

Covid-19 Unemployment may increase the risk of suicide in Aussies

The economic crisis caused by Covid-19 (corona virus) pandemic is pushing the poor to be more vulnerable; they risk becoming unemployed, homeless and consequently depressed. As a result of job losses during the lockdown period in Australia, the pandemic is pushing many men and women into unemployment and social isolation, which are major risk factors for suicide (Macdonald et al., 2005) Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre (BCEC) reported that over 1 million Australians would lose their jobs in next 12 months across the spectrum of industries such as hospitality, entertainment, tourism, transportation and construction. It is clear that many people in the lower income population cannot protect themselves by working from home.

Daily wage earners such as casual workers, taxi drivers and construction workers are the hardest hit group with the enforced lock down, which may force them to be homeless in few months. Workers from Tourism and entertainment industry are already being forced to stand down from jobs - Flight Centre alone has cut around 3,800 jobs across Australia (ABC News). The travel bans and flight cancellations by major airlines such as Qantas and Virgin Airlines are impacting more than 30,000 staff without an income for next few months. All these staggering figures are reminiscent of the Great Depression and many are panicking in isolation, which can lead to suicide ideation without a targeted support.

It is also concerning to see that Gender is playing a key role in this pandemic as men are dying more than women. White House COVID-19 Task Force director Dr Deborah Birx highlighted a "concerning trend" that men in all age brackets were becoming seriously ill from the virus at a higher rate than women, including younger males. Global Action for Men's Health (GAMH) reported that evidence from China suggesting that mortality rates from COVID-19 in men were almost twice as high as in women. The proportion of male deaths from the virus in Italy has been even higher: of the 12,428 deaths recorded by 31st March, 70% were male. This trend could be similar in Australia and represent the suicides in this country as manufacturing, construction, transport, mining and warehousing industries are male dominated (over 60% of workforce is Men) according to the



fact sheets by Workplace Gender Equality Agency statistics (WGEA) and Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS).

Temporary income support from government or emergency crisis support from helplines such as Beyond Blue or Lifeline may not address these issues, leaving the space for solutions such as the Situational Approach to Suicide Prevention, the focus of Men's Health Information and Resource Centre (MHIRC) at Western Sydney University. As Ms Christine Morgan, the CEO of National Mental Health Commission and National Suicide Prevention Adviser to Prime Minister says, addressing the risk factors such as unemployment, homelessness, food security and isolation is the only way to reduce suicides in Australia.

MHIRC has been the advocate for social determinants of suicide for the past two decades to focus on life situations along with mental health of people. This approach focuses on broader risk factors of suicidal ideation rather than medicalising the accumulated stress of people in crisis. It opens the doors for service providers to work collaboratively to reduce the burden on mental health services alone in a targeted and cost effective way. For example, The Shed in Mt Druitt has been successful in reducing the suicides in local community by addressing the needs of the local Aboriginal men in crisis with issues such as unemployment, relationship breakdown, family law and other risk factors.

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