



Australian Suicide Statistics, 2006 – Key Findings

On 14 March 2008, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) released the 2006 data on deaths by suicide in Australia. Auseinet has produced this summary in order to highlight some of the key findings. A copy of the ABS 'Causes of Death' publication (ABS catalogue no. 3303.0) is available to download.¹

Cautions in interpreting suicide statistics:

- The quality of suicide statistics are affected by a number of factors including the number of open coronial cases with insufficient information available for coding at the time of ABS processing. The ABS notes that particular issues experienced in recent years may explain at least part of the observed decline in the number of suicide deaths. Thus extreme caution must be taken when comparing trends in the number of suicides over recent years.

Number of suicide deaths:

- In 2006, there were 1,799 registered deaths from suicide compared to 2,101 in the previous year. Intentional self-harm or suicide was ranked 15th of all deaths registered in Australia in 2006.
- In 2006, males accounted for 78% of deaths by suicide (1,398 males) and females accounted for 22% of deaths by suicide (401 females).
- In 2006 the highest number of suicide deaths for males was observed in the 35 to 39 and 45 to 49 age groups (163 suicide deaths per age group), followed by males aged 40 to 44 years (143 suicide deaths). The highest number of suicide deaths for females was in the age group 35 to 39 years (46 suicide deaths), followed by females aged 40 to 44 and 50 to 54 years (41 suicide deaths per age group).
- An age-standardised suicide rate, which accounts for the changing age structure of the Australian population over time, allows for a more precise comparison of groups with different age structures and between time periods. In 2006 the suicide rate was 13.6 per 100,000 males, 3.8 per 100,000 females and 8.6 per 100,000 people. The age standardised rate in 2006 was approximately 1.7% lower than in 2005 and lower than in any single year in the previous decade. The 2006 rate was 42% lower than in 1997 at the peak of suicide deaths.
- The highest age-specific suicide death rate for males in 2006 was observed in the 85 years and over age group (34.5 per 100,000). This number is inflated by the small population and the relatively high number of deaths in this age group. Suicide deaths as a proportion of total deaths in this group were relatively low (0.7%). The age-specific death rates in the 45 to 54 and the 35 to 44 age group for males were 20.4 per 100,000 and 20.1 per 100,000 respectively. Suicides as a proportion of total deaths for these groups were 17% and 34% respectively. The lowest age-specific suicide rate for males was in the 15 to 19 age group (8.8 per 100,000).

Percentage of all deaths:

- 1.3% of all deaths were due to suicide in 2006.
- The percentage of deaths due to suicide in relation to the total number of deaths from all causes differs greatly among some age groups and between males and females. In particular, in the 20 to 24 year age group in 2006, suicide accounted for approximately 21% of all male deaths and 14% of all female deaths for the 20 to 24 year age group. It also accounted for 19% of all male deaths and 12% of female deaths for the 25 to 29 year age group in 2006.

¹ To access the ABS *Causes of Deaths* publication go to the relevant link on the Auseinet website: www.auseinet.com/suiprev/statistics.php



Trends in suicide deaths:

- Although comparing the number of suicide deaths over time must be done cautiously (see notes on 'Cautions in interpreting suicide statistics'), the 2006 figure of 1,799 suicides deaths suggests a continued decline in the number of registered suicide deaths since the peak of 2,720 suicide deaths in 1997. This decline in the number of suicides over the past decade is seen for both males and females.
- Despite these decreases, suicide remains a major external cause of death, accounting for more deaths than transport accidents between 1996 and 2006.

Method of suicide:

- Just over half (54%) of male suicide deaths in 2006 were by hanging, while approximately one fifth (20%) of male suicide deaths were due to poisoning. In contrast, hanging accounted for 44%, and poisoning 36% of female deaths due to suicide.

Differences across the states and territories:

- Given the relatively small numbers of suicides in any one state or territory each year, a more accurate picture of differences by state and territory can be gained from pooling data over a number of years. When combined data for the years of 2001 to 2005 are examined, the highest age-standardised suicide rate is observed for the Northern Territory – this suicide rate of 24.0 per 100,000 people was more than twice the Australian average (of 11.2 per 100,000 people). For single year 2006 data, the highest rate was observed for Tasmania (14.7 suicide deaths per 100,000), followed by the Northern Territory (13.0 suicide deaths per 100,000), and South Australia (10.7 suicide deaths per 100,000).

Suicide among Aboriginal people:²

- In addition to the general issues surrounding the quality of suicide statistics (as noted earlier), the quality of data on deaths of Aboriginal people is also affected by issues of undercounting. Thus the number of recorded suicide deaths among Aboriginal people is likely to underestimate the true number of such deaths.
- In 2006 the ABS only released data on the number of deaths by suicide among Aboriginal people for Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory due to both data collection issues and comparatively small numbers and relatively low coverage of Aboriginal deaths in some other states and territories. In 2006, there were a combined 71 registered deaths by suicide of Aboriginal people in the four states and territories considered compared to a combined 74 such deaths in the same states and territories in 2005.
- In 2006, in the four states and territories with reported data, suicide accounted for 4.9% of all Aboriginal deaths compared with 1.8% of deaths for other Australians. Thus, deaths by suicide accounted for a much higher proportion of all deaths among Aboriginal people than non-Aboriginal people.
- The difference between the proportion of deaths that was due to suicide among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people varies by state and territory. In 2006, the biggest difference was observed for South Australia, where 7.3% of deaths of Aboriginal people were due to suicide compared with 1.3% of deaths of non-Aboriginal people. In contrast, the smallest difference is seen for the Northern Territory; while 3.3% of deaths of Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory were due to suicide, a slightly smaller percentage (3.0%) of deaths of non-Aboriginal people were due to suicide.

2. The term 'Aboriginal' people is used to refer to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

This information sheet has been reviewed and updated by Abbie Patterson from an earlier version prepared by Dr Adriana Vanden Heuvel (2006).

