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Record demand for suicide prevention services signals positive shift in behaviour

Record numbers of Australians are heeding the call to seek help from suicide prevention services in a “silver lining” that shows the sector is making a major contribution to keeping the community safe, according to a new report released this World Suicide Prevention Day.

Suicide Prevention Australia CEO Nieves Murray said young people were seeking help at twice the rate of their parent’s generations, following decades of awareness-raising, stigma reduction initiatives and advocacy.

“Creating hope through action is an important part of World Suicide Prevention Day and every other day of the year,” Ms Murray said.

Suicide Prevention Australia will today release its second annual State of the Nation in Suicide Prevention report, which shows 84% of suicide prevention services and workers experienced an increase in demand in the past 12 months (August 2020 to August 2021). This is an increase on 78% (+6pp) on the same period last year.

“It’s a highly collaborative sector with 75% of respondents working in partnership with Government or other organisations.

“The sector is united in urging a whole-of-government approach to suicide prevention, with 95% of respondents supporting this reform.

The State of the Nation in Suicide Prevention report shows 85% of the suicide prevention sector support all government decisions considering and mitigating suicide impacts – which a national Suicide Prevention Act would deliver - as well as 67% of Australians.

In the community, 29% of Australians report they discussed suicide concerns about themselves or with someone else over the same 12-month period.

This includes young people (18- 34) reporting having conversations about suicide (40%) and seeking help (41%) at twice the rate of their parent’s generations (20% and 19% respectively).

Australians report taking action to seek help from a suicide prevention service (27%).

MATES Chief Executive Officer Chris Lockwood said, “We have seen a 40% increase in calls over the past 12 months which signals that people are reaching out.

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“We are working hard on the ground to reduce the high level of suicide among Australian construction workers. Not everyone is comfortable seeking help through a formal or clinical setting and MATES offers another option for people in distress,” said Lockwood.

LivingWorks Australia CEO Shayne Connell said, “LivingWorks has had unprecedented demand for suicide first aid skills training - from community, First Responders, to schools, often following incidents in the community. We are only three quarters of the way through 2021 and already doubled the number of people trained the previous year.

Ms Murray said the increase in service demand showed Australians were hearing the message and seeking help.

However, Ms Murray said it was important the “herculean” efforts of many suicide prevention services during the pandemic did not overshadow that they were a “sector under great strain”, both professionally and personally.

“We need to listen and respond to the voice of people with lived and living experience of suicide.

“Every life lost to suicide is heartbreaking. It’s important to remember that every statistic represents a life lost and a cascade of grief amongst family, friends, schools, workplaces and community groups.

“Physical distancing does not mean emotional and social distancing – it is important for ourselves, our loved ones and our communities to remain emotionally and socially connected,” Ms Murray said.

Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP) President, Associate Professor Vinay Lakra, said addressing workforce shortages and funding consistency would also help.

“We have a significant shortage of the psychiatrists needed to service the country’s mental health needs. This has only been further exacerbated by the surge in mental health demand during COVID-19, with wait times as long as nine months.

“Workforce shortages can be addressed with the enhancement of a multidisciplinary workforce underpinned by incentivised multidisciplinary collaboration.

“It is important that we continue to monitor the situation and continue to enhance and improve service provision to address the inequity within the system and provide services to those who need it, when and where they need it,” Associate Professor Lakra said.

The State of the Nation in Suicide Prevention report found 71% of suicide prevention services do not believe services for priority populations are appropriately funded. Only 3% did.

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Switchboard Victoria CEO Joe Ball said, "Tragically, until we see a significant shift in funding priorities toward priority populations, we will not see a decrease in the heartbreakingly high rates of suicidal distress and attempts in our LGBTIQ+ communities."

From 2020 - 2021 to date, Switchboard's specialised LGBTIQ+ helpline service, Rainbow Door (www.rainbowdoor.org.au) has seen a 210% increase in phone contacts and a 495% increase in contact made via texts.

"It's important to remember, you do not have to go this alone. Help is always available no matter who you are or what situation you are in. If you are feeling distress, please reach out and access the various support services that are available," Ms Murray said.

To get help 24/7, phone Lifeline on 13 11 14 or the Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467. If you or someone you know are in immediate danger, phone 000 for emergency services.

Help to report about suicide safely is available online: Go to <https://mindframe.org.au/>

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Other key findings from the State of the Nation in Suicide Prevention Report include:

- Two thirds (66%) of Australians agree that Australia should introduce a standalone Suicide Prevention Act similar to Japan that looks to take a whole-of-government and not just a health approach to suicide prevention. Just 8% disagree with this sentiment.
- Suicide arises from a complex interaction between many vulnerabilities, risk factors and triggers in a person's life. According to sector respondents, the greatest risk to suicide rates over the next twelve months are posed by social isolation (88%) and unemployment and job security (74%), followed by family and relationship breakdowns (69%), cost of living and personal debt (57%) and housing access and affordability (56%).
- This aligns with public sentiment, with the Australian public considering the biggest risks to suicide rates over the next 12 months as social isolation and loneliness (64%), unemployment and jobs (58%), family and relationship breakdown (57%), cost-of-living (55%), drugs and alcohol (53%), housing access and affordability (36%), ageing, retirement and savings (20%), health and fitness (16%), gender roles (13%), new technology and social change (12%), and climate change (11%).
- Female public respondents were significantly more concerned about suicide risks in all of the top categories compared to men, including social isolation and loneliness (70% vs 58%), unemployment and job security

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(64% vs 53%), family and relationship breakdowns (62% vs 52%), cost of living and household debt (61% vs 50%), drugs and alcohol (56% vs 50%), and housing access and affordability (39% vs 32%).

- Sector respondents emphasised that “suicide prevention is everyone’s business” and that private sector organisations had a responsibility for suicide prevention.
- **(Key Quote)** “We can also clearly see from the data in this report that it’s a sector under great strain. It’s been another difficult year for our community and we’ve seen record demand for many of the supports our sector delivers. There’s uncertainty around funding and uncertainty about the future.” (p4)
- **(Key Quote)** “The message is a simple one: we need to help those who help our community. The many thousands of people working in suicide prevention are facing increasing pressure and while additional investments from Government are welcome, they need to keep pace with increasing demand and put our sector on a sustainable footing. (p4)
- **(Key Quote)** “Departments need to work together. It’s no good having a minister for health or a minister for women who know nothing about the suicide risks faced by the people their portfolio represents”. (Survey respondent) (p13)

About the Report

The 2021 Suicide Prevention Australia State of the Nation in Suicide Prevention report was based on 283 responses from suicide prevention and mental health sector organisations. It also includes public survey results commissioned by Suicide Prevention Australia from YouGov plc. Total sample size was 1049 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 19th - 22nd August 2021. The survey was completed online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Australian adults (aged 18+).

About Suicide Prevention Australia

Suicide Prevention Australia is the national peak body and we’ve been providing support for Australia’s suicide prevention sector for more than 25 years. We support and advocate for our members to drive continual improvement in suicide prevention policy, programs and services. Our reach is broad, including member organisations, governments, businesses, researchers, practitioners and those with lived experience. We are focused on an integrated approach to suicide prevention encompassing mental health, social, economic and community factors. We believe that through collaborative effort and shared purpose, we can achieve our vision of a world without suicide.

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