

Rising financial distress in Australia triggers surge in calls to suicide hotline

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Recent statistics from Lifeline, one of Australia's leading crisis support and suicide prevention services, reveal a significant increase in demand for their non-profit services in the first five months of 2023.

During this period, Lifeline received an average of 3,000 calls per day, nearly 500 more than over the same period in 2019. Of these calls, approximately 50,000 were related to financial distress, averaging around 331 callers per day, surpassing the 2019 figure of 36,000 calls or 238 per day. Lifeline emphasises, however, that the number of individuals seeking help due to financial stress is likely even higher, as many callers are unable to articulate the specific reasons for their crisis.

In February 2022, Lifeline expanded its services to include a 24 hours a day, 7 days a week online chat and texting service. These additional services have also experienced an increase in demand, with Lifeline reporting an average usage of 682 times per day this year. Moreover, data from Lifeline's search engine reveals that in January there were more than 26,000 searches for assistance and support, the organisation's highest monthly tally.

Lifeline receives just 70 percent of its funding from governments, and relies on volunteer workers. The *Herald Sun* last Saturday reported that around 200,000 calls to the hotline go unanswered each year—in the state of Victoria, 360,000 calls are made to Lifeline each year but only 12 percent of these are answered.

Lifeline's chief research officer, Dr. Anna Brooks, earlier this year highlighted the impact of rising interest rates on mortgage and rental costs. She explained: "Financial stress and uncertainty can contribute to mental ill health. There is also evidence to suggest that people can experience distress and suicidal thoughts when facing financial stress and uncertainty."

Sophie Hattch, a 27-year-old Lifeline volunteer crisis

supporter taking incoming calls, told the *Sydney Morning Herald*: "Mental health support has always been expensive, but the difference now is that people are struggling so much more to pay for the bare minimum. People are calling who have had to move away from their family and support networks because they can't get a rental property, or they can't afford one, and it feels anecdotally that there are more people calling with those kinds of issues. Before, it really was a small part of the population."

Other mental health services have noted similar trends to those reported by Lifeline. A recent survey conducted by the Beyond Blue mental health support organisation found that over one-third of respondents indicated that financial pressures negatively affected their mental health in the past year.

The National Debt Helpline has also experienced a significant surge in calls, with a nationwide rise of 30 percent compared to the same period in 2022. In the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria, the number of calls received by the help line doubled compared to last year.

The cost of essentials such as food, energy and housing prices has significantly increased beyond the official inflation rate of 7 percent. The impact on working class households has been exacerbated by the Reserve Bank of Australia's series of interest rate rises. For those with a \$500,000 mortgage, interest rate hikes have slashed monthly disposable income by \$1,200, marking the most significant cut to living standards since World War II.

Research published last year by Beyond Blue found that individuals facing financial difficulties are more than twice as likely to experience psychological issues compared to those who are not. The reverse is also true—people experiencing mental health problems often

experience financial stress as a result, due to unemployment and challenges managing budgets.

Young people are especially affected. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has reported that the annual prevalence of mental ill health among 16 to 24 year olds surged from 26.4 percent in 2007 to 39.6 percent in 2020-21, marking an extraordinary rise of 50 percent in just over a decade. Tragically, this has led to a rise in people taking their own lives. Last year's Australian Institute of Health and Welfare "Deaths in Australia" report showed that between 2018 and 2020 suicide was the leading cause of death among people aged 15-24, at 38 percent of total deaths, and for people aged 25-44, 22 percent of total deaths.

A research study published July 12, analysed suicide data in Australia between 2004-2016 and reported "clear evidence" of a causal connection with unemployment and underemployment. The paper, "Unemployment and underemployment are causes of suicide," found that approximately one in ten deaths were directly due to what the University of Sydney researchers termed labour under-utilisation.

They explained: "Unemployment and underemployment are associated with multiple potential risk factors for poor psychological health, including financial hardship and poverty, lower self-perceived social status, and reduced social network size and availability of social (practical and emotional) support."

The researchers added, in an accompanying commentary, "A direct causal relationship between unemployment and suicide demands a re-evaluation of policies, a prioritisation of full employment, adequate social safety nets to prevent poverty, mental-health system reform, and greater urgency in shifting to a wellbeing economy."

In reality, successive Labor and Liberal-National governments at both the state and federal level have slashed social services, eroded real wages and job security, and privatised and cut to the bone the provision of healthcare, including mental health.

Earlier this year, the Australian Labor Party cut funding to mental health services, and in the May federal budget, the right-wing Albanese-led Labor government made significant cuts of \$11 billion to the annual health budget. These actions have further exacerbated the already strained state of mental health

support in the country. At the same time, the Labor government is implementing regressive "stage three tax cuts" that overwhelmingly favour Australia's affluent minority, and is committing hundreds of billions of dollars for nuclear-powered submarines in preparation for an aggressive, US-led war against China.

The erosion of living standards for the working class and vulnerable layers of the middle class is intensifying, which can only exacerbate the crisis surrounding mental health issues and increase the risk of suicide. The situation represents a damning indictment of the capitalist system, which creates untenable pressures on broad layers of the population and then blocks the allocation of the necessary resources to properly deal with the mental health crisis.



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