

ACOSS submission on the draft advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy

October 2024

About ACOSS

The Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) is a national voice in support of people affected by poverty, disadvantage and inequality and the peak body for the community services and civil society sector.

ACOSS consists of a network of approximately 4000 organisations and individuals across Australia in metro, regional and remote areas.

Our vision is an end to poverty in all its forms; economies that are fair, sustainable and resilient; and communities that are just, peaceful and inclusive.

Summary

ACOSS welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission on the draft advice on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy. ACOSS strongly supports a whole-of-government approach to suicide prevention and urges the government to adopt a comprehensive cross-government strategy to prevent suicide.

ACOSS's submission focuses on how the draft advice on the strategy could be strengthened to help prevent suicide among people who are unemployed or on low incomes. As such, we have focused this submission on the role of income support and employment policy. Recent data show much higher rates of suicide among people in receipt of unemployment payments and the Disability Support Pension¹, emphasising the need for work to be done to prevent suicide among people in receipt of these payments.

ACOSS also acknowledges the range of factors that can contribute to poor mental health, including lack of secure housing, homelessness, family and domestic violence, financial crisis and access to services including health and

¹ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2024) 'Supporting people who experience socioeconomic disadvantage: Deaths by suicide among Centrelink income support recipients' <https://www.aihw.gov.au/suicide-self-harm-monitoring/data/populations-age-groups/deaths-by-suicide-among-centrelink-income-support-recipients>

community services. For ACOSS policy proposals that cover these issues, please see [our latest budget submission](#).

Income support and suicide

ACOSS welcomes the inclusion income support adequacy in the draft advice to the Suicide Prevention Strategy, and we strongly urge the Federal Government to include action to ensuring all income support payments are adequate in the final strategy.

ACOSS and many other organisations have long called for income support payments to be increased so they are adequate to meet basic costs. More than 3 million people live in poverty in Australia, with receipt of income support posing the biggest risk of living in poverty.

Income support payments like the unemployment payment, JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, and other payments paid at the same rate are below the poverty line and all other measures of adequacy.²

ACOSS research shows that the low rate of unemployment and related payments negatively affects people's mental and physical health, with nine in ten people reporting that their mental health suffered because of an inability to cover basic costs.³ People receiving these payments report high levels of financial stress and poor health and wellbeing because they do not have enough money to buy food, healthcare, transport and keep a roof over their head. Many report suicidal ideation because of the grinding pressure of not having enough money each day to meet basic expenses.

Data released by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare this year showed that people receiving the Disability Support Pension and unemployment payments are three times more likely to die by suicide than the broader population.⁴ The draft strategy also refers to Australian research that shows a causal link between unemployment and underemployment and suicide.⁵ Other research shows much heightened risk of suicide among people experiencing financial stress, concluding that unemployment and poverty appears to have 'substantial effects' on increasing suicide in many countries.⁶

² Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee (2024) 'Report to Government'

https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/04_2024/economic-inclusion-advisory-committee-2024-report.pdf

³ ACOSS (2024) 'Raise the Rate survey' https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/ACOSS-COL-Report-Sept-2024_v03.pdf

⁴ AIHW, Ibid.

⁵ Adam Skinner, Nathaniel D. Osgood, Jo-An Occhipinti, Yun Ju Christine Song, and Ian B. Hickie (2023) 'Unemployment and underemployment are causes of suicide' 12 July, Vol 9, Issue 28 Science Advances <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.adg3758>

⁶ Mark Sinyor, Morton Silverman, Jane Pirkis, Keith Hawton (2024) 'The effect of economic downturn, financial hardship, unemployment, and relevant government responses on suicide', 9 September, Lancet Public Health, <https://www.thelancet.com/action/showPdf?pii=S2468-2667%2824%2900152-X>

There is a high incidence of poor mental health among people receiving unemployment payments. Forty-three per cent of people receiving JobSeeker are unable to work full time because of illness or disability, with the largest proportion reporting psychological/psychiatric reasons for illness or disability.⁷ While we cannot determine from these data if people come into the income support system because of poor mental health or acquire poor mental after being in the system, not having enough money creates and compounds distress.

The evidence strongly suggests that if people have a sufficient income to cover basic costs, suicides will be prevented. At the very least, ensuring income support payments are enough to cover the basics would reduce a major stressor facing people on very low incomes.

In addition to the consequences of an inadequate income, ACOSS is also concerned about the effect of poor social security administration on people experiencing financial distress. The worst example is the deep harm caused by the illegal Robodebt scheme that erroneously took \$1.8 billion from people who had received income support. Some people affected by the scheme took their own life. ACOSS calls on government to do all it can to reduce the stress experienced by people who need income support, including by reforming debt practices, improving service delivery (including ensuring claims are processed quickly) and the availability of social workers and reviewing existing process and practices from a suicide prevention perspective to ensure that they help reduce, rather than exacerbate distress. For the full suite of recommendations, see [ACOSS's submission to the Robodebt Royal Commission](#).

Recommendation 1

The strategy must include a recommendation that government increase income support payments so that they are adequate to meet basic costs, including JobSeeker, Youth Allowance and other payments paid at the same rate. ACOSS calls for JobSeeker, Youth Allowance, Parenting Payment and related income support to be increased to at least \$82 a day (on par with pensions), and for all payments to be indexed in line with wages as well as prices (whichever is higher) twice per year.

Strategy must address the effects of harmful mutual obligations

ACOSS welcomes the recommendations on employment policy in the document, specifically those which reference helping people on income support into secure employment and demand-led schemes for those without paid work long term. Australia under-invests in effective labour market programs that

⁷ DSS (2024) 'DSS Benefit and Payment Recipient Demographics - quarterly data' June, <https://data.gov.au/dataset/ds-dga-cff2ae8a-55e4-47db-a66d-e177fe0ac6a0/details>

make a difference for people, particularly those without paid work long-term.⁸ The employment services reform agenda would benefit from focusing much more on the health and wellbeing of people using the service, including with respect to mental health and suicide prevention.⁹

However, the employment services system will never be able to adequately support people if it is hamstrung by the present system of mutual obligation, which deliberately increases economic insecurity and distress for people on low incomes.

The present model of mutual obligation introduces income uncertainty by design, through widespread automated payment suspensions. Suspensions of income support payments can occur for missing a meeting with a provider or not completing assigned activities in a job plan. In the most recent data, over a third of people using Workforce Australia are subjected to suspensions.¹⁰ People on low incomes find these policies incredibly damaging, with many reporting harm to their mental health from the effects of mutual obligation.¹¹

At the extreme end, people can have their income support payments cancelled if they do not meet their requirements, further contributing to the risk of extreme poverty and psychological harms.

ACOSS has consistently advocated against these harmful policies, which are used across Workforce Australia and the Disability Employment Service, affecting many people on low incomes.

There is very little evidence on the impacts of mutual obligation on suicide in Australia, a significant gap that should be addressed. A review of international evidence on financial sanctions in social security systems found that sanctions were associated with poorer physical and mental health.¹² There also evidence from the UK that found increasing financial sanction rates for people on low incomes were associated with increased rates of depression and anxiety.¹³

At a minimum, increasing income uncertainty for people on already inadequate incomes as a punishment increases the risk of mental illness and distress.

Recommendation 2

The strategy should include reference to the harmful effects of mutual obligation, including the increase in income uncertainty from automated payment suspensions and financial penalties used in employment services.

⁸ ACOSS (2021) 'Faces of Unemployment', <https://www.acoss.org.au/faces-of-unemployment/>

⁹ ACOSS (2024) 'ACOSS brief on employment services reform' <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ACOSS-brief-on-employment-services-reform-March24.pdf>

¹⁰ Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (2024) Targeted Compliance Framework Data, Quarter 2, <https://www.dewr.gov.au/employment-services-data/job-seeker-compliance-data>

¹¹ ACOSS (2022) 'Voices of Unemployment 2' <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Voices-of-Unemployment.pdf>

¹² Pattaro, Serena et al (2022) The Impacts of Benefit Sanctions: A Scoping Review of the Quantitative Research Evidence

¹³ Williams, Evan (2020) Welfare conditionality and activation in the UK: the mental health impacts of benefit sanctions. PhD thesis

Recommendation 3

ACOSS recommends that automated payment suspensions be immediately abolished to reduce stress and distress and increase income security.

Acknowledgements

ACOSS prepared this submission in consultation with Mind Australia, Community Mental Health Australia, Australians for Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Australia and supports their advocacy for a whole-of-government approach to suicide prevention in Australia.

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