

Victorian suicides of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

Coroners Court of Victoria

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WARNING

Aboriginal and **Torres Strait Islander** peoples are respectfully warned that the following report includes information associated with deceased persons from events that have occurred in Victoria.

No names, voices or direct events are recorded within this report; however, the sensitive nature of the information is associated with the commencement of dreaming for many Aboriginal people and may impact some readers.

Acknowledgement

The Coroners Court of Victoria acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which it is located, the Wurundjeri and Boon Wurrung Peoples. Furthermore, the Coroners Court respectfully acknowledge all traditional owners across Victoria and pay respect to all Elders, past, present and emerging.

1. Purpose

This report provides an overview of suicides of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that have occurred in Victoria. This report aims to inform organisations across Victoria of the frequency and circumstances of suicides within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities across the state.

A requirement to accurately record and report on suicides of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Victoria is critical across the state. The data presented in this report may help to inform program development and other initiatives that aim to improve suicide rates across Victorian Communities.

The Coroners Court of Victoria has three key fundamental functions;

- Independently investigate deaths and fires
- Reduce preventable deaths
- Promote public health and safety and the administration of justice.

This report is prepared in relation to assisting measures to support preventable deaths in Victoria to help inform public health responses.

1.1 Data sources

The primary data source used by the Coroners Koori Engagement Unit and Coroners Prevention Unit (CPU) for this report was the Victorian Suicide Register (VSR), a database containing information on coroner-determined and suspected suicides reported to and investigated by Victorian Coroners between 1 January 2000 and the present. The VSR comprises two main datasets:

- A core dataset of basic information on all suicides, including date of suicide, deceased sex and age, suicide method and location; this is coded when the passing is first reported to the Coroners Court of Victoria (CCOV). The core dataset was used to compile the material in section 3 of this report.
- An enhanced dataset of more detailed information on suicides that occurred between 2009 and 2016 (noting that enhanced coding for 2016 is currently underway and is just over 90% complete). The enhanced dataset describes the circumstances in which suicides occurred, the medical and mental health background of the deceased, and relevant stressors and risk factors; this enhanced dataset is coded after the Coronial Brief of Evidence is received and the coroner's investigation is finalised. The enhanced dataset was used to compile the material in section 4 of this report.

A more detailed description of the contents of these datasets and processes for completing VSR coding is outlined in Attachment A.

1.2 Currency of data

Any data extract from a CPU database reflects the CPU's most accurate knowledge of Victorian passings at the time when the extraction occurred. However, data extracted previously or subsequently may be different. This is because the contents of all databases maintained by the CPU are continually updated as cases are coded and coroners progress and complete their investigations. For example, a passing initially flagged as a suicide in the VSR might be removed because the coroner determines it was not a suicide; likewise, a suicide not previously identified might be added.

The data included in this report was extracted on 1 May 2020.

2. Method

2.1 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification in VSR

For the period 2009 to 2016, the VSR was used to identify relevant cases. The VSR variable "Evidence of Indigenous status" records whether there was evidence that the deceased was an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. This variable is coded as part of the core dataset when evidence of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin is reported in the initial documentation received by the CCOV, and is again reviewed for all cases in the VSR during enhanced dataset coding, because accurate coding requires consideration of material gathered during the coroner's investigation: for example witness statements where a family member or friend may mention the deceased was a member of an Aboriginal Community, and medical records where Aboriginal health service engagement is noted.

For the period 2017 to 2020, the CPU used the Koori Case Management Data Warehouse, a data source that is maintained by CCOV Koori Family Engagement Coordinator within the Coroners Koori Engagement Unit, to identify relevant cases. Since the inception of the Koori Family Engagement Coordinator role at the CCOV in early 2019, systemic processes have been established whereby the Koori Family Engagement Coordinator is notified of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose passings are reported to the CCOV.

The Koori Case Management Database has been reconciled with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cases captured in CourtView (digital file case management system), the CPU Surveillance Database and the National Coronial Information System (see Attachment B for an outline of these data sources) to ensure that suicides of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples reported to the CCOV prior to 2019 are captured. Subsequently, this data source is considered to be the most accurate data source for this period.

For all suicides captured in the Koori Case Management Spreadsheet, the VSR variable "Evidence of Indigenous status" is also coded.

2.2 Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria for a relevant passing were:

- The passing was a suicide
- The deceased was an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person
- The passing was reported to the CCOV for investigation between 1 January 2009 and 30 April 2020.

2.3 Case identification and data collection

On 1 May 2020 the CPU ran the following query in the VSR:

- CPU intent = “Intentional self-harm”
- Evidence of Indigenous status = “True”
- Date reported = between 1 January 2009 and 30 April 2020.

For each relevant passing the CPU recorded the local case number, deceased name (with consideration to cultural naming protocols), deceased sex and age, location of suicide, evidence of mental ill health diagnoses, contact with the legal system, post-mortem toxicology results and major interpersonal and contextual stressors.

2.4 Limitations

The identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people among passings reported to the court is very challenging, because there are known shortcomings in the available sources of information as well as substantial inconsistencies between sources. These challenges are described in depth in Attachment B.

The VSR is continually updated as cases are coded and coroners progress and complete their investigations. Over time, passings initially flagged as suicides in the VSR might be removed because they are determined not to be suicides; likewise suicides not previously identified might be added. Therefore, any data extracted from the VSR reflects the CPU’s most accurate knowledge about suicide at the time the extract occurred but is subject to subsequent revision.

3. Socio-demographics of passings

The CCOV prepared the following report originating profile of the 117 suicide deceased whose passings were reported to the coroners between 1 January 2009 and 30 April 2020, and who were coded in the VSR as being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Information regarding all Victorian suicides for the period is included to give context to the profile.

Please note that because of the low frequency of suicides among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria, the below data must be interpreted with some caution.

Please also note that it is unknown whether the increase in suicides seen in 2018 and 2019 represents an actual increase in the frequency of suicides of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria over that period, or whether this is attributed to the increased identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cases reported to the CCOV since the commencement of the CCOV, Koori Family Engagement Coordinator in early 2019.

3.1 Annual frequency

Table 1: Annual frequency of suicides, Victoria 2009-2020*

Year	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People	All Victorians
2009	3	588
2010	5	532
2011	6	544
2012	13	585
2013	8	590
2014	6	620
2015	10	628
2016	18	634
2017	7	678
2018	13	715
2019	20	709
2020	8	244
Total	117	7067

*2020 data is part-year; 1 January 2009 to 30 April 2020

Note: CCOV respectfully acknowledges that at the time of release, 2020 figure for suicides of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is 11 (eleven).

3.2 Sex and age group

Table 2a: Frequency and proportion of suicides among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by age and sex, Victoria 2009-2020*

Age group	Male		Female		Combined	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Under 18	1	1.2	2	5.7	3	2.6
18 to 24	16	19.5	12	34.3	28	23.9
25 to 34	20	24.4	11	31.4	31	26.5
35 to 44	19	23.2	5	14.3	24	20.5
45 to 54	20	24.4	3	8.6	23	19.7
55 to 64	5	6.1	1	2.9	6	5.1
65 and over	1	1.2	1	2.9	2	1.7
Total	82	100.0	35	100.0	117	100.0

*2020 data is part-year; 1 January 2009 to 30 April 2020

Table 2b: Frequency and proportion of suicides among population by age and sex, Victoria 2009-2020*

Age group	Male		Female		Combined	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Under 18	124	2.3	66	3.7	190	2.7
18 to 24	552	10.4	172	9.7	724	10.2
25 to 34	986	18.6	305	17.2	1291	18.3
35 to 44	1040	19.6	326	18.4	1366	19.3
45 to 54	1041	19.7	368	20.8	1409	19.9
55 to 64	761	14.4	260	14.7	1021	14.4
65 and over	793	15.0	273	15.4	1066	15.1
Total	5297	100.0	1770	100.0	7067	100.0

*2020 data is part-year; 1 January 2009 to 30 April 2020

3.3 Location

Table 3: Frequency and proportion of suicides by location of fatal incident, Victoria 2009-2020*

Location of fatal incident	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people		All Victorians	
	N	%	N	%
Metropolitan Melbourne	47	40.2	4677	66.2
Regional Victoria	70	59.8	2390	33.8
Total	117	100.0	7067	100.0

*2020 data is part-year; 1 January 2009 to 30 April 2020

4. Contextual information regarding passings

The previous tables were prepared with reference to core data extracted from the VSR. In this section we now move to contextual information regarding these passings, which, as described in section 1.1 above, is coded in the enhanced dataset of the VSR and is currently only available for the period 2009 to 2016.

4.1 Diagnosed and suspected mental illness

Table 4: Frequency and proportion of suicides by history of diagnosed or suspected mental ill health, Victoria 2009-2016

Mental ill health	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people		All Victorians	
	N	%	N	%
Diagnosed	43	62.3	2631	55.7
Suspected but not diagnosed	14	20.3	936	19.8
Neither diagnosed nor suspected	12	17.4	1154	24.4
Total	69	100.0	4721	100.0

4.2 Contact with legal system

Table 5: Frequency and proportion of people who suicided and had recent contact with the legal system, Victoria 2009-2016

Legal system	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people		All Victorians	
	N	%	N	%
Contact with Victoria Police				
- within six weeks of suicide	21	30.4	1011	21.4
- within 12 months of suicide*	36	52.2	1868	39.6
Contact with Courts				
- within six weeks of suicide	7	10.1	307	6.5
- within 12 months of suicide*	24	34.8	737	15.6
Contact with Corrections				
- within six weeks of suicide	4	5.8	83	1.8
- within 12 months of suicide*	16	23.2	517	11.0

* Legal system contact within 12 months of suicide relates to contacts with police, courts and corrections that occurred outside six weeks but within 12 months of suicide (i.e. contact within seven to 52 weeks of suicide).

4.3 Post-mortem toxicological profile

Table 6: Frequency and proportion of suicides where deceased had alcohol, illegal or pharmaceutical drugs detected post-mortem, Victoria 2009-2016

Drugs detected in post-mortem toxicology	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people		All Victorians	
	N	%	N	%
Alcohol	28	40.6	1390	29.4
Illegal drugs	29	42.0	708	15.0
Pharmaceutical drugs	37	53.6	2889	61.2

4.4 Stressors

Table 7: Major interpersonal and contextual stressors identified in suicides, Victoria 2009-2016

Stressor *	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people		All Victorians	
	N	%	N	%
Interpersonal stressors				
- Conflict with partner	31	44.9	1575	33.4
- Conflict with family members	30	43.5	1403	29.7
- Family violence with partner †	25	36.2	763	16.2
- Separation from partner	33	47.8	1936	41.0
Contextual stressors				
- Substance use and misuse	57	82.6	2228	47.2
- Experience of abuse ‡	44	63.8	1560	33.0
- Legal issues	27	39.1	1211	25.7
- Experience of bullying ¥	16	23.2	586	12.4
- Work-related	17	24.6	1642	34.8
- Financial	14	20.3	1598	33.8

* Individual deceased may experience multiple stressors and are counted separately for each stressor, which is why figures reported here sum to greater than 100%

† This includes family violence where the deceased is the perpetrator and where the deceased is the victim

‡ This includes abuse where the deceased is the perpetrator and where the deceased is the victim

¥ This includes bullying where the deceased is the perpetrator and where the deceased is the victim

Attachment A

The VSR record for a suicide passing includes a core dataset of variables and an enhanced dataset.

A.1 Core dataset

The core dataset encompasses the basic information that is available to coders when the passing is first reported to the Court:

- Local case number of passing (assigned when reported to the Court)
- Age
- Sex
- Surname
- Given name(s)
- Date passing was reported to the Court
- Circumstances of passing as described in the Victoria Police Initial Report of Death to the Coroner ('Form 83')
- Forensic medical cause of death (which is usually available within six to eight weeks of the passing being reported)
- Suicide method
- Deceased's intent as determined by coroner (which is coded as "Open" when the passing is first reported, and is subsequently reviewed when the coroner's finding in the passing is delivered)
- Deceased's intent as determined by CPU (where appropriate)
- Type of location where the fatal incident occurred
- Location of fatal incident (street address, postcode, suburb, local government area, and latitude and longitude)
- Location of usual residence (street address, postcode, suburb, local government area, and latitude and longitude)
- Location of temporary residence if relevant (street address, postcode, suburb, local government area, and latitude and longitude).

In addition, a range of socio-demographic variables may be coded with the core dataset:

- Evidence of LBGQTQIA identification
- Evidence of cultural and linguistic diversity
- Evidence that born overseas
- Evidence of Indigenous status
- Current employment status
- Usual occupation
- Current relationship status.

However, these variables are not considered to be part of the core dataset because often insufficient information is available to code them accurately at the time when the passing is first reported to the Court.

A.2 Enhanced dataset

The enhanced dataset encompasses the information that is usually only available in a sufficiently reliable and detailed form after the Court has received the Coronial Brief of Evidence and any other medical records, witness statements, and/or other relevant material that the coroner has requested.

The enhanced dataset comprises variables across nine domains:

- Socio-demographics
- Physical health
- Mental health
- Evidence relevant to the deceased's intent
- Interpersonal stressors
- Contextual stressors
- Contacts with government and non-government services and the legal system
- Toxicological profile
- Information specific to the suicide method used.

A.3 Coding process

The stages of VSR coding are as follows:

- When a probable or possible suicide is first added to the VSR, the core variables are coded on a preliminary basis.
- When the forensic medical cause of passing is established, the CPU reviews coding of core variables and checks that the passing is still consistent with suicide on the basis of available material.
- When the coroner's investigation is complete and the finding is made, the CPU reviews coding of core variables and checks that the passing is still consistent with suicide on the basis of available material.
- After the Coronial Brief of Evidence is received from Victoria Police, the passing is eligible for enhanced dataset coding and is added to the coding schedule for this.

Attachment B

The Coroners Court of Victoria (CCOV) uses several information sources to establish whether reported passings are of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The following is an outline of the sources and the major issues affecting their reliability for this purpose.

B1. Information sources

The CCOV has access to five main sources of information to identify Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people among reported passings:

- Police Report of Death for the Coroner
- Application for Release of a Deceased Person
- CourtView
- Coronial case file
- National Coronial Information System

B1.1 Police Report of Death for the Coroner

Most passings are reported to the CCOV by a Victoria Police member using a document titled the Police Report of Death for the Coroner, which is colloquially referred to as the 'Form 83'. The reporting Police member completes the information on the Form 83 based on what is initially established at the scene of the passing. One of the fields the reporting Police member is required to record on the Form 83 is, whether the deceased person was "of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin". The CPU records this information on its Surveillance Database ('the CPU Database') when reviewing and coding new passings reported to the CCOV.

B1.2 Application for Release of a Deceased Person

In March 2015 the CCOV introduced a process whereby when a funeral director fills out an Application for Release of a Deceased Person and submits this to the CCOV, he or she is prompted to ask the family whether the deceased person was of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander origin. The CPU checks the Application for Release of a Deceased Person (which is usually submitted within a week of the passing being reported) and records the funeral director response on deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification into the CPU Database.

B1.3 CourtView

CourtView contains a variable for deceased people titled "Indigenous Status", which is manually coded by CCOV staff and includes the following options:

- "Aboriginal"
- "Torres Strait Islander"
- "Both Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander"

B1.4 Coronial case file

The coronial case file contains a large range of documents, which (depending on the direction and depth of the coroner's investigation) may include statements from family and friends of the deceased, statements from attending Victoria Police members and emergency responders,

statements from medical practitioners involved in the care of the deceased, medical records, drug prescribing and dispensing histories, and LEAP records, among other material.

Documents in the coronial case file may include reference to the deceased being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. These references can be direct, as in a family member confirming in a statement that the deceased was an Aboriginal person belonging to a particular community and language group. But references can also be indirect or contextual, such as a mention that the deceased had sought assistance from the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service or was receiving medical treatment at an Aboriginal community-controlled health service.

B1.5 National Coronial Information System

The National Coronial Information System (NCIS) is a database for Australia and New Zealand coronial cases. Its dataset includes information about the “Indigenous origin” of the deceased in Australian cases. Victorian NCIS cases are coded by CCOV staff upon completion of the coroner’s investigation and are coded with reference to the complete coronial case file including the Form 83 and the Application for Release of a Deceased Person.

B2. Reliability of information sources

In theory there should be perfect concordance between the information sources, such that the Form 83 information about a deceased being an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is reflected in the Application for Release of a Deceased Person, which is coded on CourtView and reflected in the Coronial Brief material that is ultimately used for case coding into the NCIS. However, in practice, reconciliation between data sources reveals a number of discrepancies.

B2.1 Form 83 and Application for Release

A long-recognised limitation of the Form 83 is that the reporting Police member does not always have the opportunity to inquire whether the deceased is an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. Reasons for this vary and may include family distress at the scene of passing. And even when inquiries take place accurate information may not be gleaned, for reasons including uncertainty as to the deceased’s identity among those who are present.

The funeral director process with the Application for Release of a Deceased Person was introduced explicitly to overcome this limitation with the Form 83 and enhance our identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. But a March 2018 audit of the two information sources revealed that that there are still significant limitations.

Briefly, for the audit (which was conducted at the request of Deputy State Coroner English) the CPU searched its database to identify all passings reported between 1 March 2015 and 28 February 2018 where the deceased was recorded as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person, according to the Form 83 and/or Application for Release of a Deceased Person. Passings were classified according to whether the flagging appeared in:

- the Form 83 only;
- the Application for Release of a Deceased Person only; or
- both the Form 83 and the Application for Release of a Deceased Person.

The CPU identified 211 passings that were flagged as being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Among these:

- 50.7% of the deceased were flagged as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders on the Form 83 but not the Application for Release of a Deceased Person.

- 26.5% of the deceased were flagged as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders on the Application for Release of a Deceased Person but not the Form 83.
- 22.7% of the deceased were flagged as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders on both the Application for Release of a Deceased Person and the Form 83.

These statistics underscore the ongoing challenge of identifying Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people among the passings reported to the CCOV.

B2.2 Coronial case file

The Koori Unit and CPU is aware of several individual passings where both the Form 83 and the Application for Release of a Deceased Person indicate the deceased was neither an Aboriginal nor a Torres Strait Islander person, but the material in the Coronial case file contradicts this.

B2.3 NCIS

The CPU extracted from the NCIS, the case numbers for all Victorian passings between 1 March 2015 and the present where the deceased was coded as being an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person. There were 63 such passings, which is substantially lower than the 232 passings flagged via the Form 83 and/or the Application for Release of a Deceased Person.

A reason for the discrepancy might be that a number of relevant passings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have not yet been coded on the NCIS. The CPU notes that the “Indigenous origin” is only coded on the NCIS after the case is finalised by the coroner.

For each of the 63 NCIS cases, the CPU checked the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander coding on the Form 83 and Application for Release of a Deceased Person, and established the following:

- In 51 (81%) of the 63 passings, the deceased was flagged as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander on the Form 83 or the Application for Release of a Deceased Person, or both.
- In the other 12 passings (19%), the deceased was not flagged as an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander on either the Form 83 or the Application for Release of a Deceased Person.

B3. The challenge of identification

The above discussion highlights that identifying suicide passings of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is an ongoing challenge for the CCOV. Information sources can be inconsistent, and the reasons for discrepancies are seldom obvious.

Additionally, the nature of the task must be considered. To be an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person is a matter of identity. When a person has died, that person cannot be asked about his or her identity, and therefore we are left only with secondary sources: what other people know about the deceased, and what is recorded in medical records and legal and other documents. These secondary sources are an inadequate substitute for what people can tell us about who they are and how they identify themselves.

However, the CPU notes that the establishment of the Koori Family Engagement Coordinator role at the CCOV has enhanced the identification of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whose passings are reported to the Court, as families have increased confidence in identifying their loved ones as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people due to improved cultural appropriateness in CCOV processes.