

A national investment in youth suicide prevention



A National Investment in Youth Suicide Prevention

Federal Pre-Budget Submission

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Executive Summary

The rate of suicide in young Canadians is a very important – and tragic – indicator of our collective lack of effectiveness in meeting the mental health needs of our children and youth. Only 25% of children with a mental health problem receive the treatment they need, a situation that would be intolerable if we were talking about cancer.

Death by suicide among 15 to 24 year olds is the second leading cause of death in this age group. The rate among First Nations youth aged 10 to 19 years has been recorded as being more than four times the overall rate for Canada's young people. When compared internationally, Canada ranks poorly, with our suicide rate higher than many countries, including Italy, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Germany, Australia and Ireland.

The annual economic cost of suicide is approximately \$2.4 billion, ranking fourth among all injuries. This includes direct costs of about \$707 million, as well as indirect costs of \$1.7 billion. Further, the human costs of youth suicide that ripple throughout families, schools and whole communities are immeasurable.

In 2011 there were 528 suicides in Canada among those 10-24 years of age. A 24% decrease in youth suicide would result in the potential prevention of 127 deaths in a given year or over \$207 million in projected cost savings. Over 5 years, this could represent over a billion dollars in projected savings. The value of saving a young life, to the families and communities involved cannot be measured.

The federal government can help reduce the rate of youth suicide in Canada by funding a research demonstration project in 25 communities across the country that would support these communities to adopt a community based approach to youth suicide prevention, allowing researchers to evaluate and measure the effectiveness of community level interventions that will ultimately create, for the first time in Canada, an evidence-based model for youth suicide prevention in Canada.

The implementation of this community-based model will respect local context so that there is a strong sense of community ownership that is essential for sustainability, and which is particularly important in First Nations, Inuit and Metis communities.

Experts across Canada have helped to build this proposal and are poised for action.

RECOMMENDATION

Given the promise of a community based approach to suicide prevention, and the need for Canada to address youth suicide prevention in a more rigorous and evidence-based manner, it is recommended that the federal government invest \$100 million over five years in a National Youth Suicide Prevention Fund. This money would be matched by an equal contribution from other levels of government and/or the private or philanthropic sector.

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Youth suicide in Canada – Significant Economic and Life Impact

The rate of suicide in young Canadians is a very important – and tragic – indicator of our collective lack of effectiveness in meeting the mental health needs of our children and youth.

- Death by suicide among 15 to 24 year olds is the second leading cause of death in this age group (10.5 deaths per 100,000 young people).¹
- We lose three times more young Canadians to suicide than we do from all forms of cancer combined.²
- Up to 8% of youth may attempt suicide (~ 12% of female youth). About one third of these attempts (i.e., approximately 2.5% of youth) are deemed medically serious.³
- Self-reported rates of suicide ideation have been documented to be as high as 24%. This percentage is higher (up to 31%) for female youth.⁴
- The rate among First Nation youth aged 10 to 19 years has been recorded as being more than four times the overall rate for Canada's young people of the same age.⁵
- The annual economic cost of suicide is approximately \$2.4 billion, ranking fourth among all injuries. This includes direct costs (i.e., cost of health care services) of about \$707 million, as well as indirect costs (i.e., societal costs of lost productivity) of \$1.7 billion.⁶ The human costs of youth suicide that ripple throughout families, schools and whole communities are immeasurable.
- The average projected lifetime costs (medical and work loss) associated with the death by suicide of a youth aged 10-24 years is \$1,632,550.⁷ This does not include the indirect costs of the pain and suffering of families and communities associated with such a loss.

A Model for Youth Suicide Prevention in Canada

We must do more to prevent youth suicide in Canada. We know that diagnosed or undiagnosed mental illness has been documented in up to 90% of deaths by suicide.⁸ Evidence-based, community-wide specialized mental health services must be available to young people, particularly to those with increased suicidal risk.

The best evidence available today suggests that the greatest promise in youth suicide prevention and risk management is in:

- whole-community initiatives that integrate the efforts of individuals across sectors (i.e., mental health, education, health, juvenile justice, child welfare) and stakeholder groups including families and youth; and
- meaningful engagement of young people to promote health and wellbeing and decrease risky behaviours such as self-harm.⁹

One of the most promising models for suicide prevention is the Nuremberg Alliance against Depression (Nuremberg model).¹⁰ This model uses a four-level approach to integrate the whole community in addressing suicide risk and depression:

- 1) Building capacity for identification and intervention in primary care;
- 2) media and public awareness to increase awareness in health professionals and the population at-large;
- 3) training community facilitators to better identify and support those individuals at risk for suicide;
- 4) provide targeted supports for those at highest risk (depressed, previous suicide attempt).

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An important result of a two-year evaluation of the Nuremberg model was a 24% reduction in suicidal acts (death and suicide attempts) across an entire community. Results also suggested better outcomes for the younger end of the age continuum (i.e., under 40 years).¹¹ These results are so promising that this model is now being adopted more broadly across Europe.¹²

Communities across Canada are gradually mobilizing to develop and implement partial aspects of these approaches, but there is currently no effective mechanism for sharing community-derived knowledge nationally or for scaling up the best of prevention and treatment solutions across Canada. Further, important gaps still remain in understanding the measurable impact of community programs and processes in reducing death by suicide.

If Canada was to adopt a similar community-based approach to youth suicide, we could significantly reduce the number of suicides each year. In 2011 there were 528 deaths in Canada among those 10-24 years of age. A 24% decrease in youth suicide (based on data from the Nuremberg model) would result in the potential prevention of 127 deaths in a given year or over \$207 million in projected cost savings. Over 5 years, this could represent over a billion dollars in projected savings.

Investing in Youth Suicide Prevention in Canada

Given the promise of a community based approach to suicide prevention, and the need for Canada to address youth suicide prevention in a more rigorous and evidence-based manner, it is recommended that the federal government invest \$100 million over five years in a National Youth Suicide Prevention Fund (Suicide Prevention Fund).

This Suicide Prevention Fund would support communities across the country to adopt a community based approach to youth suicide prevention, it would allow researchers to evaluate and measure the effectiveness of community level interventions and will ultimately create, for the first time in Canada, an evidence-based model for youth suicide prevention in Canada. The project will respect the local context and culture of the community.

The Suicide Prevention Fund will make funds available, on a matching basis, to support and study community level suicide prevention efforts over a five year time frame. The matching funds would come from other levels of government, and/or the private or philanthropic sectors.

It is anticipated that at this funding level, (\$200 million assuming matching funds) it is possible to support and study the community based approach to youth suicide prevention in 25 communities across Canada for a five year period.

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The proposed Suicide Prevention Fund resources will allow for:

- Training in communities so that teachers, family doctors, coaches, friends and family members will know what to look for and how to access the right kind of help at the right time;
- Coordination of services across providers so that the path to help is clear and without barriers;
- Additional resources for the identification and support of young people at risk because of existing mental health problems (e.g. depression or previous suicide attempt) and/or the particular circumstances that might place them at risk (homelessness, LGBTTTQ, trauma);
- Early identification of mental health problems so that people do not suffer in silence and become overwhelmed beyond their ability to cope;
- Enhanced program evaluation to ensure that whatever is being done truly makes a difference; and
- Coordination of efforts and sharing of evidence nationally to ensure impact on local, provincial and national policy and practice.

A critical element to this project is the ability to document effective practices in youth suicide prevention at the community level. Specifically, we will seek to measure:

- Decrease in death by suicide and suicidal attempts
- Economic benefits
 - cost effectiveness and cost efficiency of early identification and whole community approach
- Reduced stigma (attitudes, changes in help-seeking behaviour)
- Increased community mobilization (better partnerships and use of existing community resources for suicide prevention)
- Evolution of a whole-community suicide prevention plan, strength of partnerships, role clarity, protocols and process tools, community co-investment.

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