

## 4.0 Setting the scene: Suicide and young people

### Box 1: Definitions

Due to the complex nature of the behaviours surrounding suicide, there are a number of different terms used in the literature. For the purposes of this report, the terms used have been aligned with the Living Is For Everyone (LIFE) Framework<sup>14</sup> and with Suicide Prevention Australia.<sup>16</sup>

#### **Suicidal ideation:**

Thoughts of taking one's own life. Suicidal ideation varies in severity depending on intent and specificity of suicidal plans.

#### **Suicidal behaviours:**

Any actions or thoughts related to suicide. This includes self-harm with suicidal intent, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.

#### **Suicide:**

Is the intentional act of taking one's own life.

#### **Self-harming:**

The non-fatal, intentional act of harming oneself without suicidal intent.

#### **Suicide attempt:**

The intentional act of trying to take one's own life.

In 2011, suicide was the 15th leading cause of death in Australia, accounting for 2,273 deaths.<sup>17</sup> Overall deaths from suicide have been declining from 12.7 deaths per 100,000 in 2001 to 9.9 per 100,000 in 2011.<sup>17</sup> This decline has been attributed to suicide prevention initiatives in Australia that began in the mid 1990s.<sup>14</sup> Although suicide accounts for a relatively small percentage (1.5%) of overall deaths in the whole population, it was the leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 24, accounting for 26% of all deaths in this age group.<sup>18</sup> This was followed by car related transport accidents, (14%), and events of undetermined intent, (5%).<sup>18</sup> Young males were 2.5 times more likely to die from suicide than females.<sup>18</sup> These recent figures should be interpreted with caution as they are likely to represent an underestimation due to challenges associated with reporting deaths as suicide. To classify a death as suicide, the coroner must be able to confirm

suicidal intent; this can be difficult especially with deaths from drug overdoses and single vehicle car accidents.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, deaths that have not yet been coded by the coroner at the time of reporting are classed as an event of undetermined intent.<sup>19</sup>

Currently, there are no reliable figures that illustrate the level of suicide amongst homeless young people in Australia. The report entitled *Before it's too late: Report on the inquiry into early intervention programs aimed at reducing youth suicide* highlighted the need for collecting more social and demographic data on suicide, the Australian Government indicated in its response that this is not likely to occur in the foreseeable future.<sup>20</sup> This makes it challenging to be able to determine the true extent of the problem within this group and to advocate for greater investment in prevention strategies.

### Box 2: A word on self-harm

Differentiating between self-harming behaviours with and without suicidal intent is challenging.<sup>21</sup> Recent studies suggest that the differences can be determined through intent, rate of reoccurrence and the degree of lethality, however, different types of self-harming behaviours can coexist in an individual.<sup>15</sup> While most acts of self-harm are generally not intended as an attempt to end one's life, a previous incident of deliberate self-harm is the strongest predictor of a completed suicide and the risk for accidental death can be high.<sup>1,22</sup> Consequently, all self-harming behaviours should be taken seriously.

This report acknowledges the shared characteristics of self-harm and suicide, but understands that they are two very different issues that require separate responses from Youth Service Providers. This report does not attempt to address self-harm, other than to acknowledge the overlapping nature of suicide and self-harm.