SUICIDE AND SELF-HARM IN AUSTRALIA

Differentiating and understanding suicide, attempted suicide and non-fatal self-harm in Australia (and beyond): a conceptual map

SUICIDE DEATHS

MALES

FEMALES

SELF-HARM

RATES
The majority of suicide deaths are of adult men. Males account for at least 75% of suicides in Australia – 2,292 of 3,027 total suicide deaths in 2015.1 Suicide is generally considered to be significantly under-reported in Australia (and internationally).2 Suicide rates are higher among rural and remote males.3

LETHALITY
Many men who kill themselves do so at their first attempt.4 Suicide attempts are more lethal in men.5 This includes choice of methods, how lethally methods are used,6 and intentionality.7 Men are more likely to use guns,8,9 and to use them lethally.10 Men are more likely to hang themselves.11,12

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS
For both lethal and non-lethal suicide attempts, men are more likely than women to have alcohol and other drug problems.13,14 Alcohol use disorders are very common in suicide,15 particularly among men.16 Alcohol intoxication increases suicide risk,17 sometimes by increasing method lethality.18,19,20

HEALTH CARE
Men have lower overall rates of contact with the formal health care system, including primary health care21 and mental health services.22 Males are often not well served by health/mental health, welfare, or social services.23,24 Contact with mental health services prior to suicide is much less common among men than women.25 Many men who suicide have no psychiatric history or known mental disorder.26 The duration of the suicidal process is much shorter in men than in women, limiting the opportunities for intervention.26

SUICIDE DEATHS

MALES

FEMALES

SELF-HARM

RATES
The majority of non-fatal self-harm incidents, including suicide attempts, involve women and girls.31 Compared with males, a larger proportion of females make a non-fatal suicide attempt.32 Females have higher rates of reported non-fatal suicidal behaviour,33 but not as much higher as generally thought.34 They are more likely to seek help for their injuries,35 and more likely to be hospitalised.36 Females accounted for 63% of hospitalised self-harm cases in Australia in 2010-11 (16,314 female and 9,748 male cases).37

LETHALITY
Intentional self-harm is not necessarily a suicide attempt.38 Although females attempt suicide at higher rates, they are more likely to use methods that are less likely to be lethal.39,40 Women tend to use higher rates of poisoning and drug-overdoses, which are often not fatal.41,42 In Australia, there are almost twice as many hospitalisations due to poisoning for women as there are for men: 13,892 vs 7,124 (2010-2011).43

ALCOHOL AND OTHER DRUGS
Alcohol problems contribute to both lethal and non-lethal suicide attempts by women.44,45

HEALTH CARE
The majority of those who self-harm or attempt but do not complete suicide, and then come in contact with health services, are female.46,47 This is particularly the case for hospitalisations related to poisoning.48 Women are more likely than men to use services for mental health problems.49,50

OVERLAP

Although there is some overlap between people who attempt suicide and those who complete suicide, these groups are characterised by significant demographic and clinical differences.27,28

Although people who intentionally self-harm (including incomplete suicide attempts) have an elevated risk of going on to kill themselves, the majority do not do so.29,30