

23 September 2024

House Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport  
PO Box 6021  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600

To the House Standing Committee on Health, Aged Care and Sport

**RE: Inquiry into the health impacts of alcohol and other drugs in Australia**

Suicide Prevention Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide input to the inquiry into the health impacts of alcohol and other drugs in Australia. We are 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.

Sadly, there is a significant body of research which demonstrates a strong link between harmful alcohol and other drug (AOD) use and suicide.<sup>1,2</sup> The research indicates that people with an alcohol dependence and people who use drugs are 10-14 times more likely to die by suicide compared to the general population.<sup>3,4</sup> Up to 40% people who are living with substance dependence and seek treatment, report a previous suicide attempt(s).<sup>5</sup>

Concerningly, all categories of substance use disorders are linked to an increased risk of suicide, particularly among women.<sup>6</sup> Other suicide risk factors at the individual, interpersonal/relational and community levels can lead to and exacerbate harmful AOD use and heighten suicide risk.<sup>7,8,9,10</sup> The severity of AOD use has also been found to have a role in increased risk of suicide.<sup>11</sup> Chronic and/or acute AOD use is common among people who have attempted suicide or who have died by suicide.<sup>12</sup>

Factors such as age (in particular, adolescence and youth), sex, co-existing mental health conditions, trauma, minority group stressors (e.g., Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and LGBTQI communities) and remoteness have also been found to have a related role in harmful AOD use and suicide.<sup>13,14,15</sup>

Given the well-established link between harmful AOD use and suicide we would like to provide input relating to the following terms of reference for this inquiry:

- A) Whether current services across the AOD sector is delivering equity for all Australians, value for money and the best outcomes for individuals, their families and society;
- B) The effectiveness of current programs and initiatives across all jurisdictions to improve prevention and reduction of AOD-related health, social and economic harms, including in relation to identified priority populations and ensuring equity of access for all Australians to relevant treatment and prevention services;
- C) How sectors beyond health, including for example education, employment, justice, social services and housing can contribute to prevention, early intervention, recovery and reduction of AOD-related harms in Australia.



We refer the Committee to two policy documents that address the link between harmful AOD use and suicide. A brief overview and the key points of the policy documents are provided below. The documents are attached to this submission and can be downloaded here:

- [Background Paper on the Socio-economic and Environmental Determinants of Suicide](#)
- [Closing the Loop Edition on Alcohol and Other Drugs in Suicidality](#)

Factors, including harmful AOD use, which can increase risk of suicidality. In particular, the paper provides an overview of the international and Australian evidence and shows that dependency and all harms from the use of AOD including the effects of withdrawal can increase a person's suicide risk.

To develop the background paper and to better understand the link between AOD use and suicide, we undertook extensive consultations with our members, people with lived experience and AOD-related organisations. Worryingly, we heard that there are significant gaps in availability and inequitable access to AOD treatment and support services, particularly in regional and remote areas. This barrier to access can delay a person from receiving appropriate care and serves to heighten suicide risk among vulnerable and marginalised members of our community.

During consultations it was also emphasised that to improve outcomes for individuals and their families, suicide prevention should be prioritised and incorporated into AOD treatment programs and services. This will help ensure that people who access treatment who are experiencing suicidal thoughts don't slip through the cracks and are swiftly identified and receive appropriate care and support.

The second policy document, the Closing the Loop Edition on Alcohol and Other Drugs in Suicidality summarises a rapid review of evidence on the role of AOD as a risk factor for suicidality and review of effective interventions in reducing suicide attempts and deaths. The rapid review was undertaken by Australian researchers to synthesise the evidence base and provide recommendations to inform the National Suicide Prevention Adviser's advice to the Prime Minister in 2020.

The policy document is designed to 'close the loop' between research and policy by translating research evidence into policy directions. It contains the following key recommendations for government action which were developed based on the research to strengthen the national response to harmful AOD use and to prevent suicide:

1. Governments review policies on alcohol accessibility, taxation and drink driving and adopt evidence supported reforms to address the high prevalence of harms attributable to AOD usage.
2. Prioritise implementation of the shared government commitments on AOD outlined in the National Agreement on Mental Health and Suicide Prevention.
3. Suicide prevention interventions should recognise and respond to the complexity of AOD use in suicidality and address multiple risk factors for suicide while understanding these may vary among priority population groups.
4. Integration of screening, assessment, and treatment for AOD use in existing suicide prevention services (including but not limited to psychosocial interventions, aftercare and postvention).
5. Suicide prevention education and training for AOD frontline staff to identify people at risk of suicide.
6. Targeted gatekeeper training for members of the community who may encounter people with high levels of alcohol and/or other drug use.
7. AOD-use interventions and education targeted at young people on the relationship of AOD use and suicidality.

8. Commission further research on the efficacy of AOD use interventions in preventing suicidal thoughts, attempts, and deaths, with focus given to priority populations who may benefit from targeted approaches.

We urge the Committee to recognise the strong link between harmful AOD use and suicide. We also urge the Committee to ensure that the Commonwealth Government commits to improving the effectiveness and availability of programs and services to better support vulnerable members of the community and to prevent AOD-related suicide.

If you require any further information please contact Anne Leslie, Suicide Prevention Australia's Senior Policy Advisor, [annel@suicidepreventionaust.org](mailto:annel@suicidepreventionaust.org).

Yours sincerely



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Chief Executive Officer

<sup>1</sup> Suicide Prevention Australia. (2023). Socio-economic and Environmental Determinants of Suicide: Background Paper. [SPA-SEDS-Background-Paper-August-2023-Designed.pdf \(suicidepreventionaust.org\)](#)

<sup>2</sup> Isaacs, J. Y., Smith, M. M., Sherry, S. B., Seno, M., Moore, M. L., & Stewart, S. H. (2022). Alcohol use and death by suicide: A meta-analysis of 33 studies. *Suicide & life-threatening behavior*, 52(4), 600–614. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sltb.12846>

<sup>3</sup> Esang, M. & Ahmed S. 2018. A Closer Look at Substance Use and Suicide. *American Journal of Psychiatry Residents Journal*. 13 (6).

<sup>4</sup> Wilcox, H. C., Conner, K. R., & Caine, E. D. (2004). Association of alcohol and drug use disorders and completed suicide: an empirical review of cohort studies. *Drug and alcohol dependence*, 76 Suppl, S11–S19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2004.08.003>

<sup>5</sup> Yuodelis-Flores, C., & Ries, R. K. (2015). Addiction and suicide: A review. *The American journal on addictions*, 24(2), 98–104. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajad.12185>

<sup>6</sup> Lynch, F. L., Peterson, E. L., Lu, C. Y., Hu, Y., Rossom, R. C., Waitzfelder, B. E., Owen-Smith, A. A., Hubley, S., Prabhakar, D., Keoki Williams, L., Beck, A., Simon, G. E., & Ahmedani, B. K. (2020). Substance use disorders and risk of suicide in a general US population: a case control study. *Addiction science & clinical practice*, 15(1), 14. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13722-020-0181-1>

<sup>7</sup> Hoertel, N., Faiz, H., Airagnes, G., Blanco, C., Pascal De Raykeer, R., Franco, S., Ducoutumany, G., Lemogne, C., & Limosin, F. (2018). A comprehensive model of predictors of suicide attempt in heavy drinkers: Results from a national 3-year longitudinal study. *Drug and alcohol dependence*, 186, 44–52. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2018.01.010>

<sup>8</sup> Clapperton, A., Newstead, S., Bugeja, L., & Pirkis, J. (2019). Relative risk of suicide following exposure to recent stressors, Victoria, Australia. *Australian and New Zealand journal of public health*, 43(3), 254–260. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12886>

<sup>9</sup> Ali, B., Rockett, I., & Miller, T. (2021). Variable Circumstances of Suicide Among Racial/Ethnic Groups by Sex and Age: A National Violent-Death Reporting System Analysis. *Archives of suicide research : official journal of the International Academy for Suicide Research*, 25(1), 94–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13811118.2019.1661894>

<sup>10</sup> Fisher, A., Marel, C., Morley, K., Teesson, M. & Mills, K. (2020). 'The role of alcohol and other drugs in suicidal behaviour and effective interventions to reduce suicidal thoughts and behaviours, Evidence check prepared for the National Suicide Prevention Task Force and commissioned through the Suicide Prevention Research Fund, managed by Suicide Prevention Australia.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

<sup>14</sup> Fitzpatrick, S. J., Handley, T., Powell, N., Read, D., Inder, K. J., Perkins, D., & Brew, B. K. (2021). Suicide in rural Australia: A retrospective study of mental health problems, health-seeking and service utilisation. *PLoS one*, 16(7), e0245271. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0245271>

<sup>15</sup> Friesen, E. L., Bailey, J., Hyett, S., Sedighi, S., de Snoo, M. L., Williams, K., Barry, R., Erickson, A., Foroutan, F., Selby, P., Rosella, L., & Kurdyak, P. (2022). Hazardous alcohol use and alcohol-related harm in rural and remote communities: a scoping review. *The Lancet. Public health*, 7(2), e177–e187. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667\(21\)00159-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2468-2667(21)00159-6)