

Increasing suicide rate in Australia highlights social crisis

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26 April 2016

An Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report, *Causes of Death Australia, 2014*, released last month, revealed a sharply rising suicide rate over the past decade, with steep increases among children and young women.

The media barely mentioned the report, and it was quickly buried by the parties of the political establishment—Liberal-National, Labor and Greens. That is because the trend points to a worsening human toll, above all among young people, from the mounting social crisis and declining prospects for youth.

Nationally, there were 2,864 deaths from intentional self-harm in 2014—2,160 men and 704 women. The total was up from about 2,100 in 2005, making suicide the 13th leading cause of all deaths. Suicides occurred at a rate of 12 per 100,000 people in 2014—up by 20 percent from about 10 per 100,000 in 2005.

According to the ABS data, the impact of these deaths is even greater when measured in terms of years of potential life lost, precisely because of the young age of many of the victims. Intentional self-harm deaths accounted for 97,066 years of potential life lost, the highest of all leading causes of death in 2014.

While heart disease, dementia, stroke, lung cancer and chronic lower respiratory diseases were the top five biggest causes of death overall, among people 15–44 years of age, suicide was the greatest killer. This is a damning indictment of an economic and social system based on corporate profit, which offers no future for many young people.

Most of the suicide victims—75 percent—were male. Tragically, among male teenagers and men aged between 15 and 34, about a third of all deaths were due to intentional self-harm. For those aged 15–19, nearly 36 percent of all deaths resulted from suicide.

The sharpest rises, however, have occurred among

girls and women. In recent years the rate of suicide among young females, aged between 10 and 29, has risen to almost the same levels as among males. More than a quarter of the female deaths between those ages were attributed to intentional self-harm. According to Suicide Prevention Australia, the suicide rate among young women has increased by 10 percent per year over the past three years.

That so many young men and women, in what should be the primes of their lives, feel there is little to look forward to indicates deteriorating social conditions in Australia, despite the myth of an exceptional “lucky country” leading to rising social tensions and problems.

Disturbingly, increasing numbers of children are also killing themselves. In 2013, the ABS reported that suicide was the leading cause of death of children between 5 and 17 years of age. In 2009, 9.9 percent of all deaths of children this age were due to suicide. By 2013, this proportion had almost doubled to 19.3 percent.

The rates of suicide per 100,000 children remained low—2.5—compared to the overall population rate of 10.9 in 2013, but the rise was stark.

Between 2010 and 2014, the Northern Territory (NT) reported the worst rate of child deaths due to suicide, with 12.7 deaths per 100,000. Because the NT has the highest proportion of indigenous people among Australia’s states and territories, this indicates a terrible impact on Aboriginal people, who are among the most oppressed layers of the working class (see: “Australia: Eleven-year-old Aboriginal boy commits suicide”).

While the interaction between suicide, mental health problems and economic and social stresses, such as worsening job prospects, is complex, there is mounting evidence of a link between suicide and unemployment.

After compiling a series of reports and research

documents, the Australian Institute of Male Health Studies found that unemployed males were around 4.6 times more likely to take their own lives than employed males.

A global study last year concluded that one-fifth of all suicides were linked to unemployment—about 45,000 people each year took their own lives because they became unemployed. This study, published on the *Lancet* medical journal's psychiatry web site, suggested an association between the 2008 economic crisis, rising jobless rates and increased rates of suicide.

Young jobseekers in Australia are under intensifying pressure in looking for work. As at August 2015, nearly 290,000 young people were officially unemployed—over 50 percent, or 100,000 people, more than at the start of the global financial breakdown in 2008.

There is growing job insecurity. Mass layoffs in mines, steelworks, car factories and other basic industries have left more than 1.5 million workers unemployed or underemployed—wanting more hours—even according to the understated official figures. As a result, young people and working-class households are under acute stress, competing for jobs, trying to obtain educational qualifications and pay bills.

In response to the economic crisis, successive federal and state governments, Liberal-National and Labor, have imposed austerity measures. These have included cuts to mental health programs and welfare benefits—especially for sole parents, disabled workers and the unemployed.

Decades of under-funding have left mental health services unable to assist many people suffering distress. In a recent report, titled “Mental health services reach the tipping point in Australian acute hospitals,” the *Medical Journal of Australia* noted that Australia ranked 26th of the 34 countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for hospital psychiatric beds per 100,000 population. In 2013, Australia had 29 fewer beds per 100,000 than the OECD average.

Funding for community-based care, allocated to non-government service providers through competitive tender processes, has been slashed also over the past decade, with long periods of uncertainty between funding rounds.

One result is that in 2011, Australia had the third

highest readmission rate among the OECD countries for patients diagnosed with schizophrenia—over 15 percent were readmitted to hospital within 30 days—and the fourth highest unplanned readmission rate (15 percent) for patients with bipolar disorder.

The underlying link between suicide and periods of economic breakdown was illustrated by an earlier report by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, “Suicide and hospitalised self-harm in Australia, Trends and analysis.” It found that the highest rates of suicide for men recorded in Australia—30 deaths per 100,000—were in 1930 and 1931, during the Great Depression. Unemployment and mental ill health were cited as the two major contributing factors.

It is not surprising that the young and working class people are the most affected again today. Parents in jobs are having to work longer hours, cut back on recreational activities and spend less time with their children. Household debt levels are the highest in the world and young people are also burdened with large debts from university or college fees.



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