

Coroners Court of Victoria

Experience of family violence among people who suicided,
Victoria 2009-2016

30 July 2024

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1. Purpose

The Coroners Court of Victoria (the Court) prepared this data summary in response to a request from Prof Anne Summers AO, to assist the Expert Panel conducting the rapid review of evidence-based approaches to prevent gender-based violence.

This data summary provides an overview of Victorian Suicide Register (VSR) data the Court holds regarding the experience of family violence among people who suicided in Victoria. Section 2 introduces the VSR and its two components: the core dataset and the enhanced dataset. The core dataset includes basic information on all suicides reported to the Court between 2000 and the present. The enhanced dataset includes more detailed information about the contexts in which the suicides occurred, but is only available for cases during the period 2009-2016 at present because of intensive resource requirements for coding. The enhanced dataset is where information about the experience of family violence is coded. Therefore, the data presented in Sections 3 and 4 of this data summary spans the period 2009-2016.

On 25 July 2024, Prof Anne Summers AO further requested that the proportion of suicides where the deceased had experienced family violence be presented by age group. This data is presented in Attachment A and Attachment B.

2. The Victorian Suicide Register

The Victorian Suicide Register (VSR) is the Court's central repository of coded data on suicides investigated by Victorian coroners. This section provides an overview of VSR processes for suicide case identification, coding core and enhanced datasets, and capturing information about the experience of family violence.

2.1. Death report

Section 4 of the *Coroners Act 2008 (Vic)* requires that all Victorian deaths from suspected non-natural causes (including all suspected suicides) are reported to the Court for investigation. In most cases,¹ the death is reported by a Victoria Police member who attends the location of the fatal incident to speak to witnesses, document the scene, and undertake initial investigations. This reporting member submits the Police Report of Death for the Coroner (generally referred to as the Form 83) to the Court usually on the same day the deceased was found.

The Form 83 includes a range of standard information: the deceased's name and address; occupation; sex, age and date of birth; whether the deceased was known to be an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander person; name and contact details for next of kin; the deceased's dentist and usual treating doctor; where and when the deceased was last seen alive; and where and when the deceased was found dead or dying. Not all information may be known at the time when the Form 83 is prepared.

The Form 83 also includes a summary of the circumstances in which the death occurred. The summary is an unstructured free-text narrative containing whatever information the reporting police member can ascertain and believes might be relevant, based on initial attendance at the scene of death and speaking with witnesses. The detail and accuracy of information contained therein is dependent on what can be established at the time. Some summaries include extensive accounts of the events leading up to death as related by (for example) family members, acquaintances, treating medical practitioners, and through suicide notes found at the scene. In other cases, particularly where the deceased's identity cannot initially be ascertained, the summary of circumstances may be little more than a description of the scene of death.

2.2. Identifying suicides among reported deaths

The Court runs a prospective death surveillance program to capture information about every death reported to the Court. When a death is reported, the Court's trained staff review the Form 83 text and any other available information (for example notes on the electronic case record) and code basic information about the deceased:

- Name.
- Sex.

¹ One exception is a death that was not initially reported to the Court, but was subsequently reported when the Registry of Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria reviewed the death certificate and identified a cause of death that may indicate it was reportable. Another exception is certain types of falls-related deaths in older people where there is no family or coronial concern about the circumstances in which the fall occurred.

- Age.
- Date of birth.
- Address where the deceased usually resided.
- Address where the fatal incident occurred.
- Evidence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity.
- Summary of circumstances from the Form 83.

Additionally, Court staff code information about the deceased's likely intent and the mechanism of death, based on the available material and using a modified version of the ICD-10 Chapter XX external causes of morbidity and mortality classification system. If the death is identified to be a possible or probable suicide, it is added immediately to the VSR.

2.3. VSR core dataset

The VSR core dataset encompasses the basic information that is available to coders when the death is first reported to the Court or shortly thereafter. The standard information recorded for all deaths in surveillance (name; sex; age; date of birth; address where the deceased usually resided; address where the fatal incident occurred; evidence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity; and summary of circumstances from the Form 83) is part of the VSR core dataset, together with the following:

- Suicide method.
- Latitude and longitude of usual residence and fatal incident locations.
- Deceased intent.
- The type of location where the fatal incident occurred.

The VSR core dataset is available for all suicide deaths reported to the Court between 1 January 2007 and the present. The core dataset is maintained as part of the prospective death surveillance program, which means there is usually only a 24 hour delay (or less) between a possible suicide being reported and its inclusion - with core data coded - in the VSR.

2.4. VSR enhanced dataset

The VSR enhanced dataset encompasses the information that is usually available in a sufficiently reliable and detailed form only after the Court has received the coronial brief of evidence and any other relevant material the investigating coroner has requested. Binary, categorical and free-text information is gathered across nine main areas:

- Socio-demographics including the deceased's employment status and usual occupation, relationship status, country of birth, whether the deceased identified as an LGBTIQ+ person.
- Physical health including any serious physical illness, injury and/or pain condition the deceased was experiencing.
- Mental health including any diagnosed or suspected mental illness, and any contact with health services for mental health related issues within six weeks and/or 12 months of death.

- Intent including the presence (and contents) of suicide notes or similar, verbal indicators of intent, and past suicidal ideation and self-harming behaviour.
- Interpersonal stressors including exposure to suicide of another person; death of a partner, family member, friend or acquaintance; separation from and/or conflict with partner; conflict with family members or friends; and experience of interpersonal violence (as perpetrator and/or as victim).
- Contextual stressors including work-related stressors; financial stressors; legal stressors; stressors pertaining to sexuality and gender; experience of isolation; and substance misuse and abuse.
- Contacts with government and non-government services and the legal system (including Victoria Police, Courts and Corrections Victoria).
- Toxicological profile including detection of alcohol, pharmaceutical drugs and illegal drugs in postmortem and antemortem toxicology.
- Information specific to the suicide method used, such as (for example) the ligature point and ligature used in a hanging; the source of the nitrogen used in a suicide by inhalation of irrespirable atmosphere; and how the train track was accessed in a rail suicide.

The VSR enhanced dataset is resource-intensive to maintain; a trained and experienced VSR coder requires on average two to three hours to code the enhanced variables for a single death. At June 2024, enhanced dataset coding has been completed for all Victorian suicide deaths that occurred between 1 January 2009 and 31 December 2016. Enhanced coding of 2017 suicide deaths is underway, but there are challenges in progressing this because of resourcing issues.

2.5. Data specifically relating to experience of family violence

Experience of family violence (encompassing both intimate partners and other family members) is coded within the VSR enhanced dataset.

The VSR contains a field called “Violence between deceased and partner” to record whether there was any evidence of family violence between the deceased and a current or former intimate partner. The instructions for the VSR coder to check this field are deliberately broad to ensure that all types of family violence are captured:

Code any behaviour between the deceased and a current or former partner that would be considered family violence according to the Family Violence Protection Act 2008 (Vic).

There is no time restriction on when the family violence may have occurred; any evidence of experiencing family violence involving an intimate partner at any time in the past is sufficient to check this field. If the field is checked, the VSR coder then must code two further fields relating to the direction of the family violence (noting these fields are not mutually exclusive):

- Check the “Family Violence partner - victim” field if the deceased was the victim of family violence perpetrated by an intimate partner.
- Check the “Family Violence partner - perpetrator” field if the deceased perpetrated family violence against an intimate partner.

Additionally, the VSR coder must add free-text notes in the VSR to describe whatever evidence is available regarding the family violence: for example the nature of the violence; any times and dates

known for incidents of violence; the impact of the violence; involvement of police, Courts and other services in responding to the violence; and so on.

The VSR contains similar fields to capture evidence regarding experience of family violence between the deceased and family members other than intimate partners: a general “Violence between deceased and family member” field and two more specific fields capturing the direction of any violence, with free-text notes to record known details.

2.6. Revisions to VSR data

The contents of the VSR are continually revised and updated as Coroners’ investigations progress and new information becomes available regarding deaths. Sometimes a death that was initially identified as a probable suicide and included in the VSR, may be removed because further investigation reveals it was not a suicide. Likewise, a death not initially flagged as suicide might be added when evidence is gathered to demonstrate that it resulted from intentional self-harm. Therefore, VSR data always reflects the current knowledge of suicide in Victoria only at the moment when the data was extracted. A report based on a VSR extract done at another time might contain different data.

2.7. Limitations

VSR data is coded with reference to the material gathered in the coroner's investigation. The amount and nature of material available to VSR coders in any death is dependent on how the coroner conducted the investigation and what material the coroner requested. In some investigations, a coroner might obtain multiple witness statements and medical records and hold an inquest to examine the circumstances of death. Other investigations might be completed with a single witness statement and no medical records to hand.

This limitation means the amount and depth of information available to record in the VSR can vary substantially from case to case. Regarding family violence, for example, there may be cases where clear evidence exists that a person experienced family violence, but little information is available for coding about the family violence history itself. The possibility also exists that information about experience of and exposure to family violence in secondary sources such as witness statements and police reports is not accurate and complete, with (for example) misidentification of perpetrators and victims.

On a related point, a limitation of relying on secondary sources is that they are an inadequate substitute for what people can tell us about the nature of their experiences of violence, and the impacts that these experiences have had upon them. Secondary sources are also of limited utility when considering important prevention information that relates the people’s identity and conception of self: for example gender, sexuality, cultural identity, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity, and disability.

3. Experience of family violence in Victorian suicides

As noted in Section 2.4 above, the VSR enhanced dataset is currently available for Victorian suicides that were reported between 2009 and 2016. The enhanced dataset fields pertaining to family violence context were extracted for all suicides reported during this period, and the data collated to produce the following insights into family violence and suicide in Victoria.

3.1. Evidence the deceased experienced family violence

Among the 4790 Victorian suicides recorded in the VSR which occurred between 2009 and 2016, there was evidence in 1172 suicides (24.5%) that the deceased had ever experienced family violence. Table 1 shows that evidence the deceased had experienced family violence was identified in a higher proportion of suicides among females (28.2%) than males (23.2%).

Table 1: Number and proportion of suicides by evidence the deceased had ever experienced family violence, Victoria 2009-2016.

Evidence the deceased had experienced family violence	Male		Female		All cases	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Evidence identified	834	23.2	338	28.2	1172	24.5
No evidence identified	2743	76.3	850	71.0	3593	75.0
Evidence unclear	16	0.4	9	0.8	25	0.5
Total	3593	100.0	1197	100.0	4790	100.0

In 25 of the 4790 suicides (0.5%) there was evidence of a possible family violence context, but insufficient detail to confirm the nature of the context.

3.2. Deceased relationship to family violence

Among the 1172 suicides where there was evidence the deceased had experienced family violence, the deceased were divided into three mutually exclusive groups based on their relationship to the family violence: the “perpetrator only” group (for those who had only ever perpetrated family violence but had not been a victim of family violence), the “victim only” group, and the “both victim and perpetrator” group.

Table 2: Number and proportion of suicides among people who had experienced family violence, by deceased relationship to the family violence, Victoria 2009-2016.

Deceased relationship to family violence	Male		Female		All cases	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Perpetrator only	543	65.1	54	16.0	597	50.9
Victim only	160	19.2	210	62.1	370	31.6
Both victim and perpetrator	131	15.7	74	21.9	205	17.5
Total	834	100.0	338	100.0	1172	100.0

Table 2 shows that in just over half of cases (50.9%) the deceased had only ever been a perpetrator of family violence. There was a substantial difference in proportion by sex: 65.1% of the males were in the perpetrator only group, compared to 16.0% of females. Most females (62.1%) were in the victim only group.

The 205 deceased (131 male, 74 female) who were both victims and perpetrators of family violence are challenging to describe in a basic overview of this type, because many combinations of relationships to family violence are found among them, including intersection across both intimate partner and other family relationships.

For purposes of the following analysis they will not be treated as a separate group, but instead will be combined with other two groups as follows:

- Suicide of family violence perpetrators: 802 suicides, comprising the 597 deceased who were perpetrators only of family violence, plus the 205 deceased who were both victims and perpetrators of family violence.
- Suicide of family violence victims: 575 suicides, comprising the 370 deceased who were victims only of family violence, plus the 205 deceased who were both victims and perpetrators of family violence.

3.3. Suicide among family violence perpetrators

Among the 802 deceased who were family violence perpetrators, there were differences by sex in the people against whom they perpetrated violence. Table 3 shows the male deceased primarily perpetrated family violence against their partners only (383 cases, 56.8%) whereas the female deceased were more evenly distributed between those who perpetrated violence against partners only (56 cases, 43.8%) and other family members only (59 cases, 46.1%).

Table 3: Number and proportion of suicides among family violence perpetrators, by people against whom violence was perpetrated, Victoria 2009-2016.

People against whom the deceased perpetrated the violence	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Partners only	383	56.8	56	43.8	439	54.7
Other family members only	142	21.1	59	46.1	201	25.1
Both partners and other family members	149	22.1	13	10.2	162	20.2
Total	674	100.0	128	100.0	802	100.0

A higher proportion of men (22.1%) than women (10.2%) perpetrated violence against both partners and other family members.

3.4. Suicide among family violence victims

Among the 575 deceased who were family violence victims, differences in proportion of suicides by sex and perpetrator identity were pronounced.

Table 4: Number and proportion of suicides among family violence victims, by who perpetrated the violence, Victoria 2009-2016.

People who perpetrated the violence against the deceased	Male		Female		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Partners only	69	23.7	125	44.0	194	33.7
Other family members only	203	69.8	101	35.6	304	52.9
Both partners and other family members	19	6.5	58	20.4	77	13.4
Total	291	100.0	284	100.0	575	100.0

Table 4 shows that among male victims of family violence, 69.8% had experienced family violence perpetrated by family members but not partners; this compared to 35.6% of the female victims of family violence. In contrast, 44% of the female family violence victims had experienced family violence perpetrated by partners only (compared to 23.7% in the male group). Additionally, a higher proportion of females (20.4%) than males (6.5%) experienced family violence perpetrated by both partners and other family members.

3.5. Suicide among those who were both victims and perpetrators

As already noted in Section 3.2, the complexities in the relationships to family violence among those who were both victims and perpetrators of family violence mean that data on this group is difficult to present and explain in a summary of this kind. However, the Court wishes to highlight one notable aspect of the data.

Among the 131 males who were both victims and perpetrators of family violence, in 92 cases (70.2%) they were the victims of family violence perpetrated by family members, and in 106 cases (80.9%) they perpetrated family violence against partners. VSR coders have noted anecdotally a cohort of suicides where males experienced family violence as children (including being exposed to family violence between their parents) and then perpetrated family violence against partners as adults; understanding how the intergenerational reproduction of family violence may intersect with suicidality may produce insights for prevention of both suicide and family violence.

4. Family violence intersection with other stressors

The coded data on the deceased's experience of family violence can be combined with other information coded into the VSR enhanced dataset to explore how the experience of family violence intersects with a range of stressors and factors. This section presents some sample tables to demonstrate the types of insights that might be produced.

4.1. Diagnosed mental illness

Table 5 shows the number and proportion of people who suicided in Victoria between 2009 and 2016 and who had ever been diagnosed with mental illness. This data is collated for three groups: all Victorian suicides (4790 suicides including 3593 males and 1197 females), suicides of family violence victims (575 suicides including 291 males and 284 females), and suicides of family violence perpetrators (802 suicides including 674 males and 128 females).

Table 5: Number and proportion of suicide deceased who experienced diagnosed mental illness, Victoria 2009-2016.

Prevalence of diagnosed mental illness	Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%
All Victorian suicides	1873	52.1	842	70.3
Victims of family violence	211	72.5	222	78.2
Perpetrators of family violence	399	59.2	107	83.6

Overall, 52.1% of males who suicided (1873 of 3593) and 70.3% of females (842 of 1197) had a history of diagnosed mental illness. These proportions were higher among those who experienced family violence, including both victims and perpetrators, than among all Victorian suicides.

4.2. Financial stressors

Financial stressors are recorded in the VSR enhanced dataset where there is any evidence of any stress or harm relating to the deceased's financial situation: for example high debts, loss of money, inability to pay mortgage or bills or afford other costs of living, and gambling-related harms. Table 6 shows that the prevalence of financial stressors was higher among those who experienced family violence, than among all Victorian suicides; this was found for both males and females.

Table 6: Number and proportion of suicide deceased who experienced financial stressors, Victoria 2009-2016.

Prevalence of financial stressors	Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%
All Victorian suicides	1275	35.5	355	29.7
Victims of family violence	138	47.4	112	39.4
Perpetrators of family violence	301	44.7	48	37.5

4.3. Legal stressors

Legal stressors are recorded in the VSR enhanced dataset where there is any evidence that the deceased's involvement in legal processes (both criminal and civil, and including outcomes of legal processes such as divorce settlements and child custody) caused stress to the deceased. Table 7 shows that the prevalence of legal stressors was higher among those who experienced family

violence, than among all Victorian suicides; and further that the prevalence was higher in perpetrators than in victims of family violence, and in males than females.

Table 7: Number and proportion of suicide deceased who experienced legal stressors, Victoria 2009-2016.

Prevalence of legal stressors	Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%
All Victorian suicides	1046	29.1	238	19.9
Victims of family violence	134	46.0	102	35.9
Perpetrators of family violence	408	60.5	70	54.7

4.4. Substance misuse

Substance misuse is recorded in the VSR enhanced dataset where there is evidence that the deceased's substance use was associated with harms of any type: for example dependence, impact on relationships or employment, criminal justice involvement, or so on. Table 8 shows that the prevalence of substance misuse was higher among those who experienced family violence, than among all Victorian suicides.

Table 8: Number and proportion of suicide deceased who experienced substance misuse, Victoria 2009-2016.

Prevalence of substance misuse	Male		Female	
	N	%	N	%
All Victorian suicides	1819	50.6	491	41.0
Victims of family violence	216	74.2	178	62.7
Perpetrators of family violence	500	74.2	88	68.8

5. Future opportunities to develop the data

The data presented here assists to understand what proportion of people in Victoria experienced family violence before they suicided, as well as some basic dimensions of the experience: who were the perpetrators and victims of family violence, and what relationships existed between perpetrators and victims. In interpreting the contents of this Data Summary, though, it is crucial to keep in mind that the data in no way bears on the nature of the family violence experience, which is a highly complex area with strongly gendered dimensions.

The Court acknowledges there are many areas where VSR data on the experience of family violence could be developed to generate a deeper understanding of how family violence and suicide intersect, and what interventions might reduce the burden of suicide among those who experience family violence in Victoria.

Persistent resourcing constraints mean the VSR enhanced dataset (in which experience of family violence is captured) is systematically coded only for the period 2009 to 2016. If the Court was funded to continue with this coding through to the present, the Court would be able to produce more current data on the experience of family violence in Victorian suicides. Additionally, having a dataset spanning from 2009 through to the present would enable analysis of how the intersection between family violence and suicide has evolved over time.

In 2015 the Court collaborated with researchers from the University of Melbourne to conduct a detailed analysis of Victorian suicides between 2009 and 2012 where there was evidence the deceased had been exposed to interpersonal violence.² The researchers used the VSR as the data source, and coded further information about interpersonal violence that is not currently part of the VSR's enhanced dataset, but which would potentially be highly beneficial:

- The mode of violence (for example physical, sexual, psychological).
- The proximity of violence to the suicide.
- People with whom the deceased had discussed the violence prior to suicide.

This and other information may assist to understand better the relationship between family violence and suicidal behaviour, and elucidate issues such as how childhood experience of family violence and abuse impacts wellbeing and suicidality. However the Court would require resourcing to capture in VSR coding.

2 The research was published as Maclsaac M, et al, "Prevalence and Characteristics of Interpersonal Violence in People Dying From Suicide in Victoria, Australia", *Asia Pacific Journal of Public Health*, vol 30(1), 2018, pp.36-44.

Attachment A

A.1. Evidence the deceased experienced family violence by age

Table 9 shows the number and proportion of the 3593 males who suicided in Victoria between 2009 and 2016 by age group and whether they had ever experienced any family violence.

Table 9: Number and proportion of male suicides by age group and evidence the deceased had ever experienced family violence, Victoria 2009-2016.

Age group of males	Evidence identified		No evidence identified		Evidence unclear	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Under 18	22	2.6	58	2.1	0	0.0
18 to 24	97	11.6	271	9.9	3	18.8
25 to 34	184	22.1	479	17.5	3	18.8
35 to 44	225	27.0	485	17.7	4	25.0
45 to 54	172	20.6	539	19.7	4	25.0
55 to 64	84	10.1	415	15.1	2	12.5
65 and over	50	6.0	496	18.1	0	0.0
Total	834	100.0	2743	100.0	16	100.0

Table 10 shows the number and proportion of the 1197 females who suicided in Victoria between 2009 and 2016 by age group and whether they had ever experienced any family violence.

Table 10: Number and proportion of female suicides by age group and evidence the deceased had ever experienced family violence, Victoria 2009-2016.

Age group of females	Evidence identified		No evidence identified		Evidence unclear	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Under 18	17	5.0	32	3.8	0	0.0
18 to 24	44	13.0	76	8.9	0	0.0
25 to 34	79	23.4	124	14.6	3	33.3
35 to 44	80	23.7	141	16.6	4	44.4
45 to 54	69	20.4	188	22.1	1	11.1
55 to 64	34	10.1	137	16.1	1	11.1
65 and over	15	4.4	152	17.9	0	0.0
Total	338	100.0	850	100.0	9	100.0

Attachment B

B.1. Deceased relationship to family violence by age

Table 11 shows the number and proportion of the 832 males who suicided in Victoria between 2009 and 2016 and had experienced family violence by age group and the deceased's relationship to the family violence.

Table 11: Number and proportion of male suicides among people who had experienced family violence, by age group and deceased relationship to the family violence, Victoria 2009-2016.

Age group of males	Perpetrator only		Victim only		Both victim and perpetrator	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Under 18	9	1.7	7	4.4	6	4.6
18 to 24	56	10.3	24	15.0	17	13.0
25 to 34	125	23.0	26	16.3	33	25.2
35 to 44	146	26.9	39	24.4	40	30.5
45 to 54	117	21.5	33	20.6	22	16.8
55 to 64	53	9.8	23	14.4	8	6.1
65 and over	37	6.8	8	5.0	5	3.8
Total	543	100.0	160	100.0	131	100.0

Table 12 shows the number and proportion of the 338 females who suicided in Victoria between 2009 and 2016 and had experienced family violence by age group and the deceased's relationship to the family violence.

Table 12: Number and proportion of female suicides among people who had experienced family violence, by age group and deceased relationship to the family violence, Victoria 2009-2016.

Age group of females	Perpetrator only		Victim only		Both victim and perpetrator	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Under 18	3	5.6	9	4.3	5	6.8
18 to 24	8	14.8	27	12.9	9	12.2
25 to 34	10	18.5	49	23.3	20	27.0
35 to 44	10	18.5	43	20.5	27	36.5
45 to 54	17	31.5	45	21.4	7	9.5
55 to 64	4	7.4	26	12.4	4	5.4
65 and over	2	3.7	11	5.2	2	2.7
Total	54	100.0	210	100.0	74	100.0