

14 November 2022

Employment Taskforce
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Dear Employment Taskforce

I write on behalf of Suicide Prevention Australia to provide our submission on the Employment White Paper. We welcome the opportunity to support the development of this important White Paper and ongoing work emerging from the recent *Jobs and Skills Summit*.

About Suicide Prevention Australia

Suicide Prevention Australia is the national peak body for the suicide prevention sector. With over 350 members representing more than 140,000 workers, staff and volunteers across Australia, we provide a collective voice for service providers, practitioners, researchers, local collaboratives and people with lived experience.

Over 3,000 people tragically die by suicide and an estimated 65,000 people attempt suicide each year. Over 7.5 million Australians have been close to someone who has lost their life to, or attempted, suicide. Our shared vision is a world without suicide and with our members, we work to inform through data and evidence; influence systemic changes that drive down suicide rates and build capability and capacity for suicide prevention.

The social determinants of health, including economic stability, clearly have a major impact on the risk of our suicide in our community. This submission follows recent work with our members to examine the impact of these varied risk factors on the risk of suicide in our community.

We refer you to two reports released in 2019 and 2020 respectively: [Turning Points](#) – which examined the emerging trends in housing, finance, employment, and relationships that are likely to have an effect on Australians; and [Turning the Tide](#) – a six point action plan to better support people navigating the gig economy, experiencing significant debt and the breakdown of their intimate relationships.

Cost of living and welfare supports

Suicide is complex human behaviour with many, varied risk factors. Financial security, employment, community participation and engagement can act as protective factors for suicide. Employment further provides a sense of purpose and belonging. Improving social and financial security of Australian people experiencing the challenges of unemployment can meet their basic needs and have the support they need to find meaningful work when it



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becomes available. Income support payments act as a protective factor for suicide and provide capability for people to engage with their communities.

Research into the link between macroeconomic factors and unemployment rate during the Global Financial Crisis in 2008 found the association between unemployment and suicide to be strongest among countries which had the least supports for unemployment protection.^{1,2} Social security is intended to act as a 'safety net' for vulnerable Australians who are struggling to meet basic living needs, and access to social security is a human right.³

As outlined in our annual 2022 State of the Nation report, seven in ten Australians say they have experienced elevated distress due to social and economic circumstances over the past 12 months.⁴ The largest contributor to this was cost of living and personal debt (40%). Australian households where income support payments are their main source of income, 55% receiving Newstart and 64% receiving Youth Allowance, are living in poverty.⁵

The Senate Community Affairs References Committee reported significant evidence was raised on the inadequacy of income support payments and their current ability to meet basic living needs during their inquiry into poverty and financial hardship.⁶ This is consistent with clear evidence that adequate income support improve employment outcomes for income support recipients. The adequacy of income support payments needs to be addressed as part of the Employment White Paper.

Recommendation:

1. The Commonwealth Government to permanently increase the base rates of income support payments to adequate levels as outlined in the [Raise the Rate campaign](#).

Job security and unemployment

The link between unemployment, financial distress, and suicide is, sadly, well established. An

¹ Frاسquilho, D., Matos, M. G., Salonna, F., Guerreiro, D., Storti, C. C., Gaspar, T., & Caldas-de-Almeida, J. M. (2016). Mental health outcomes in times of economic recession: a systematic literature review, *BMC Public Health*, 16(1), 115-115.

² Mathieu, S., Treloar, A., Hawgood, J., Ross, V. & Kólves, K. (2022). The role of unemployment, job insecurity and financial hardship on suicidal behaviours, and interventions to mitigate their impact: A review of the evidence, *Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention, Griffith University, Brisbane*.

³ Department of Foreign Affairs. (1976). International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Australian Treaty Series, Canberra, available online: <http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/other/dfat/treaties/1976/5.html>.

⁴ Suicide Prevention Australia (2022), *2022 State of the Nation Report* https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SPA_StateNationReport_2022_FINAL-2.pdf.

⁵ Davidson, P., Saunders, P., Bradbury, B. & Wong, M. (2018). Poverty in Australia. ACOSS/UNSW Poverty and Inequality Partnership Report No. 2, Sydney.

⁶ The Senate Community Affairs References Committee. (2004). A hand up not a hand out: Renewing the fight against poverty, *Commonwealth of Australia*, available online: https://www.apf.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Community_Affairs/Completed_inquiries/2002-04/poverty/report/index.



analysis of global suicide, population and economic data, for example found the rate of suicide for people who were unemployed was nine times that of the general population.⁷

Several systematic reviews have provided strong evidence of the relationship between unemployment and suicide, with the risk at its highest in the first five years of unemployment.⁸ Australian studies, including a recent analysis of male suicide rates, have found periods of unemployment and underemployment – particularly in insecure forms of work - is strongly correlated with an increase in the suicide rate.⁹

A study into deaths by suicide in Victoria found 42% of people who died by suicide were under financial stress, 45% were unemployed, and 22% experienced family violence.¹⁰ The latest Annual Report of the Queensland Suicide Register identified over a quarter of people who died by suicide were unemployed, 18.3% experienced financial problems, and additional 10.2% experienced workplace problems.¹¹

Socioeconomic status is strongly associated with deaths by suicide.¹² Over the past 10 years age-standardised suicide rates were highest for those living in the lowest socioeconomic areas.¹³ In 2020, the overall suicide rate for people living in the lowest socioeconomic (most disadvantaged) areas (18.1 deaths per 100,000) was twice that of those living in the highest socioeconomic (least disadvantaged) areas (8.6 deaths per 100,000).¹⁴ Risk of suicide in Australia has been found to be associated with lower levels of education, and with unemployment similarly to other Western countries.

Accordingly, a whole-of-government approach to suicide prevention is required. To enshrine this, the Commonwealth should pass a Suicide Prevention Act in conjunction with the Employment White Paper. An Act would legislate a Suicide Prevention Plan, governance arrangements for reporting and lived experience and require agencies, including those responsible for employment to consider suicide risks and prevention in their work.

Recommendation:

2. The Commonwealth Parliament pass a national *Suicide Prevention Act*

⁷ Nordt, C. et al. (2015). Modelling suicide and unemployment: a longitudinal analysis covering 63 countries, 2000–11, *The Lancet Psychiatry*, vol. 2, 3, pp. 239 – 245.

⁸ Milner, A., Page, A. & LaMontagne, A.D. (2013). [Long-term unemployment and suicide: a systematic review and metaanalysis](#). *PLoS one*, 8(1), e51333.

⁹ Pagea, A. Milner, A. Morrell, S. Taylor, R. (2013). The role of under-employment and unemployment in recent birth cohort effects in Australian suicide. *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 93, pp. 155-162.

¹⁰ Jesuit Social Services. (2020). Support after suicide, Family perceptions of how Victoria responds to people at risk of suicide and their loved ones, *Jesuit Social Services*, Melbourne.

¹¹ Leske, S., Schrader, I., Adam, G., Catakovic, A., Weir, B. & Kolves, K. (2021). Suicide in Queensland: Annual Report 2021, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia: Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention, School of Applied Psychology, Griffith University.

¹² AIHW. (2020). Suicide, by socioeconomic areas, Suicide & Self-Harm Monitoring, available online:

<https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/behaviours-risk-factors/suicide-by-socioeconomic-areas>.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.



Suicide Prevention Workforce

In addition to addressing risk, and, supporting protective factors, related to suicide, an effective Jobs and Skills agenda can support major workforce and skills challenges in the suicide prevention sector. The suicide prevention workforce includes the clinical workforce who interact with those at risk of suicide (e.g. medical professionals), the formal suicide prevention and mental health workforce (e.g. working in suicide prevention, crisis support and postvention) and the informal suicide prevention workforce (e.g. those working with individuals who may be vulnerable to suicide).

There are critical gaps in strategy, skills and capability across the workforce and ongoing work is required to support retention, supply and sustainability in the sector. Over 8 out of 10 (83%) of respondents to our annual State of the Nation in Suicide Prevention survey respondent they do not have currently have sufficient staff and/or volunteers to meet workforce needs.¹⁵ A quarter of respondents (25%) report not having access to the skills and training necessary to meet service delivery and needs.

To address this a fully-funded National Suicide Prevention Workforce Strategy and Implementation Plan is required. This will provide the long-term vision and strategy for workforce and specific actions to ensure accessibility, capability, skills, supply, retention and sustainability across the sector. It should be appropriately with other related sectors and strategies under development. This should include specific actions to support the lived experience and peer workforce across the suicide prevention sector.

Recommendation:

3. The Commonwealth Government should deliver a fully-funded National Suicide Prevention Workforce Strategy and Implementation Plan

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this White Paper. Should you wish to discuss our submission further please do not hesitate to contact Deputy Chief Executive Officer Matthew McLean at matthewm@suicideprevention.org.au or on 0431 152 365.

Yours sincerely,



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¹⁵ Suicide Prevention Australia (2022), *2022 State of the Nation Report* https://www.suicidepreventionaust.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SPA_StateNationReport_2022_FINAL-2.pdf.

