

# Going Off, Growing Strong: Building Resilience of Indigenous Youth

C. Hackett

*McMaster University and Nunatsiavut Government*

C. Furgal

*Trent University*

D. Angnatok, T. Sheldon, S. Karpik, D. Baikie, and C. Pamak

*Nunatsiavut Government*

T. Bell

*Memorial University*

## ABSTRACT

Going Off, Growing Strong is a program for Inuit youth facing widespread social, cultural, and economic change. The overarching goals of the program are to: (1) enhance resilience and wellness; (2) build social connections for the youth; and (3) transmit traditional knowledge, skills, and values to participating youth.

**Keywords:** Inuit mental health, youth suicide prevention, land-based programming

## PEJAINNIK

Aullasimak, Pigutsanik Sangijogiamik pivitsauvuk Inosuttunut sangaviujunut pivalliatugutitut, piusituKanut amma kenaujaliginimmut tautsininginnut. Tugagutillagingit pivitsaujop pigasuavut: 1)

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C. Hackett, Health Policy, McMaster University, and Department of Lands and Natural Resources, Nunatsiavut Government; C. Furgal, Health, Environment, and Indigenous Communities Research Group, Trent University; D. Angnatok, J. Angnatok, S. Karpik, C. Pamak, & T. Sheldon, Department of Lands and Natural Resources, Nunatsiavut Government; D. Baikie, Department of Health & Social Development, Nunatsiavut Government; T. Bell, Department of Geography, Memorial University of Newfoundland.

This paper is in memory of our colleague, Dorothy "Duru" Angnatok, who was central to the program, and brought joy to the lives of the youth and the community. The program and work continues in dedication to her memory. Duru worked for Going Off, Growing Strong from fall 2012 until she passed away in January 2016.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christina Hackett, Department of Health Policy, 1280 Main Street West, McMaster University, Hamilton, ON L8S 2K8. Email: [hacketc@mcmaster.ca](mailto:hacketc@mcmaster.ca)

piunitsautitsivallinimmik amma piujonimmik; 2) sanannik pivalliagutinnik inosutunut; amma 3) siamma-titsinik Kaujimatukannik, pisonguninnik amma illinatunik ilaujunut inosutunut.

**uKausitsauluat:** Inuit iisumatsiagigasuanik inoguset, Inosuttunik imminettailigasugiamut nukKangatitsigasuanik, Nunamelluni- ikajotiugunnatut

## RÉSUMÉ

Going Off, Growing Strong est un programme pour les jeunes inuits qui font face à de nombreux changements sociaux, culturels et économiques. Les buts principaux du programme sont: 1) accroître la résilience et le bien-être; 2) aider les jeunes à bâtir des liens sociaux; et 3) transmettre aux jeunes des connaissances, des habiletés et des valeurs traditionnelles inuits.

**Mots clés :** la santé mentale Inuit, prévention du suicide jeunesse, la programmation basée sur les terres

The *Aullak, Sangilivallianginnatuk (Going Off, Growing Strong; GOGS)* program in Nain, Nunatsiavut was designed to build the resilience of a group of Inuit youth facing widespread social, environmental, and cultural change. GOGS was created to try to find solutions to these ongoing challenges by engaging youth who were struggling with serious suicidal behaviours, and who were not participating in any other community-offered program. The overarching goals of this program are to: (1) enhance the mental, physical, and spiritual health of a group of “at-risk” youth; (2) build social connections between the youth and other community members; and (3) transmit environmental knowledge, skills, and values from experienced harvesters (i.e., Inuit mentors skilled in the areas of hunting, harvesting, navigation, and traditional knowledge) to youth.

In the fall of 2011 there was a cluster of school-aged Inuit male suicides in the community of Nain, Nunatsiavut. Nunatsiavut is one of four self-governed Inuit regions in Canada, within which over 60% of the population is under the age of 25. Of the four Inuit regions, Nunatsiavut has been reported to have the highest suicide rate (Inuit Tapirit Kanatami, 2008; Statistics Canada, 2011), one that is double the next highest region. The community of Nain is the largest community in Nunatsiavut and its administrative capital, and has faced cycles of epidemic rates of suicide throughout the past two decades.

GOGS was created to try to find solutions to the escalation of suicide rates among Inuit youth by engaging those who were struggling with serious suicidal behaviours and who were not engaged in any other community-offered program. When those in the targeted youth population were asked what they would participate in, or show up for in terms of activities, they stated that they wanted to “go off on the land.” “Going off,” in this context, means to explore the surrounding land and gather food and wood for the community. The GOGS program was thus born to meet the needs of these youth.

The authors have all been involved in the administration, program development, implementation, and evaluation of GOGS. The lead author, Christina Hackett, was a mental health professional in the community of Nain from 2010 to 2013 and helped develop the program. Chris Furgal acts as a consultant on program evaluation and development; Tom Sheldon leads the program team and is the Director for the Environment at Nunatsiavut Government. Dorothy Angnatok and Sarah Karpik were lead program staff at the time this article was written. Danielle Baikie facilitates the mental health component of program evaluation and works

for the Nunatsiavut government's Department of Health and Social Development as a clinical social worker. Joey Angnatok is the lead mentor-harvester for the program; Carla Pamak and Trevor Bell assist with program evaluation and development. There are no conflicts of interest to report for any authors.

### INNOVATION, REPORTED EXPERIENCE, AND IMPACT

GOGS is unique in that it is structured to be culturally appropriate, continuous and intensive, and both formal and informal. Youth in the program participate in a number of traditional Inuit activities on a weekly basis with program staff harvesters and outreach workers. Relationships with harvester-mentors from the community help to build resilience through improved social capital within the community, and through reconnection with Inuit cultural heritage (Condon, Collings, & Wenzel, 1995; Kral, & Idlout, 2012). These activities include hunting, trapping, fishing, gathering wood, gathering wild plants, building Kamutiks (sleds for carrying supplies), and making arts and crafts. Other activities include processing wild meat, delivering food and wood to elders and community members, thereby building intergenerational relationships and social capital in the community in which they live (Hurd et al., 2014).

To date, two cohorts of youth have participated in the GOGS program. The first comprised 10 male youth, and operated from March 2012 to August 2013. The second cohort of youth began in January 2014 and continued until December 2015. Young people participate in the program for more than one year, and once a cohort finishes, participating youth are given the opportunity to become Junior Leaders for the next cohort. Youth are always welcome to drop in at the program office (more to follow) during or after their program. The length of the program cycle allows youth and program staff to build trust and safe relationships (Condon, Collings, & Wenzel, 1995; Hurd et al., 2014). Many youth face persistent traumatic stressors in their home environments, thus this length of time is needed to facilitate the building of these relationships at the comfort level and pace that best fits the youth.

The program is operated out of the Nain community freezer (NCF) and youth are welcome and often drop in to the NCF to chat with program staff and help out with freezer activities. The NCF was established in 2011 to provide a hub for traditional food sharing, and to help reduce food insecurity issues. The NCF is housed in the Nain Research Centre, and includes an industrial-sized walk-in freezer, a refrigerator and a meat-processing area. This is an informal space where youth can access social support if needed, and get help with various life tasks like writing résumés, applications to other programs, or to re-enter school, find jobs, and do homework. All former, or current, youth participants in the program are welcome at the NCF space.

Program evaluation has been built in as an integral part of GOGS in order to measure and capture the program's impact and provide valuable information on which to make operational adaptations along the way. The evaluation process uses a participatory action research framework to guide its development and implementation. The evaluation team comprises community members involved in GOGS, including staff members, harvesters, program administrators, as well as researchers with ties to the community. Collectively, five main domains of outcome measurements were developed and used to inform the development of qualitative interview guides, and quantitative data collection tools were used in triangulation of evidence of impact for each cohort.

Outcomes to date include a very considerable reduction in suicide rates in Nain for school-aged males, as well as for the population in general. There have been no male school-aged suicides in Nain since April 2012. Clinic visits related to serious suicide attempts for youth involved in the program have reduced in the first cohort. This is likely due to the substantial number of days the youth are able to experience on the land, and learning traditional Inuit skills. The youth reported an improvement in these skills and in their confidence levels in general.

### FUTURE DIRECTIONS

GOGS is an example of an innovative, grass roots initiative that has grown and been sustained to serve youth at high risk for suicide in the Inuit community of Nain, Nunatsiavut. This innovation involved, and further facilitated, the collaboration of several community services and sectors, such that youth were able to access a culturally and developmentally appropriate program in a time of crisis and beyond. GOGS is a sustainable program, allowing for the development of ongoing formative and summative evaluation protocol development. GOGS addresses the unique needs of youth in this community; however, it can also serve as a program model for other remote and northern indigenous communities in which youth face similarly complex and persistent trauma, and high-risk situations that exacerbate or propagate mental ill-health and harmful coping strategies. Our team has completed the evaluation for the first cohort, and evaluation for the second cohort ended in December 2015. Results from the second cohort will be analyzed and reported in 2016 and a new cohort is currently being established. In addition to reporting outcomes, future research results from this program will focus on the complexities of program evaluation in this context, as well as the development of a framework for evaluation that may serve as a model for similar programs and contexts.

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