked across the road into the bush. He was later found by a child hanging from a tree. He was rushed to the local hospital but pronounced dead at 6.44 p.m.

Peter Little was born on 16 March 2003 in Geraldton, a port with a population of around 35,000, located 425 kilometres north of Perth, the state capital. According to an Australian National University study in 2013, the city is the second worst regional centre for Aboriginal disadvantage in Western Australia (WA), with an indigenous unemployment rate of 26.6 percent.

Details of Little's life are scant. He lived with different relatives and attended several schools during his brief life. Chris Little and Rhoda Narrier, the boy's parents, separated and were not consistently in his life, making him emotionally vulnerable. Teachers described him as quiet. He loved drawing and gardening but struggled with literacy and numeracy.

The boy's final move was to live with his grandparents and be nearer his father, who previously served a prison sentence.

Aboriginal incarceration rates are among the highest in the world. According to recent WA figures, 77.8 percent of all juveniles imprisoned in the state are Aboriginal and over 70 percent of Geraldton's prison

population is Aboriginal.

Earlier this year, Chris Little sought assistance from the state's child protection parent-support program, a service used to develop family relationships and addressing behavioural issues such as truancy.

According to a state government inter-agency briefing note cited by the *Australian* newspaper, the boy "had a number of previously reported suicide attempts." What support, if any, was provided is unknown. The WA Child Adolescent Mental Health Service and the Country Health Service claim to have no record of earlier suicide attempts by the boy.

Whatever the exact circumstances that led Peter Little to take his life—whether he felt unwanted, abused or victimised—the tragedy is part of an escalating wave of Aboriginal youth suicides that stems from the endemic unemployment, poverty and social problems afflicting indigenous communities.

George Georgatos, a senior national consultant to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project, told the media there was a rapid increase in suicide numbers, with the median age of suicides getting younger. "The majority of the suicides are found within concentrations of acute poverty," he said.

Although a child's suicide is a shocking event, it is by no means isolated. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, 53 children under the age of 15 committed suicide in Australia between 2007 and 2011, of whom 17 were Aboriginal. The rate of suicide for indigenous children was 1.2 per 100,000—six times the rate for non-indigenous children.

For Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24 years, the suicide rate is 42 per 100,000, compared to 8 per 100,000 for non-Aboriginal youth. Two weeks after Little's funeral, two Aboriginal teenagers—a 14-year-old and a

15-year-old—committed suicide in WA.

Last month the Productivity Commission delivered its 2014 report *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* (OID). It noted that despite a slight improvement in life expectancy for the indigenous population, rates of suicide, self-harm, mental health and incarceration had worsened, along with access to basic services.

Admissions to hospital for intentional self-harm increased by an alarming 48 percent between 2004–05 and 2012–13, and the proportion of adults reporting high or very high psychological distress rose from 27 to 30 percent.

Warren Mundine, a former Labor Party national president and the federal Coalition government’s chief indigenous adviser, told the media that Peter Little’s death was part of “an epidemic.... [Q]uite frankly you are looking at a society in collapse. I am a father and I cannot get it through my head that at the age of eight or nine a child can’t see a future for themselves.”

However, the rising number of Aboriginal youth committing suicide is no surprise to Mundine or any government official. The rate of Aboriginal youth suicide is one of the highest in the world, second only to Greenland.

Aboriginal communities have been crying out for much needed resources for decades, but their appeals have been rejected by Labor and Liberal governments alike. Last month the “Closing the Gap” initiative denounced the government’s approach to Aboriginal mental health as “disjointed, inadequate and culturally inappropriate.”

In September 2013, newly-elected Prime Minister Tony Abbott declared: “It is my hope that I could be, not just a prime minister, but a prime minister for Aboriginal Affairs.”

Abbott’s claim was as empty and cynical as Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd’s 2008 apology to the “Stolen Generations”—the thousands of Aboriginal children forcibly removed from their parents by federal and state authorities and church missions between 1909 and the early 1970s. The “apology” changed nothing for the majority of Aborigines. Social conditions in indigenous communities worsened under Labor.

Last December, the Abbott government announced cuts of \$13.4 million over four years to indigenous legal aid. In this year’s May budget, cuts of \$534 million over five years were announced to indigenous

social programs, including a \$160 million cut to the indigenous health budget. The only increase was \$54 million for seven new police stations in remote communities.

Last week, the Western Australian government revealed the possible closure next year of 150, or more than half, of the state’s Aboriginal remote settlements. The decision is partly due to a federal government cut of \$45 million for basic services in these small communities.

The closures will have a devastating impact. In 2011, after four suicides in one year, Oombulgurru, an Aboriginal community of about 200 people in WA’s far north, was closed and the site bulldozed.

The social ills that produced the deaths in Oombulgurru—unemployment, poverty, depression and substance abuse—were never resolved but simply transferred to other towns in the region. Many people ended up homeless. Last year, two former Oombulgurru residents committed suicide—one was a 12-year-old girl.

Peter Little was buried at Geraldton cemetery last month, just metres from Julieka Dhu, a 22-year-old Aboriginal woman who died in police custody earlier this year. Dhu was found dead in a police lockup on August 4, after being imprisoned over the non-payment of approximately \$1,000 in various fines. Her boyfriend was imprisoned in the cell next to her.

These deaths are an indictment of capitalism. A social order that offers only poverty, unemployment and misery to young children, and drives them to suicide, does not deserve to exist.



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