

27 September 2024

Royal Commission into Domestic, Family, and Sexual Violence
GPO Box 464
ADELAIDE SA 5001
Via email: RoyalCommissionDFSV@sa.gov.au

Dear Commissioner,

Suicide Prevention Australia welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. We are the national peak body for suicide prevention, with over 350 members representing more than 140,000 workers, staff, and volunteers across Australia. We provide a collective voice for service provider organisations both large and small, as well as practitioners, researchers, local collaboratives, and people with lived experience.

Suicide is a complex human behaviour with many risk factors, and research demonstrates clear linkages between domestic, family and sexual violence (DFSV) and suicidal behaviours, both in perpetrators and victims of violence. This presents opportunities to both prevent suicide and reduce the incidence and impact of DFSV through both the prevention and recovery aspects of this Inquiry.

The connection between DFSV and suicide

There is a large body of international research which indicates a link between suicide and domestic, family, and sexual violence. International research indicates that consistent risk factors for suicide attempts include intimate partner violence (IPV) and having a mother who experienced IPV.¹ Studies show that suicidal behaviour is prevalent among partner-violent men.² A study undertaken in the United States which examined IPV related suicides found that most were males who perpetrated nonfatal intimate partner violence.³ The study suggests that IPV may be associated with 6% or more of all suicides. Another study found that among racially and ethnically diverse female survivors of IPV one in five had threatened or attempted suicide.⁴ Regarding coercive control research finds that dominance/intimidation and hostile withdrawal are types of emotional abuse which can lead to suicidal ideation in dating couples.⁵

There is limited Australian research in comparison. But there are coronial reports which highlight a stark relationship between DFSV and suicidal behaviours and deaths. For example, the Victorian Suicide Register provided information on 4,790 suicides reported between 2009 and 2016 and identified experiences of DFSV prior to death in 24.5 per cent of suicides.⁶ For females who died by suicide, 28.2% of cases had violence recorded. The report states that both perpetrators and victims of the violence experienced significant rates of suicide. For those deaths by suicide with prior DFSV, half involved the perpetrator. It highlights that one in three cases was the victim of violence, with 62.1 per cent of these



deaths being female. Most female victims who died from suicide experienced violence from their intimate partner, but for males, the violence was more likely to have been perpetrated by a different family member. More than 17 per cent of suicide deaths with prior family violence were for individuals who were both the perpetrator and victim of violence.⁷

In addition, a report by the Queensland Government indicates there are incidences of First Nations peoples dying by suicide which is linked to experiences of domestic and family violence.⁸ And data from the AIHW found that people who have had a hospital stay due to family and domestic violence were twice as likely to die by suicide compared to a comparison group.⁹

Difficulties in seeking and providing help

Data from Western Australian revealed that 56 per cent of all women and children who died by suicide in 2017 were known to the state government as victims of DFSV.¹⁰

Because of a range of factors, including feelings of fear of retribution, shame, low self-esteem, or a sense that the victim is responsible for the violence, or will not be believed, domestic and family violence is often underreported,¹¹ meaning these figures are likely under-representative.

Consultations conducted for this submission revealed stigma was a significant pressure on people leaving an abusive relationship. Leaving a situation was a point at which the need for intervention, encouragement, and support was essential. One person spoke of the difference it made to have both a Centrelink navigator and a Housing SA client service person immediately provide welcome, support, and active help.

Recommendation 1: The South Australian Government should make evidence-based “first aid” suicide prevention training more available to key members of the community and Government agencies who commonly encounter people at risk of suicide. Funding should be provided for free training available through a readily accessible online learning platform.

Immediacy of assistance at a time of grief and guilt

In the consultations conducted for this submission, people spoke of blaming themselves or being blamed, feeling shame which was magnified by the responsibility for children, a feeling of being overwhelmed and feeling guilt, and feeling pressure to return to the situation. There was a feeling of grief for the life which was left behind. Pressure was also intense to attain basics including shelter, toiletries, and food.

The grief continued beyond escaping the situation, both among partners and children, resulting in suicidal behaviours and deaths in years following. Statistics in the Western Australian Ombudsman’s report show the highest-risk period for suicide was in the six

months immediately after a woman's final report to police, accounting for nearly half of deaths.¹² Half had also presented to hospital emergency departments within three months of their deaths. This necessitates supports during the time in which the victim seeks help, from law enforcement, health services, or social services. Immediate support, that helps provide basic needs in a safe space was identified as a significant need.

Recommendation 2: The South Australian Government should ensure that in developing or reviewing agency plans under the Suicide Prevention Act they identify areas where responses are needed. All agencies, including police, social services, and health services, should be equipped to provide a trauma-inform response, and links to supports for obtaining food, toiletries, and communication.

Tackling social determinants through financial and relationship education

Research has also identified underlying causes of domestic violence which correlate to the determinants of suicide, including mental illness, financial stress, and substance misuse.^{13,14} Nearly three quarters of victims of DFSV in a Victorian report who died by suicide had been diagnosed with a mental illness at some point in their lives, with a slightly higher rate among females.¹⁵ Both victims and perpetrators of DFSV who died by suicide were more likely to be under financial stress, involved in legal processes (including child custody and divorce), or misusing substances. This provides opportunity for early intervention to prevent underlying factors for both FSV and suicide.

Recommendation 3: The South Australian Government should ensure that schools embed principles of financial literacy and healthy relationships that can equip young people with necessary skills and resilience as they approach adulthood and the pressures that will impact relationships.

Recommendation 4: The South Australian Government should address the high incidence of perpetrator deaths by suicide by undertaking more work to understand the suicide risk and supports required for rehabilitation of perpetrators.

If the Committee requires any further information please contact Rebekah Henricksen, Senior Government Relations Advisor, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]
Nieves Murray
Chief Executive Officer



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- ⁸ Queensland Government. (2022). [Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board: Collaborative responses to risk, safety and dangerousness](https://www.courts.qld.gov.au). Available from: [Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board Annual Report 2021-22 \(courts.qld.gov.au\)](https://www.courts.qld.gov.au)
- ⁹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2021). Examination of hospital stays due to family and domestic violence 2010-11 to 2018-2019. Available from: [Examination of hospital stays due to family and domestic violence 2010–11 to 2018–19, Summary - Australian Institute of Health and Welfare \(aihw.gov.au\)](https://www.aihw.gov.au)
- ¹⁰ Ombudsman Western Australia. 2023 A report on giving effect to the recommendations arising from the Investigation into family and domestic violence and suicide <https://www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/Publications/Reports/Implementation-of-recommendations-from-an-investigation-into-family-and-domestic-violence-and-suicide-2023.pdf>
- ¹¹ Australian Law Reform Commission and New South Wales Law Reform Commission, Family Violence: A National Legal Response, ALRC Report 114; NSWLRC Report 128 (2010), [18.4].
- ¹² Ombudsman Western Australia. 2023 A report on giving effect to the recommendations arising from the Investigation into family and domestic violence and suicide <https://www.ombudsman.wa.gov.au/Publications/Reports/Implementation-of-recommendations-from-an-investigation-into-family-and-domestic-violence-and-suicide-2023.pdf>
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