



Fact Sheet: Reducing Youth Suicide in Queensland

What is the RYSQ project?

The Reducing Youth Suicide in Queensland (RYSQ) project grew from the Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian's concern about the high number of young people taking their own lives each year in Queensland.

RYSQ is a detailed review of the lives and deaths of children and young people in this state who suicided between 2004 and 2007. The review aims to provide a solid and contemporary evidence base to better target future efforts at reducing youth suicide in Queensland. By improving our understanding of the factors that increase suicide risk among children and young people, this information can be used to explore new ways to protect the lives of some of Queensland's most vulnerable youth.

The RYSQ Discussion Paper is available for key stakeholder consultation until 30 November 2009. The Commission is seeking feedback from professionals, government and non-government organisations with knowledge or experiences engaging with children and young people who are at risk of suicide or who have suicided.

For a copy of the RYSQ Discussion Paper and details on how to provide feedback, visit: www.ccyipcq.qld.gov.au or free call 1800 688 275.

The link between media reporting and suicide

- Recent Australian research shows reporting of suicide can have an impact on vulnerable people. The way in which suicide is reported appears to be particularly significant.
- The Commission actively encourages the media to report on issues relating to suicide which follow the Commonwealth reporting guidelines. Links to these resources are available on our website.
- Research identifies that the way suicide is reported can *reduce* suicide rates. Reporting which positions suicide as a tragic waste and an avoidable loss, and focuses on the devastating impact of the act on others, has been linked to *reduced* rates of suicide.¹
- However, in some cases, inappropriate reporting of suicide has been linked to increased rates of actual suicide.
- Extensive coverage of suicides, prominent items, and articles in which the method of suicide was explicitly detailed and sensationalised are particularly likely to be followed by copycat behaviours.²
- In particular, research has found that media coverage may encourage suicidal behaviour in vulnerable children,³ and that the impact of suicide stories on subsequent completed suicides is greatest for adolescents.⁴

Issues to consider when reporting on suicide

The following advice is contained in *Reporting suicide and mental illness: a Mindframe resource for media professionals*.

Language

Check the language you use does not glamorise, sensationalise, or present suicide as a solution to problems – eg. consider using ‘non-fatal’ not ‘unsuccessful’ when discussing suicide attempts; ‘took their own life’ instead of ‘committed suicide’ and ‘cluster of deaths’ rather than ‘suicide epidemic’.

Positioning the story

Research suggests a link between prominent placement of suicide stories and copycat suicide. Position the story on the inside pages of a paper or magazines, or further down in the order of reports in TV and radio news.

Don't be explicit about method

Most members of the media follow a code – written or unwritten – that the method and location of suicide is not described, displayed or photographed. If it is important to the story, discuss the method and location in general terms only – eg. consider using ‘cocktail of drugs’ rather than a description of the medications taken. Detailed description can prompt some vulnerable people to copy the act.

Interviewing the bereaved

People who are bereaved may be at risk of suicide. Follow media codes of practice on privacy, grief and trauma when reporting personal tragedy.

Include helpline contacts

Include phone numbers and contact details for support services so those who may be distressed or prompted to act by your story can access immediate support. The best contacts in Queensland for young people are: Lifeline 13 11 14 and Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800.

Facts about youth suicide in Queensland

The following facts about the suicides of Queensland children and young people aged 10 to 17 between 2004 to 2007 are provided to raise awareness of the risk factors associated with youth suicide. The Commission for Children and Young People and Child Guardian has conducted thorough research and analysis in this area to provide information which could help prevent young people taking their own lives.

- Between 2004 and 2007, Queensland children and young people suicided at a rate well above the national average. An average of 16 children and young people took their lives each year in Queensland – a rate of 3.3 young people per 100,000 – almost twice the national rate of 1.9 per 100,000.⁵
- Suicide was one of the most common causes of death of Queensland children and young people:
 - in 2004–05 and 2005–06, suicide was the leading cause of death for Queensland children aged 10–14
 - between 2004–05 and 2007–08 suicide was the second leading cause of death for young people aged 15–17 (second only to transport accidents).
- The rate of suicide for 10 to 17 year olds in Queensland has increased since 2004, from 2.7 per 100,000 young people to 4.5 per 100,000 in 2007.
- 42% of youth suicides in Queensland were contagion suicides – where the child or young person took their own life after the suicide or attempted suicide of a friend, family or community member. It is clear that the occurrence of a suicide can contribute to an increased risk of suicide in other vulnerable young people, reinforcing the importance of suicide prevention.⁶

- 28% of children and young people who suicided were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, representing a rate almost six times that of other Queensland youth.
- 63% of children and young people who suicided had significant behavioural problems and disciplinary problems. This included ongoing truancy, physical and verbal abuse of others, suspension or exclusion from school, contact with police and/or youth justice. These findings challenge the popular belief that most students who suicide are predominantly introverted, withdrawn and often bullied.
- 60% of children and young people who suicided had previously stated or implied their intention to suicide to a family member, friend or health professional – this highlights the importance of taking threats of suicide seriously.
- 43% of children and young people who suicided had mental health problems, with the vast majority suffering from depression.
- 40% of children and young people who suicided had experienced abuse or chronic family conflict or violence.

More information

The Mindframe website (www.mindframe-media.info) provides useful information for media professionals reporting on suicide, including:

- reporting issues
- research on the links between suicide and the media, and
- the resource quoted above, *Reporting suicide and mental illness: a Mindframe resource for media professionals* (includes industry codes of practice on reporting and portraying suicide).

Media contacts

For more information, please call Sam Keegan on 3211 6977 or email media@ccypcq.qld.gov.au

¹ Martin, G. and Koo, L. (1997) Celebrity suicide: Did the death of Kurt Cobain affect suicides in Australia? *Archives of Suicide Research* 3(3), 187-198.

² Pirkis, JE, Burgess, PM, Frances, C, Blood, RW & Jolley, DJ 2006, 'The relationship between media reporting of suicide and actual suicide in Australia', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol. 62, p2881.

Stack, s 2000, 'Media impacts on suicide: A quantitative review of 293 findings', *Social Science Quarterly*, 81(4) pp.957-952.

³ Beautrais, AL 1999, 'Risk factors for suicide and attempted suicide among young people', in Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care (ed.), *National Youth Suicide Prevention Strategy – Setting the evidence-based research agenda for Australia: A literature review*. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra, p.233.

⁴ Gould, MS & Kramer, RA 2001, 'Youth suicide prevention', *Suicide and Life Threatening Behaviour*, vol. 31, p.10.

⁵ The national rate used for comparison is the Australian Institute for Health and Welfare's figures for the 2005-06 financial year, which is the latest national data available. The Queensland rate is based on the number of suicides of 10 to 17 year olds in Queensland in 2005-06, as per the Commission's Child Death Register for Queensland.

⁶ Postvention refers to the activities and strategies undertaken after a suicide or attempted suicide to reduce associated trauma to other potentially vulnerable people. There are two main aims – to provide bereavement support to those affected by a suicide and to prevent future suicide events.