

Rash of youth suicides rattles, baffles Fort Peck reservation



Michael Albans AP photo Josh Failing, a student at Poplar Middle School, talks about childhood suicide during an interview on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Poplar last month. Failing, a 14-year-old middle school student who attempted to commit suicide in 2010, said he has taken under his wing a younger cousin who was being bullied and was contemplating suicide.



Michael Albans AP photo Darrell Follette, left, and Ida Follette recount the day of their daughter Chelle Rose Follette's suicide during an interview in their home on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in Poplar last month.



Michael Albans AP photo Dalton Gourneau, 17, committed suicide on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation in November 2010.

Tragic trend

By MATT VOLZ Associated Press | Posted: Monday, March 21, 2011 12:00 am

POPLAR — Chelle Rose Follette fashioned a noose with her pajamas, tying one end to a closet rod and the other around her neck. When her mother entered the bedroom to put away laundry, she found the 13-year-old hanging.

Ida Follette screamed for her husband, Darrell.

He lifted his child's body, rushed her to the bed and tried to bring her back.

"She was so light, she was so light. And I put her down. I said, 'No, Chelle!'"

But the time had passed for CPR, he said, his voice fading with still raw grief. His wife sat next to him on the couch, sobbing at the retelling.

Here on the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, a spasm of youth suicides had caused alarm and confusion even before Chelle's death. The Follettes had talked with her about other local children who had killed themselves. She had assured her parents that they need not worry about her.

"She always promised that," said Ida as the half-light of the winter afternoon created shadows in the sparsely furnished home. "She said, 'What's going on with these kids, are they stupid or what?'"

Earlier that day last April, Chelle and a friend got drunk after school. Police later told her parents that her blood-alcohol content was .217, nearly three times the legal limit.

Chelle argued with her parents when she came home. They ordered her to lie down, to cool off, to sober up.

The Follettes say Chelle was a happy teen who had been looking forward to her 14th birthday the following week. They believe she was just trying to scare them after their argument, but that in her intoxicated state it became a horrible accident.

"I know in my heart she's in heaven," Ida Follette said, burying her face in her hands. "She didn't mean to do it. I know she didn't kill herself."

But that's how the coroner listed Chelle's death. What he and other authorities examining the suicide outbreak among Native American children cannot easily answer is: Why?

Suicide is the second-leading cause of death behind unintentional injuries among Indian children and young adults, and is on the rise, according to the Indian Health Service. Native Americans ages 10 to 24 killed themselves at more than twice the rate of similarly aged whites, according to the most recent data available from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

On the Fort Peck reservation, five children killed themselves during the 2009-2010 school year at Poplar Middle School — enrollment about 160 — and 20 more of the 7th and 8th graders tried. In the current school year, two young adults have committed suicide, though none at Poplar Middle School.

Emergency teams from the U.S. Public Health Service descended upon Fort Peck last June after Sioux and Assiniboine leaders declared a crisis. The teams provided counseling and mental health services to assist the overworked counselors and strained resources of the reservation.

No suicides were recorded during the 90-day deployment of the federal health team. When they packed their bags in October and left a detailed report with a dozen recommendations, the Indian Health Service declared the crisis had passed — a view repeated to The Associated Press last month by IHS behavioral health director Dr. Rose Weahkee.

But it proved to be only a lull. Two more teenagers killed themselves since October and dozens of other children across the reservation have tried.

"We're at a loss," said Larry Wetsit, a traditional spiritual leader and former tribal chairman.

The Fort Peck reservation sprawls across four counties in northeastern Montana. Poplar, with

880 residents, is the seat of government for the reservation's Sioux and Assiniboine residents. Wolf Point, a community of about 2,500, is some 20 miles west.

Like many reservations, Fort Peck is struggling with high unemployment, estimated to be 28 percent in 2008, and rampant substance abuse. Some 45 percent of the residents live below the poverty level, including half of all children, according to tribal statistics.

The problems of the reservation are already pronounced in the schools. Poplar school officials told the federal health team that more than a third of middle-school students tested positive for sexually transmitted diseases, at least one-fifth of 5th graders drink alcohol weekly and 12 percent of high school girls are pregnant. The dropout rate is 40 percent.

But despite those devastating numbers, there doesn't appear to be a predictable pattern to the suicides. The victims were from broken homes and loving families, they were substance abusers and popular athletes.

Children at Fort Peck Middle School cite bullying and peer pressure as big factors in the deaths of their friends, and they say those issues continue as a daily struggle.

"Let's say that all your emotions are in a glass of water. When somebody bullies you, dump out a little bit. When somebody offers you drugs and you take those drugs, and then somebody tears you down because you used drugs, pour out a little bit. Eventually that glass of water is going to be empty and that's kind of like your self-esteem. You're going to be empty, so you're going to try to commit suicide," said A.J. Hollom, a 14-year-old student.

Officials warned that bullying comes in many forms — in school hallways and online, from other kids and from adults.

"Some of the suicides, they found out after the fact about the bullying. The bullying from other

students, the bullying from staff,” said Stacie Crawford, the chief tribal prosecutor.

During a school assembly last September, Poplar Middle School principal Patricia Black separated by name dozens of children in grades 5-7 who were failing at least one class from the rest of the students gathered.

Their parents were enraged, criticizing Black for shaming the children.

The federal response team noted in its report that several children expressed hopelessness and thoughts of self-harm afterward.

Black said she only wanted to give the students a private pep talk on how to improve their grades. “I didn’t say that these kids have Fs. I did not say that I was ashamed of them or anything like that,” Black told The Associated Press.

The school board voted to keep Black as principal after she apologized to the students.

Some teachers, including Erin Solem, are encouraging students to speak out instead of bottling their emotions. Solem has had them write essays on suicide, bullying and substance abuse, some of which have been published in the local newspaper.

Solem said conditions at the school have improved, but little could compare to last year.

“You got to the point where you look at the kids and you’d be like, who’s next? Because there’s no rhyme or reason.”

The eagerly anticipated report from the federal intervention team landed as a disappointment, detailing problems at the reservation that most everybody already knew: Mental health services are lacking, violent crime rages, people live in dire economic conditions and in broken homes.

“You know there’s not even a personal message to us as parents, or to families about how we raise (our children), but to have the audacity to come in here with this large report and say it’s

community and parents?” said Roxanne Gourneau, a tribal family court judge whose 17-year-old son Dalton shot himself in November. “They don’t know our lifestyle and they don’t know who’s who and what’s what.”

The report did include some practical recommendations, such as creating a safe house for suicidal kids instead of locking them up in a jail cell. But those ideas weren’t accompanied with funding, giving the impoverished community no way to implement them.

The federal deployment cost \$241,000, with an additional \$50,000 grant from the Department of Education. There is no additional federal money planned to deal with the crisis.

More is needed, said Patty McGeshick, director of the Family Violence Resource Center in Wolf Point. Counselors are still overwhelmed and unable to properly deal with the crisis, she said.

“It’s like trying to put a Band-Aid on an infection through your whole body,” McGeshick said.

Some families and community leaders have given up on waiting for outside experts. Some are angry.

“I’m going to tell you something: I’m going to get justice for my son,” Gourneau said. “The truth is going to be his justice. We were an ironclad family. We took care of our children and we did everything right. And something really bad happened. Yes, he did pull the trigger. But who created the situation where he lost all hope and despaired? Because his family didn’t.”

The resurgence in suicides and attempts on the reservation led the tribe to create a new criminal charge in December called aggravated disorderly conduct. The charge allows prosecutors to detain someone threatening suicide until a mental health specialist can see that person.

The charge has been enforced eight times since Dec. 23, and six of those detained have been teenagers, said tribal prosecutor Crawford.

That's in addition to a monthly average of a dozen suicidal people who are given emergency commitment papers for hospitals in Billings or Minot, N.D., Crawford said. Out of those commitments, she estimated that 40 percent are juveniles.

The children who get charged with aggravated disorderly conduct are those who don't qualify for emergency commitment for whatever reason. Jailing people with suicidal thoughts is obviously not a long-term solution, but it's the best the tribe can do without better services or facilities, Crawford said.

"We're not trying to criminalize them. But nobody else is offering any other alternative," she said, while calling for help in building a mental health facility on the reservation.

On the positive side, a new suicide prevention specialist has been hired, there's a weekly interagency suicide prevention coordination meeting and better services are available for walk-in patients at the tribal clinic, Indian Health Service officials said.

James Melbourne, the Fort Peck tribal health director, declined numerous interview requests from the AP to answer community criticism about his agency's response to the suicides.

"We have chosen not to respond in detail with the media to respect our families and community who are continuing to mourn and grieve," Melbourne wrote in an e-mail.

Spiritual leaders say the suicides are rooted in an identity crisis that goes to a cultural and spiritual bankruptcy among Indian youth.

Young people have lost touch with tradition, they say. It's a problem that's grown worse with each generation and is a result of the marginalization of Indian people through the reservation system forced upon them by the federal government many decades ago, said Raymond White Tail Feather, a Baptist minister and former tribal chairman.

"The tribes were contained on reservations, and systematically their culture, the way of life, the federal government attempted to destroy this," said White Tail Feather. "When you do that to a people, what comes about is hopelessness."

Spiritual leader Wetsit presides over the Assiniboine Medicine Lodge, where young men and women participate in a right-of-passage ceremony based on prayer, sacrifice and reflection. He said a strong sense of identity, coupled with good morals and an understanding of one's own culture gives strength of character.

But many Indian children are disconnected from that culture and spirituality, compromising that strength of character, he said. He said there is no simple answer.

"It's going to take us a couple of generations to work through all of that because we've got a whole bunch of families that are stuck, and they're not going to just come out of it overnight. There's a lot of healing, there are a lot of issues we've got to take care of," Wetsit said.

His message has reached some young tribal members. Josh Failing, a 14-year-old middle school student who attempted to commit suicide last year, said he has taken under his wing a younger cousin who was being bullied and was contemplating suicide.

Failing started spending more time with his cousin and taking him to traditional ceremonies, including sweat lodge. His cousin is still angry all the time, he said, but he's still here.

"We need positive role models for the kids — leaders — and we don't get much of that," Failing said. "Give those kids examples, and they can give other people examples, and maybe someday this will all stop and we can all be good people once again."

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