How do changes in weather, season, and climate impact Inuit mental wellbeing in Nunatsiavut?

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Introduction

Inuit rely on the environment to support their livelihoods, culture, relationships, and wellbeing. Changes in the physical environment can limit the ability of Inuit to engage in knowledge-based practices such as hunting, trapping, and harvesting. As such, climatic changes have been linked to mental health challenges, including increased family stress, possible substance abuse, the potential for increased suicidal ideation, and concurrent reports of an increased use of mental health services and overburdened health professionals.2,4

Rationale

Ongoing community-driven research in the Labrador Inuit Land Claim Area (hereafter referred to as Nunatsiavut) has identified mental wellbeing among several climate-sensitive health priorities.5 Although some mental health outcomes such as suicide are already known to be associated with seasonal and meteorological trends in some Alaskan Natives,6 these findings are both regionally and outcome specific and cannot be reliably extrapolated to other populations.7,8 Therefore, the present study seeks to investigate the environmental-mental health relationship in Nunatsiavut.

Research Objectives

1. Investigate meteorological, seasonal, and climatic factors locally identified as important to Nunatsiavut Inuit mental wellbeing.

2. Explore how these meteorological, seasonal, and climatic factors influence the use of mental-health-related services in Nunatsiavut.

Methods

Qualitative Data

• Between 2012-2013, 106 in-depth interviews were conducted by local research coordinators across all 5 communities (Nain, Hopedale, Maskvak, Postville, and Rigolet).

• 90 community members; 20 health professionals were interviewed (N=116).

Analysis

• Thematic analysis of transcripts using an iterative, constant-comparative method was conducted.9

Findings

Temporal Patterns of Mental Wellbeing

"The weather has a strong hold on us"

Weather and climatic conditions were consistently reported to impact individual and collective emotional states, as they are learned through place. Many participants described ontological insecurities, examining how and their place-based identity would exist in a new climate.

Changing Climate and Anticipated Wellbeing

All participants described increasingly unpredictable changes in weather and climate. When asked how these changes made them feel, many felt "sad" for the loss of their land, culture, and skills learned through place. Many participants faced ontological insecurities, examining if and how their place-based identity would exist in a new climate.

"Inuit are not really known for warm weather but I think we’re probably going to get hit by that you know, warmer temperatures, I don’t know. Just hopefully the warmer temperatures don’t hit us too fast, just gradually."

Discussion

• Short- and long-term patterns of weather both impeded and enhanced mental wellbeing.

• Temporal patterns in mental wellbeing reflected potential periods of vulnerability for mental health (e.g. the fall freeze-up), and conversely, opportunities to support individuals and communities with health resources.10

• Identifying community-level exposures for mental wellbeing enables population-based approaches to health that can help build resilient communities and address larger proportions of the burden of mental health issues.11

Next Steps

• Investigate the generalizability of these qualitative findings, and explore how trends in weather impact the use of mental health-related services across the region (i.e. objective two):

1. Investigate whether the increase in mental health visits is affected by the timing of seasonal transitions and climate variability.

2. Examine the factors that influence mental health visits and their relationship to climate variability.

Implications

• A better understanding of the impact weather, season, and climate have on individual and collective mental wellbeing and the burden this poses to regional and local healthcare systems.

• Development of epidemiological approaches that integrate Indigenous and Western knowledge.

• Inform regional and local public health policies, planning, and programming.

• Provide a baseline of mental health for future health initiatives and adaptation strategies in response to a changing climate.

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References


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> Transcripts

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