

**Submission
No 14**

PREVENTION OF YOUTH SUICIDE IN NEW SOUTH WALES

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Catholic Women's League Australia - New South Wales Inc

Do not be afraid, I will help you.
(Isaiah 41:13)

Prevention of Youth Suicide in New South Wales

2017

Catholic Women's League NSW

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:4

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1. Introduction

Catholic Women's League Australia – New South Wales Inc. is the state peak body representing the CWLA in New South Wales. We are a Non-Government Organisation and are a member organization of the Catholic Women's League Australia Inc. (CWLA), the national peak body representing the League's six member organisations located throughout Australia. One of CWLA's four principle aims is to influence legislative and administrative bodies at all levels of government in order to preserve the dignity of the human person. Given our focus we feel compelled to contribute a submission to this particular inquiry.

2. Catholic Social Teachings

The CWLA NSW Inc. looks to the Catholic Church's social teaching, which we believe to be a rich source of wisdom and guidance about building a just society and living an ethical life amidst the challenges of modern society. Our social teachings are articulated through a tradition of papal, conciliar, and episcopal documents. One important social teaching theme relates to that of the Common Good, which can be explained as "the principle of the common good, to which every aspect of social life must be related if it is to attain its fullest meaning, stems from the dignity, unity and equality of all people". According to its primary and broadly accepted sense, the common good indicates "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily"ⁱ. Supporting the rights of young people to lead a healthy and fulfilling life and not to feel compelled to complete the act of suicide is a step in upholding this particular social teaching.

3. Human Rights Framework

The Convention on the Rights of the Child includes certain provisions to prevent intentional self-harm. Article 6 guarantees children the "inherent right to life" and states that all "State Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child". Article 19 guarantees protection from all forms of violence, article 24 provides for the right to the highest attainable

standard of health, and article 27 recognises the right to an adequate standard of living.

4. The Current Situation Relating to Youth Suicide in Australia and New South Wales

It is important to understand the current situation relating to suicide in Australia and New South Wales. Suicide has been found to be a leading cause of death among young people, second only to motor vehicle accidents. Between 1960 and 1990, suicide rates among 15 to 24 males have trebled. The situation is particularly concerning in country areas, where remote rural Australia suicide rates for young males are nearly twice those of males living in capital cities. Amongst children less than 14 suicide is rare but becomes much more common during adolescence. The most rapid rise of suicide rates is between the ages of 15 and 19 years, with a further increase between the age of 20 to 24 years. Since the 1970s, the rates of suicide in indigenous communities has been increasing, with the highest rates of suicide amongst Aboriginal people being under the age of 29. One statistic indicates that the suicide rate in indigenous communities may be 40% higher than the rate of non-indigenous suicide¹.

89 males aged between 15 and 19 years of age, i.e. 11.8 per 100,000 and 192 males aged between 20 to 24 years of age (22.5 per 100,000) completed suicide. Males aged between 15 to 19 years, i.e. 11.8 per 100,000, were the second lowest of all male aged specific suicide rates. In the same year 56 females aged between

¹ <http://www.rch.org.au/cah/research/Youth_Suicide_in_Australia/> last viewed at 6 August 2017.

15 to 19 years, i.e. 7.8 per 100,000, and 54 females aged between 20 to 24 years, i.e. 6.7 per 100,000 died by suicide. Suicides accounted for 26.8% of deaths among 15 to 19 years old males and 37.9% of deaths among 20 to 24 year old males in 2015. The corresponding percentages for females in these age groups are 33.9% and 31.4%. In the mid 1980s, suicide rates for 15 to 19 years olds rose rapidly peaking at 21.0 per 100,000 in 1988. During the next decade rates fluctuated around 17 to 19 per 100,000 for this particular group and stood at 18.4% per 100,000 in 1997. Males aged between 15 to 19 years have experienced a decline since the 1990s, peaking at 19.0 per 100,000 in 1991. For the past ten years the suicide rates have fluctuated around 12 per 100,000 within this age group. For females aged between 15 to 19 years old the suicide rates peaked in 1997 i.e. 9.0 per 100,00 and were at their lowest in 2003, 3.8 per 100,000. For 2015, the data was 7.8 per 100,000². Cyber bullying, which is being linked to incidents of self-harm and suicide affect an estimated 463,000 young people a year with around 365,000 of them being in the 10 to 15 age group.³

A report carried out by youth mental health service Orygen has found that suicide rates among young Australians are at their highest level in ten years notwithstanding a wide spectrum for prevention strategies and investment from the government. It found that suicide rates for 15 to 24 years are at the highest rate in ten years; that a third of deaths of all young men are due to suicide; 41,000 young people aged 12 to 17 have made a suicide attempt; twice as many 15 to 19 year old women died by suicide than in 2005; suicide rates have increased for

² <<http://www.mindframe-media.info/for-media/reporting-suicide/facts-and-stats>> last viewed at 6 August 2017.

³ <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-30/system-for-suicide-prevention-rates-highest-10-years/8076780>> last viewed at 20 August 2017.

children under the age of 14; and that 25% of women aged 16 to 17 year olds have self-harmed⁴.

It is evident from the statistics and data detailed above that young people are suffering and experiencing high rates of suicide. They require assistance and support to ensure that they do not feel that the only option available to them is to complete suicide. We aim to explore in this submission the most meaningful ways that we as a society can provide innovative and effective solutions to this alarming situation.

5. Youth Suicide Action Plan in Every School

One suggestion that has been made to attempt to curtail the high youth suicide rate is to develop a youth suicide prevention policy and action plan in every school in Australia. The Black Dog Institute suggests that such a policy “should include plans to execute prevention programs, goals for positive mental health and guidelines for managing suicidal behaviour in schools”⁵ and that such a plan should be distributed to all school staff. Teachers and parents could then receive training so that they can become more aware of identifying suicidal youth by being in a better position to be able to recognise warning signs and refer students who need help to access the care support that they may need. The policy/plan would furthermore develop peer helper programs, so that young people could gain the knowledge and skills they may need to help fellow students whom they believe to be at risk.

⁴ < <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-30/system-for-suicide-prevention-rates-highest-10-years/8076780>> last viewed at 20 August 2017.

⁵ < <http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/news/nsw/youth-suicide-action-plans-needed-in-every-school-in-australia-to-help-save-lives/news-story/bb32fdbfef2bbab76bcebe012b5d8252>> last viewed at 10 August 2017.

Such an approach has a lot of merit in it. We as a society can no longer bury our heads in the sand and refuse to speak about the topic of suicide. All stakeholders that can make an impact, such as parents, teachers, counsellors and peers need to be trained and have the information they need to be able to support a young person at risk of suicide and guide them to access the support they may need. Young people are most likely to confide in their friends, and thus peers have a great role to play in helping to reduce the high rate of suicide.

6. Counsellors in Every School

It should be imperative that trained counsellors who are specifically trained in understanding youth suicide and how it can be prevented, should be employed by every single school in New South Wales. The engagement of school counsellors would be a valuable resource for all students, particular for those at risk of suicide. They should be part of the implementation of the Youth Suicide Action Plan, and the counsellors could be the centre of the implementation of the plan in each school, ensuring that there is awareness, education, training and a strategic plan to stop youth suicide from occurring. A comprehensive study should be done of all schools in New South Wales, including primary schools and public schools as well as private schools to assess how much access to counsellors each school presently has and to establish a minimum standard for the presence of counsellors in all schools. Principals campaigning for more counsellors in schools to help disturbed children are now reporting that there are increasingly more

problems prevalent amongst younger students, who are beginning to show signs of violent and challenging behaviours without showing any signs of remorse⁶.

8. Creation of More Mental Health Services for Young People

It is evident that more funding is required to be focused on creating more mental health services to target and better support young people, and that such services require better coordination. Such services cannot solely be forced on emergency interventions but also ongoing support of young people so that they are assisted a long time before they reach the crisis point of wanting to end their own lives.

9. Better Use of Technology in the Fight against Suicide

The report by Orygen also suggested that technology could play a strong role in preventing suicide via improved online platforms, such as web-based counselling services, are able to help people at risk of suicide. These applications are particularly helpful given their high rate of acceptance by young people and they are easily accessible to them. There has been a fear of technology being blamed for bullying and suicide risks, however, “when technology is used appropriately to

⁶ < <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-30/system-for-suicide-prevention-rates-highest-10-years/8076780>> last viewed on 20 August 2017.

connect and support young people, actually suicidal behaviour and mental health problems go down, not up” according to Professor Ian Hickie⁷.

10. Better Education and Awareness Raising amongst Young People regarding Support Available

Young people themselves need to receive better training and education in relation to the topic of suicide, and how they can be supported with relevant services should they reach the point of wanting to take their own lives. The topic has always held such stigma, with a fear that talking about suicide can result in suicide. We need to create open spaces where it is possible for young people to be able to discuss this issue amongst themselves and with adults. Education and information on the topic is vital.

11. Better Training for Support Professionals on the Issue of Youth Suicide

Professionals working with young people in various professions such as education, the legal system, the medical system etcetera need to be exposed to education, training and information on this issue, to ensure a greater network of support for young people. Thus, education and training on this issue should not be limited to just mental health professionals who specialise in this area but should be expanded to encompass other professionals and workers from other professions, who regularly interact with young people.

⁷ < <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-11-30/system-for-suicide-prevention-rates-highest-10-years/8076780> > last viewed at 20 August 2017.

12. More Funding

The statistics paint an alarming picture. Overall, it is evident that the NSW parliament needs to dedicate more funding to the prevention of youth suicide. This issue is of utmost importance if we are determined to protect and keep our youth safe.

The time has come where more urgent action is needed to provide our youth with the support that they both need and deserve. By adopting the strategies suggest we can begin to take a serious step in the right direction.

We wish the committee every success in its deliberations.

Yours sincerely,

Ann Pereira

Catholic Women's League Australia – New South Wales Inc

State President