

JULY 2024



**Suicide Prevention
Australia**

Inquiry into support for health and medical research funding priorities

Submission

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Imagine a world without suicide

Introduction

Suicide Prevention Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback to the Western Australian Government's inquiry into support for health and medical research funding and priorities.

Suicide Prevention Australia is the national peak body for the suicide prevention sector. We have over 340 members representing more than 140,000 employees, workers, and volunteers across Australia. We provide a collective voice for service providers, practitioners, researchers, local collaboratives, and people with lived experience.

Suicide is a significant issue in Western Australia. Sadly, the data shows that between 2013 and 2022 at least one person has died by suicide each day in Western Australia.¹ Each suicide death is a tragedy which has a devastating ripple effect and impacts a further 135 lives.² We are concerned about the high rate of suicide in Western Australia and believe that ongoing commitment and investment in suicide prevention research is necessary to guide suicide prevention policy and practice and to prevent further suicide deaths.

On this basis we would like to provide input relations to two of the terms of reference for this inquiry:

- (1) Western Australia's small share of national competitive funding
- (3) The impact on specific types of research and areas of need

Summary of Recommendations

1. The Western Australian Government should ensure that suicide prevention research is recognised as an area of need and receives priority funding as this will help build the evidence base and improve suicide prevention policy, systems and services.
2. The Western Australian Government should significantly increase funding for suicide prevention research which considers the state's unique demographic characteristics to help ensure that suicide prevention services and initiatives meet the needs of the diverse community.
3. The Western Australian Government should undertake an audit of suicide prevention research that has been undertaken in Western Australia and provide additional funding to research projects focused on suicide prevention which have stalled due to lack of funds.
4. The Western Australian Government should ensure that suicide prevention research is co-designed with people with lived and living experience of suicide to improve the quality, relevance and translation of research.
5. The Western Australian Government should provide funding to create career pathways and mentorship programs to help ensure that people with lived and living experience of suicide are involved in suicide prevention research.
6. The Western Australian Government should increase investment in suicide prevention research which helps prevent suicide among priority populations including First Nations peoples.

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7. The Western Australian Government should ensure that participatory action research is the preferred methodology for suicide prevention research in First Nations communities.
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8. The Western Australian Government should lobby the Commonwealth Government to invest \$15 million in the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund so that Suicide Prevention Australia can deliver an enhanced program over four years and to ensure that Western Australia continues to receive a share of national suicide prevention research funding.
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The need for suicide prevention research

The rate of suicide in Western Australia is concerningly high. In particular, the data shows that between 2018 and 2022, areas of the Kimberley experienced the highest suicide death rate in Australia (32.9 deaths per 100,000 population).³ The research also indicates that Western Australia along with South Australia and the Northern Territory have the highest level of youth self-harm.⁴

Concerningly, it has been suggested that there is a dearth of suicide prevention research in Australia. In particular, a report released in 2020 by the Black Dog Institute identified that Australia lacks the research evidence necessary to provide good guidance for its suicide prevention strategies and policies.⁵ To help prevent further suicide deaths, the Western Australian Government should ensure that suicide prevention research is recognised as an area of need. Suicide prevention research should receive priority funding as this will help build the evidence base and improve the effectiveness of suicide prevention policy, systems and services.

Recommendation

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1. The Western Australian Government should ensure that suicide prevention research is recognised as an area of need and receives priority funding as this will help build the evidence base and improve suicide prevention policy, systems and services.
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Western Australia has a unique environment and covers a much larger geographical area, including a larger regional and remote area compared to the most densely populated states. Consequently, suicide prevention research or initiatives designed in or for other geographic areas may not be as relevant or effective.

This is relevant to suicide prevention because there is a higher risk of suicide among people living in very remote areas compared to major cities.⁶ In particular, the data shows that in 2022 people living in very remote areas were over twice as likely to die by suicide compared to residents of major cities.⁷

Western Australia also has several demographic differences. Compared to other Australian states and territories, Western Australia has the highest proportion of residents born overseas. In 2021 one in three Western Australians were born overseas which indicates that

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suicide prevention initiatives and services must be culturally safe and appropriately tailored to meet the diverse needs of the community.⁸

Western Australia also has a substantial mining and fly-in fly-out (FIFO) workforce. Concerningly, FIFO workers are significantly more likely to experience mental ill-health and die by suicide compared to the general population.⁹ It has been surmised that the increased risk of suicide among FIFO workers is related to specific occupational factors including lack of social support, loneliness and higher levels of fatigue associated with FIFO work compared to other types of employment.¹⁰ Australian research also identified that the rate of suicide among males in the mining sector between 2012-2019 was significantly higher compared to other comparative groups.¹¹ Concerningly, the evidence also shows that the suicide rate among male mining workers is increasing.¹²

Due to the differences between Western Australia and other regions across Australia, the Western Australian Government should fund Western Australia-specific suicide prevention research tailored to the needs of the diverse community and unique challenges that exist in Western Australia as this will help ensure that local community initiatives and services are effective.

Stakeholders that we consulted with have indicated that there are several researchers developing innovative approaches to suicide prevention in areas of Western Australia where there are elevated rates of suicide. However, we were advised that research funding is required to test the evidence base for these new approaches to determine whether the initiatives are effective. An example is the Peel Youth Safe Haven Café model, developed to support young people at risk of suicide in the Peel region on the west coast of Western Australia.¹³ This model was co-designed by Professor Ashleigh Lin and her team at the University of Western Australia, in conjunction with young people and parents and carers with lived and living experience of suicide. Although this model has been developed, additional funding is needed for implementation and evaluation.

During consultations it was also raised that there are several outstanding researchers in Western Australia who are recognised for their work in the suicide prevention field including Professor Patricia Dudgeon and Professor Ashleigh Lin from the University of Western Australia and Professor Penelope Hasking from Curtin University. This indicates that Western Australia is well-equipped to undertake further suicide prevention research, tailored to the landscape to help prevent further suicide deaths.

Recommendations

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2. The Western Australian Government should significantly increase funding for suicide prevention research which considers the state's unique demographic characteristics to help ensure that suicide prevention services and initiatives meet the needs of the diverse community.
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3. The Western Australian Government should undertake an audit of suicide prevention research that has been undertaken in Western Australia and provide additional funding to research projects focused on suicide prevention which have stalled due to lack of funds.
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Research should be co-designed with people with lived and living experience and target priority population groups

To ensure that suicide prevention research is meaningful and fit for purpose it should be co-designed with people with lived and living experience of suicide. This will help improve the quality, relevance and translation of research.¹⁴ In addition, there should be funding provided to create career pathways and mentorship programs for people with lived and living experience of suicide to facilitate ongoing input into suicide prevention research. This will help build the existing workforce and improve innovation and evaluation outcomes.

It is also critical that funding is directed towards research projects which aim to reduce the rate of suicide among population groups who are at elevated risk of suicide in Western Australia. These population groups are termed priority populations and in 2023 Suicide Prevention Australia developed a position paper outlining best practice in this area, which can be found [here](#).¹⁵

As outlined in the policy position statement, priority populations can be identified through:

- (a) statistical data indicating a heightened risk of suicide
- (b) experience of factors known to increase the risk of suicide
- (c) barriers to accessing suicide prevention supports.

Suicide Prevention Australia has also developed a Foundations Paper which provides a list of population groups which are more likely to die by suicide including men, young people (15-24), people living in regional, rural and remote areas and First Nations peoples.¹⁶ The Foundations Paper can be found [here](#).

Concerningly, the research shows that First Nations peoples are two to three times more likely to die by suicide compared to the general population.¹⁷ This pattern of First Nations peoples being disproportionately impacted by suicide is even more pronounced in Western Australia where the rate of suicide is double the rate of New South Wales and significantly higher than any other state or territory.^{18,19}

One of the key targets of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap is to reduce the rate of suicide among First Nations peoples.²⁰ In particular, under target 14 the Commonwealth Government has committed to achieving a significant and sustained reduction in suicide of First Nations peoples towards zero.²¹ Worryingly, this target is off track as recent data shows that the rate of suicide among First Nations peoples is increasing, rather than decreasing.^{22,23}

Given that the rate of suicide among First Nations people is higher in Western Australia than in any other state or territory, it is critical that the Western Australia Government invests in research which helps reverse this trend. Practical suicide prevention research focused on reducing suicide among this vulnerable cohort which can be rapidly translated into effective programs and services is essential to support the national target of reducing suicide among First Nations peoples.

It is also important that First Nations communities are closely involved in the research process. In particular, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project (ATSISPEP) which was undertaken in Western Australia identified that

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participatory action research is the preferred methodology for future suicide prevention research in First Nations communities.²⁴

Recommendations

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4. The Western Australian Government should ensure that suicide prevention research is co-designed with people with lived and living experience of suicide to improve the quality, relevance and translation of research.

 5. The Western Australian Government should provide funding to create career pathways and mentorship programs to help ensure that people with lived and living experience of suicide are involved in suicide prevention research.

 6. The Western Australian Government should increase investment in suicide prevention research which helps prevent suicide among priority populations including First Nations peoples.

 7. The Western Australian Government should ensure that participatory action research is the preferred methodology for suicide prevention research in First Nations communities.

Western Australia's share of national funding for suicide prevention research

Suicide prevention research is funded by the Commonwealth Government at a national level through the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund (Research Fund).²⁵ The Research Fund aims to support world-class research and to facilitate the translation of knowledge into more effective suicide prevention services for individuals, families and communities. Suicide Prevention Australia manages the Research Fund on behalf of the Commonwealth Government.

Since inception, the Research Fund has over 88 research grant awardees across PhD Scholarships, Post-Doctoral Fellowships, Innovation Grants and Implementation Science Grants. Researchers from all the States and Territories in Australia, including Western Australia are eligible for grants through the Research Fund to undertake suicide prevention research activities. Many of the research grant awardees are internationally recognised as suicide prevention research leaders and emerging leaders.

The Research Fund has a robust, open and transparent research grants process. A Research Advisory Committee which is chaired by Professor Don Nutbeam guides this process with the support of several expert researchers, suicide prevention service providers and people with lived and living experience of suicide. Accordingly, the Research Fund awards research grants through an equitable process based on merit.

Yet, as of 30 June 2025, the Commonwealth Department of Health's funding for this crucial initiative will conclude. This is concerning given that now more than ever, sustained funding for suicide prevention research is needed. It is critical that funding is provided to support research that not only advances our understanding but also translates knowledge into practical, impactful services.

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An additional \$15 million in the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund will enable Suicide Prevention Australia to deliver an enhanced research program over four years. This is necessary so that researchers in Western Australia can continue to undertake suicide prevention research. The Western Australia government should lobby the Commonwealth Government to ensure that it continues to receive a share of national suicide prevention research funding.

Recommendation

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8. The Western Australian Government should lobby the Commonwealth Government to invest \$15 million in the National Suicide Prevention Research Fund so that Suicide Prevention Australia can deliver an enhanced program over four years and to ensure that Western Australia continues to receive a share of national suicide prevention research funding.
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Acknowledgements Statement

Suicide Prevention Australia acknowledges the unique and important understanding provided by people with lived and living experience. This knowledge and insight is critical in all aspects of suicide prevention policy, practice and research. We drew from previous work which was developed with our members and people with lived experience to prepare this submission.

As the national peak body for suicide prevention, our members are central to all that we do. Advice from our members, including the largest and many of the smallest organisations working in suicide prevention, as well as practitioners, researchers and community leaders is key to the development of our policy positions. Suicide Prevention Australia thanks all involved in the development of this policy position.

For more information please contact:

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

Lifeline: 13 11 14 **Standby Support After Suicide: 1300 727 247**
www.lifeline.org.au www.standbysupport.com.au

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

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