

25 September 2024

Department of Health and Aged Care
GPO Box 9848
Canberra ACT 2601

To the Department of Health and Aged Care

RE: Draft National Roadmap to Improve the Health and Mental Health of Autistic People

Suicide Prevention Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the Draft National Roadmap to Improve the Health and Mental Health of Autistic People (Draft Autism Roadmap). 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, the research shows that autistic people are significantly more likely to die by suicide compared to non-autistic people.^{1,2} International research has found that autistic children and teens are twice as likely to attempt suicide in contrast to the general community.³ Large scale population studies also suggest that autistic people are four to nine times more likely to die by suicide and seven times more likely to attempt suicide compared to non-autistic people.^{4,5,6}

Research conducted in Australia also indicates that there is an elevated risk of suicide among autistic people.⁷ Worryingly, just over four percent of all males aged between 10-24 who died by suicide in Australia between 2006-2015 had autism spectrum disorder.⁸ Another study with Australian and New Zealand-based university students with autism spectrum disorder found that nearly half (48%) had experienced suicidal thoughts.⁹ These findings are supported by research led by the University of Queensland which identified that people on the autism spectrum are three to five times more likely to die by suicide in contrast to non-autistic people.^{10,11}

Given the well-established link between autism and suicide, it is critical that the Draft Autism Roadmap is updated to prioritise suicide prevention. Accordingly, this submission will address the following key points:

- Revise the title of the Draft Autism Roadmap to acknowledge suicide prevention
- Include clear and measurable actions to help prevent suicide
- Build on the Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy
- Recognise the need for suicide prevention research

The Draft Autism Roadmap was developed to address inequities and improve the health and mental health of autistic people in Australia.¹² Considering that autistic people are at an elevated risk of suicide compared to the general population, suicide prevention should also be a key focus of the Draft Autism Roadmap.

As a first step, suicide prevention should be highlighted in the title of the Draft Autism Roadmap alongside the words, 'health and mental health'. This will help ensure that suicide prevention is a key focus and priority. It will also show that the Government is committed to reducing the unacceptably high rate of suicidal behaviour among autistic people.



The Draft Autism Roadmap includes several broad actions to help prevent suicide, but these actions are not specific or comprehensive. The Draft Autism Roadmap should be revised so that it includes clear, targeted and measurable actions to prevent suicide among autistic people. This will help prevent ambiguity and ensure that there is a blueprint to guide action at a national level to reduce the rate of suicide among autistic people.

To further ensure that the Draft Autism Roadmap adequately addresses suicide prevention it should be designed to complement and work alongside the Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy (The Advice).^{13,14} The Advice is currently in draft form and has been developed by the National Suicide Prevention Office to guide long-term, coordinated suicide prevention activity in Australia.^{15,16} It is important that actions to prevent suicide in the Draft Autism Roadmap operate in concert with The Advice to ensure that national suicide prevention efforts are aligned and that there is a coordinated approach.

Lastly, to better serve and support autistic people the Draft Autism Roadmap should be revised so that it has a focus on suicide prevention research. Focus area E of the Draft Autism Roadmap is to strengthen research and data on the health and mental health of autistic people and their families and carers. This focus area and its title should be expanded so that suicide prevention research is acknowledged and considered a key priority. We also note that under focus area E that the Department of Health and Aged Care is considering including suicide prevention research as a possible action item.

We strongly suggest that suicide prevention research is included as a priority as it will help provide insights to improve outcomes for autistic people at risk of suicide. It is important that there is ongoing investment in research to identify effective policies, services and initiatives which can help prevent suicide among children and adults who have an autism diagnosis. In addition, research should focus on identifying strategies and services which can best support families and carers of autistic people at risk of suicide or who have been bereaved by suicide.

The National Suicide Prevention Research Fund (Research Fund) is well-placed to undertake this research.¹⁷ The Research Fund was established in 2017 by the Commonwealth Government to support research into suicide prevention. Funding for this crucial initiative will conclude on 30 June 2025 and an additional \$15 million is needed to enable an enhanced research program over four years. Part of this funding can be used to undertake research which advances our understanding of autism and suicide and translates this knowledge into practical, impactful policy and suicide prevention services.

Suicide Prevention Australia makes the following recommendations:

1. The Draft Autism Roadmap title should be expanded to explicitly acknowledge suicide prevention.
2. The Draft Autism Roadmap should include clear, targeted actions to help prevent suicide among autistic people.
3. The Draft Autism Roadmap should be designed to complement and work alongside the Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy.
4. The Draft Autism Roadmap should be updated so that suicide prevention research is a key focus area.

Given the significantly heightened risk of suicide among autistic people compared to the general population we strongly suggest that, in addition to improving the health and mental health of the autistic population, that the Draft Autism Roadmap takes an explicit focus on suicide prevention.



This will ensure that there is clear leadership and accountability at a national level and will help drive down the high rate of suicide among autistic people in Australia. If you require any further information please contact Anne Leslie, Suicide Prevention Australia's Senior Policy Advisor, annel@suicidepreventionaust.org.

Yours sincerely

Nieves Murray
Chief Executive Officer

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- ¹ Kirby, A. V., Bakian, A. V., Zhang, Y., Bilder, D. A., Keeshin, B. R., & Coon, H. (2019). A 20-year study of suicide death in a statewide autism population. *Autism research : official journal of the International Society for Autism Research*, 12(4), 658–666. <https://doi.org/10.1002/aur.2076>
- ² Hirvikoski, T., Mittendorfer-Rutz, E., Boman, M., Larsson, H., Lichtenstein, P., & Bölte, S. (2016). Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder. *The British journal of psychiatry : the journal of mental science*, 208(3), 232–238. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.114.160192>
- ³ Huntjens, A., Landlust, A., Wissenburg, S., & van der Gaag, M. (2024). The Prevalence of Suicidal Behavior in Autism Spectrum Disorder. *Crisis*, 45(2), 144–153. <https://doi.org/10.1027/0227-5910/a000922>
- ⁴ Hirvikoski, T., Boman, M., Chen, Q., D'Onofrio, B. M., Mittendorfer-Rutz, E., Lichtenstein, P., Bölte, S., & Larsson, H. (2020). Individual risk and familial liability for suicide attempt and suicide in autism: a population-based study. *Psychological medicine*, 50(9), 1463–1474. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291719001405>
- ⁵ Hirvikoski, T., Mittendorfer-Rutz, E., Boman, M., Larsson, H., Lichtenstein, P., & Bölte, S. (2016). Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder. *The British journal of psychiatry : the journal of mental science*, 208(3), 232–238. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.114.160192>
- ⁶ Kölves, K., Fitzgerald, C., Nordentoft, M., Wood, S. J., & Erlangsen, A. (2021). Assessment of Suicidal Behaviors Among Individuals With Autism Spectrum Disorder in Denmark. *JAMA network open*, 4(1), e2033565. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.33565>
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- ⁸ Hedley, D., Stokes, M. A., & Trollor, J. N. (2022). Suicide by young Australians, 2006-2015: a cross-sectional analysis of national coronial data. *The Medical journal of Australia*, 216(1), 53. <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51359>
- ⁹ Anderson, A. H., Carter, M., & Stephenson, J. (2020). An On-Line Survey of University Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in Australia and New Zealand: Characteristics, Support Satisfaction, and Advocacy. *Journal of autism and developmental disorders*, 50(2), 440–454. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-019-04259-8>
- ¹⁰ Santomauro, D. F., Hedley, D., Sahin, E., Brugha, T. S., Naghavi, M., Vos, T., Whiteford, H. A., Ferrari, A. J., & Stokes, M. A. (2024). The global burden of suicide mortality among people on the autism spectrum: A systematic review, meta-analysis, and extension of estimates from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2021. *Psychiatry research*, 341, 116150. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2024.116150>
- ¹¹ The University of Queensland. (2024). *Suicide rate higher for people with autism*. [Suicide rate higher for people with autism - UQ News - The University of Queensland, Australia](https://www.uq.edu.au/news/suicide-rate-higher-for-people-with-autism)



¹² Australian Government. Department of Health. (2024). *National Roadmap to Improve the Health and Mental Health of Autistic People*. [National Roadmap to Improve the Health and Mental Health of Autistic People | Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care](#)

¹³ Australian Government. National Mental Health Commission. (2024). *Public consultation – Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Consultation Draft*. [Public Consultation - Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Consultation draft | Have Your Say – National | Mental Health Commission](#)

¹⁴ Australian Government. National Suicide Prevention Office. (2024). *Media release: The draft Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy is now open for public consultation*. [Media Release: The draft Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy is now open for public consultation. | National Suicide Prevention Office | National Mental Health Commission](#)

¹⁵ Australian Government. National Mental Health Commission. (2024). *Public consultation – Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Consultation Draft*. [Public Consultation - Advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy Consultation draft | Have Your Say – National | Mental Health Commission](#)

¹⁶ Australian Government. National Mental Health Commission. (2023). *Overview of the development process of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy*. [Overview of the development process of the National Suicide Prevention Strategy | Have Your Say - National Mental Health Commission](#)

¹⁷ Suicide Prevention Australia. (2024). *Research Grants: The National Suicide Prevention Research Fund*. [Research Grants - Suicide Prevention Australia](#)