

4 Executive summary

Throughout Australia, suicide remains the leading cause of death within the 15 to 24 year old age bracket. In Western Australia, 9595 people are homeless every night, 5% of which are young people aged 12 to 24.¹ These statistics reinforce feedback to the Youth Affairs Council of WA (YACWA) from the WA Youth Sector that homelessness and suicide are real and present issues impacting youth and community work practice across WA.

YACWA, through the commission of this report, aims to provide the Western Australian Youth Sector with a useful resource in supporting young people who are homeless, at risk of homelessness and who are also at risk of suicide. The report has been guided by a theory-led and evidence-based approach. This involved a comprehensive review of current research and literature and led by the perspectives from key practitioners and leaders from front-line youth focussed services across Perth. This process identified key local, national and international literature findings and evidence-based approaches to 'what is working' in suicide prevention and intervention. In addition, the report also provides comprehensive e-links to many relevant web-based resources with the aim to encourage integration by practitioners and agencies with the goal to further guide their thinking.

It is acknowledged that the task of bringing this material together in one document has been somewhat challenging. One of the main challenges is the absence of specific literature outlining ways of working with young homeless people who are at risk of suicide. What was apparent was that there was evidence that described ways of working with young homeless people and unconnected evidence of ways of working with people at risk of suicide. Synergies within the evidence base

have been aligned through the research process and reference group expertise, consequently, guiding the identification of best practice principles for working with young homeless people at risk of suicide.

The findings of this report and its recommendations need to be interpreted with reference to the individual young person's circumstance, as young homeless people do not represent a homogenous group. There will be unique differences based upon age, experience, sexuality, ethnicity, family supports, social supports, geographic location, substance use, mental health issues and a range of other dimensions. Likewise, Youth Service Providers in WA are also not a homogenous group and have unique strengths premised upon their areas of expertise. The main findings from the literature review, guidance from the expert reference group and service provider interviews suggest that:

- Young people are over-represented in Australia's homelessness and suicide statistics;
- Young homeless people have many risk factors for suicide and fewer protective factors, placing them at high risk of suicide;
- There is a lack of current suicide prevention research amongst young homeless people;
- There are barriers to connecting young homeless people to mental health services;
- A range of theories and models underpin practice approaches in the sector with the majority adopting a client-centred and strengths-based approach;
- Addressing suicide from a recovery perspective provides insight into the young person's journey, promotes their independence and helps to build resilience;
- Suicide prevention training is one of the best strategies that Youth Service Providers can participate in to improve their response to suicide; and
- Responding to suicide is challenging. Hence, Youth Workers need to be supported to develop professionally through training, appropriate internal and/or external supervision and organisational supports so as to maintain their own resilience.

Based upon these findings, the following recommendations have been developed for Youth Service Providers working with young homeless people at risk of suicide. It is suggested that they be considered for integration into Youth Service Providers' own aims and operational thinking. Organisational and managerial leadership in driving these initiatives is integral in effective service integration.

Recommendation 1

All Youth Service Providers have current policies and procedures that provide clear direction to all staff working with young people at risk of suicide.

Recommendation 2

Procedures be developed, under Recommendation 1, incorporating a response protocol based on responding to young homeless person at risk of suicide through the following three steps:

1. Recognise the warning signs
2. Ask 'the question' and listen
3. Connect to support

Recommendation 3

Youth Service Providers have in place protocols whereby a safety plan is negotiated for young homeless people at risk of suicide. The development of this safety plan should be grounded in a client-centred, strengths-based approach and incorporate:

- Internal coping strategies
- Social distractions
- Assistive social supports
- Accessing professional support for assistance
- Removing access to means of suicide
- Include and consider the views of the client
- A follow-up agreement

Recommendation 4

Youth Service Providers ensure that support services for Youth Workers dealing with young people at risk of suicide are in place and consider:

- Need for ongoing professional development, including suicide prevention training
- Need for supervision that is either provided internally and/or externally
- Support personal well-being after dealing with a crisis situation

Recommendation 5

That Youth Service Providers across the youth, homelessness and mental health sectors work more collaboratively, allowing for stronger referral pathways as well as more efficient use of resources.

Recommendation 6

That further Western Australian research is required to better articulate the size of the problem, effectiveness of early intervention and prevention programs and to provide a more in-depth evidence base to guide best practice in the area.

A note on working with people from different cultural backgrounds

It is acknowledged that the recommendations described in this report may not be appropriate for use when working with all young people. Young Aboriginal people and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) backgrounds are over-represented within the homeless population. It is recommended that additional training is undertaken to be able to adapt these practice guidelines to meet the needs of these young people in a culturally appropriate manner.

To find out more, visit the training section of this website www.yacwa.org.au/youthworkertoolkit/suicide-prevention