



Closing the Loop

Suicide Prevention Research Priorities

This series is designed to 'close the loop' between research and policy by translating research evidence into policy directions and advice. These papers review key findings from National Suicide Prevention Research Fund¹ projects and identify evidence-based policy recommendations. This edition focuses on priorities for suicide prevention research.

Research summary

This report outlines current and future priorities in Australian suicide prevention research and identifies shifts in research focus over time (Reifels et al. 2022). Three studies are described:

- Review of published literature: Analysis of Australian peer-reviewed journal articles on suicide prevention published during 2017-2022 to ascertain current priorities in suicide prevention.
- Review of funded grants: Examination of funded grants and fellowships for suicide prevention research awarded between 2017-2022 to determine existing research priorities.
- Survey of key stakeholders: An online survey was conducted in 2022 to obtain the views of key stakeholders involved in the suicide prevention sector to identify priorities for future research.

The project builds on a previous study by the same team which examined priorities for Australian suicide prevention research between 2010-2017 to provide an overview of shifts in research focus and long-term changes in the research landscape (Reifels et al. 2017).

Suicide and research

Suicide is a serious public health problem in Australia. Approximately 3,000 people die by suicide every year, and for Australians aged 15 to 49 suicide is the main cause of death (AIHW, 2022a; AIHW, 2022b). In 2020-2021, 16.7% of Australians aged 16-85 experienced suicidal ideation (AIHW, 2022c).

Suicide is a complex behaviour associated with a broad range of factors and circumstances at both the individual-level and societal-level (Hawton & Pirkis, 2018). Given suicides complexity and considerable impact on Australians, it is important that timely and targeted research is undertaken to inform suicide prevention policy and initiatives to reduce the number of suicides in the Australian community.

¹ [The National Suicide Prevention Research Fund](#) is funded by the Australian Government Department of Health to drive world-class research and build best practice in suicide prevention.

Related research

The current research is an activity of the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund (NSPRF) to inform future research. This research built on a previous study conducted by the University of Melbourne in 2017 (Reifels et al. 2017). The 2017 study identified the research priorities for suicide prevention in Australia to inform the NSPRF's ongoing research activities and direction. This study found that research was focused on the epidemiology of suicidal behaviour and suicide, however, stakeholders identified intervention studies and protective factors as a focus for future research priorities.

Since 2017 the suicide prevention landscape has changed. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a shift from in-person interventions to virtual care, and a move towards collecting research data online (Reifels et al. 2022). Research priorities need to reflect the current and future challenges encountered by Australians (Reifels et al. 2022).

Current research priorities

To assess current priorities in Australian suicide prevention research, two studies were undertaken (Reifels et al. 2022). The first study involved a literature review of peer-reviewed journal articles focused on suicide prevention published between 2017-2022 to identify current research knowledge and trends.

It was found that on average 77 suicide prevention articles were published each year. Epidemiological studies were the most common research type followed by intervention studies. A more detailed analysis identified that studies of risk factors were published most frequently, followed by studies which examined suicide rates. Suicide was the type of suicidal behaviour largely focused on, followed by attempted suicide. Notably, young people were the dominant target research group and only 4% of articles reported including individuals with lived experience of suicide. Mental health services were the most prioritised research setting, followed by workplaces.

The second study involved a review of funded grants and fellowships awarded between 2017-2022 to further understanding of current research priorities (Reifels et al. 2022). Grants and fellowships were funded by key bodies; the Australian Research Council (ARC), Australian Rotary Health (ARH), Medical Research Future Fund (MRFF), National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) and Suicide Prevention Australia's NSPRF.

It was found that total funding for grants reached \$45.1 million, with annual investment of \$13 million in both 2021 and 2022. The NHMRC was the most significant funder, although MRFF and NSPRF funding schemes made considerable investments equivalent to more than half of overall research funding. Funding was mainly awarded for intervention studies, followed by epidemiological studies. The dominant suicidal behaviour of interest was attempted suicide, followed by suicide. Consistent with the first study the main target group of interest was young people. However, in contrast, a quarter of the awarded grants included input by people with lived experience of suicide as part of the study design. The most common research setting was digital and online settings, followed by other health service settings.

Future research priorities

To identify future research priorities, a third study was undertaken. Key stakeholders involved in the suicide prevention sector completed an online questionnaire to ascertain views on priorities for future suicide prevention research (Reifels et al. 2022).

It was found that intervention studies should be prioritised in future research followed by epidemiological studies. Studies assessing suicide protective factors were also earmarked as a high priority. For research focused on suicidal thoughts and behaviours, stakeholders recommended that suicide attempts followed by suicide be prioritised in future research. Young people were identified as the highest priority target group. It was also indicated that research in community settings should be prioritised, followed by mental health services.

Evidence review

The Final Report compares findings from the three studies to the study team's earlier research to identify shifts and continuities in research emphasis (Reifels et al. 2017, Reifels et al. 2022). The previous study examined then-current and future research priorities across an 8-year period of 2010-2017 (Reifels et al. 2017). Thus, current and future priorities in Australian suicide prevention research were also compared across both studies and analysed over time (Reifels et al. 2022).

Investment and outputs key findings:

- Annual publication output has increased significantly, by approximately 50%, with 77.5 articles published per year and a total of 393 articles during the 5-year period between 2017-2022. In comparison, 51.6 articles were published per year and a total of 424 articles during the 7.5-year period between 2010-2017.
- The number of grants and fellowships awarded increased threefold, with 110 grants and fellowship funded during 2017-2022 in contrast to 36 grants and fellowships awarded between 2010-2017.
- Research grant funding value also grew substantially, with a total of \$45.1 million and annual average grant funding of \$7.7 million during 2017-2022. In comparison, total funding for the preceding period of 2010-2017 was much lower, and reached \$10.6 million, reflecting annual average funding of \$1.1 million.

Shifts over time for current research priorities key findings:

- Since 2010 there has been a continued emphasis on growing the evidence base for suicide prevention and an ongoing focus on the effective translation of research into policy and practice.
- Between 2017-2022 research grants were mainly awarded for intervention studies, followed by epidemiological studies. In contrast, between 2010-2017 epidemiological studies followed by intervention studies were the most frequently funded study type. For published research, there was no change in emphasis between the two time periods and epidemiological research remained dominant.
- There was also minimal change for risk factor studies which were common in publications and grants across both time intervals. However, studies of protective factors are now receiving increased attention in grant funding.
- There has also been a relative shift in emphasis away from research on suicide which was previously prioritised, as suicide attempts were predominant in recent funded grants and fellowships. However, for publications, there was a smaller shift, and suicide remains the foremost focus followed by suicide attempts.
- Young people remain the most researched target group for publications and funded grants across both time periods.
- The previous study did not collect data on the inclusion of lived experience, however the current review found that 4% of articles and a quarter of grants reported including people with lived experience of suicide as part of the study design.

Comparing current and future priorities

Stakeholder views on where future priorities in suicide prevention should lie mostly reflect current funding priorities. Stakeholders indicated intervention studies should be the focus of future suicide prevention research. Presently, intervention studies were the most funded study type, however epidemiological research was the focus of recent publication output.

Mirroring current funding priorities stakeholders also advised that studies of attempted suicide should be prioritised in future research, followed by studies focused on suicide. In contrast, suicide was the most common focus of recent suicide prevention literature. It was also identified that young people should be prioritised in future research which is consistent with current research funding priorities. However, in conflict with current research funding emphasis, stakeholders advised that future research should prioritise community settings ahead of mental health service settings.

Policy implications

To effectively address suicide in Australia a strong evidence base to inform suicide prevention policy is vital. National research funding for suicide prevention has significantly increased over time, which is encouraging, however there needs to be sustained investment to maintain momentum. The NSPRF requires significant and ongoing funding.

The growth rate for publication output has been less remarkable. Future emphasis should be on increasing publication output to fill critical knowledge gaps and guide policy. While it is important that future research priorities align with research funding to help bring about reductions in suicide, long-term priorities must align with sector needs and emerging policy areas.

There is a national policy focus on the impact of social determinants on suicide and evidence is needed to inform policy decisions and advise suicide prevention strategies that can be delivered with government. There is also scope to increase inclusion of lived experience in future research efforts. The national research agenda should be guided by and incorporate lived experience to improve suicide prevention outcomes.

Greater communication and coordination is needed between local and national government, non-government bodies, the suicide prevention sector and researchers to inform future priorities, maximise research findings and ensure effective translation into policy and practice.

Recommendations

1. The national research agenda should sustain ongoing investment in suicide prevention, include a greater emphasis on effective research translation and should be developed in collaboration with suicide prevention industry leaders, people with lived experience, research and government bodies.
2. People with lived experience of suicide should have greater involvement in future research projects through co-design and research participation and should be involved in research priority setting.
3. Future research priorities should focus on several key areas including intervention research, suicide attempts, protective factors for suicide, community settings, and social determinants of suicide.
4. The Commonwealth Government should sustain investment in suicide prevention research by providing ongoing, recurrent funding for the NSPRF.
5. There should be an ongoing focus on research translation, including through increased rates of collaboration between researchers and suicide prevention policy makers and practitioners to ensure evidence guides policy and practice, and broader dissemination of research to build industry and community awareness.
6. Funded suicide prevention programs should include evaluation within funding schemes to improve the program and to inform the wider suicide prevention sector by sharing what is learned.
7. Suicide prevention research priorities should be assessed, reviewed, and updated as needed every 3-5 years.

Note: recommendations are proposed by Suicide Prevention Australia based on the above research, they are not recommendations of the researchers referenced.

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There are crisis services available 24/7 if you or someone you know is in distress

Lifeline: 13 11 12
www.lifeline.org.au

Suicide Call Back Service: 1300 659 467
www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au

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