



# **Investigation into family and domestic violence and suicide**

Presentation to Members of Parliament  
20 October 2022

**Ombudsman Western Australia**

# Acknowledgement of Country

- We acknowledge the Whadjuk Noongar people as the original custodians of the land on which our office sits.
- We pay our respects to their Elders past, present and future.



# Overview

- Methodology
- Understanding the impact of suicide and family and domestic violence
- The relationship between family and domestic violence and suicide
- The 68 women and children
- Key principles of trauma informed responses
- The need for trauma informed responses
- Recommendations

# Methodology

- We conducted an extensive literature review.
- We collected and analysed information and data from State government departments and authorities about 410 people who died by suicide.
- Using this information, we identified where State government departments and authorities had identified a woman or child who died by suicide as a victim of family and domestic violence.
- We examined the deaths of 59 women and 9 child victims of family and domestic violence who died by suicide in Western Australia (**the 68 women and children**).

# The relationship between family and domestic violence and suicide

There is a strong relationship between family and domestic violence and suicidality identified in the research literature, including in Australia.

- The Queensland Domestic and Family Violence Death Review and Advisory Board has identified that:
  - ‘apparent suicides contribute the largest number of domestic and family violence deaths each year in Queensland’ and
  - ‘intimate partner violence is a significant risk factor for suicide in female victim/survivors, with some studies suggesting women who have been abused by their intimate partners are almost four times more likely to experience suicidal ideation compared to non-abused women in the general population;’

# The relationship between family and domestic violence and suicide (continued)

- Almost half of female suicides in a New South Wales Domestic Violence Death Review study 'had a recorded or apparent history of domestic and family violence, relationship conflict or relationship breakdown' (49 per cent).
- Victorian research has identified that 'forty-two percent of women who died from suicide had a history of exposure to interpersonal violence.'

# The 68 women and children

The Office found that the 68 women and children who died by suicide were identified as victims of family and domestic violence in WA Police, courts and tribunals, WA Health, child protection and corrective services records, including:

- 59 women aged 18 or over at the time of their death;
- nine children aged under 18 at the time of their death;
- nine Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women and 3 children; and
- six boys under 18 who died by suicide and 3 girls.

Fifty-two of the 68 women and children resided in a major city at the time of their death, 9 resided in a regional area, and 7 resided in a remote or very remote area.

# Contact between the 68 women and children and WA Police

- Despite most family and domestic violence going unreported to government services, 43 of the 68 women and children had family and domestic violence related contact with WA Police between the introduction of family violence incident reports (**FVIRs**) in 2003 and their deaths (66 per cent). This is consistent with the research literature identifying experiences of family and domestic violence as a significant psycho-social risk factor for suicide.
- WA Police recorded a total of 520 FVIRs relating to the 43 women and children named in a FVIR by WA Police on one or more occasions prior to their death. The number of FVIRs relating to each woman and child ranged from one to 54, with an average of 12 FVIRs per person and a median of 4.



# Contact between the 68 women and children and WA Police (continued)

- Thirty-six of the women and children who died by suicide (84 per cent) had more than one occasion of family and domestic violence related contact with WA Police. Of these 36 women and children with multiple recorded occasions of family and domestic violence related contact with WA Police, 16 had more than 10 contacts (44 per cent).
- Forty-one of the 43 women and children known to have had family and domestic violence related contact with WA Police were identified as a victim of this violence in an FVIR. Of the 43 women and children who had family and domestic violence related contact with WA Police prior to their death, 32 (63 per cent) were identified as both a victim and as a person of interest or offender in FVIRs.
- Twenty-five of the 43 women and children had been named in a FVIR within 12 months of their death (58 per cent).

# Contact between the 68 women and children and WA Police (continued)

Additionally, 12 women among the 43 women and children known to have had family and domestic violence related contact with WA Police were also recorded as a suspected offender in FVIRs.

This finding was consistent with previous Australian research which found that women who do not present to Police and other support services in the submissive, passive and cooperative ways depicted in popular culture, including women who act in self-defence and those who turn to alcohol or substances because of abuse, can be misidentified as suspected perpetrators of abuse, particularly when there are 'mutual allegations of violence.'

# Use of restraining orders by the 59 women

- Twenty-eight of the 59 women were involved in restraining order proceedings prior to their death (47 per cent). These 28 women were identified in a cumulative total of 85 distinct restraining order applications.
- Nineteen women had been involved in restraining order proceedings on multiple occasions. Six women were involved in five or more restraining order applications.
- Of the 28 women that were named in a restraining order, 24 were named as a protected person (86 per cent).

# Use of restraining orders by the 59 women (continued)

- Eighteen of the 28 women for whom a restraining order was made, were named as a protected person in the last restraining order made prior to their suicide (62 per cent). Five of these women (17 per cent) had a restraining order naming them as a protected person made within 2 years of their suicide, which is likely to have been current at the time of their death.
- Each of the seven Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women were named as a protected person in restraining order proceedings prior to their death (100 per cent).
- All of the restraining orders for the seven Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women had been made more than 2 years prior to their death. Accordingly, none of the seven women were likely to have been protected by a restraining order at the time of their death.

# Contact between corrective services and the 68 women and children

The Office found that:

- Sixteen women and children had contact with corrective services
  - Eight of the 16 women and children who had contact with corrective services were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
- Most of the 16 women and children had contact with custodial and community-based corrective services, including:
  - Three women and 1 child had contact with Youth Justice Services and/or a juvenile detention facility during their childhood (25 per cent);
  - Eleven women had contact with Adult Community Corrections (69 per cent); and
  - Nine women had contact with an adult custodial facility (56 per cent).

# Contact between corrective services and the 68 women and children (continued)

- Six of the 11 women managed by Adult Community Corrections were identified in one or more WA Police family and domestic violence incident reports during their period of their management in the community.
- Five women known to corrective services died while on an active period of adult community management or during a custodial stay.
- Twenty-seven of the 68 women and children had contact with court counselling and support services prior to their death (40 per cent) on 411 occasions.

# Contact between hospitals and the 68 women and children

- Excluding hospital admissions where a person died by suicide, the Office identified that 55 of the 68 women and children (81 per cent) had one or more hospital admissions between 1 January 2012 and the date of their death.
- Further, the Office identified that 49 of the 55 women and children admitted to hospital were admitted on multiple occasions (89 per cent), with only 7 admitted once (13 per cent).
- Eleven of the twelve Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women and children, were admitted to hospital (92 per cent).
- Ten of the 11 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women and children were admitted to hospital on more than one occasion (91 per cent), and only one was admitted on a single occasion (9 per cent).

# Contact between hospitals and the 68 women and children (continued)

- Thirty-three of the 55 women and children who had been admitted to hospital, had been admitted on one or more occasions for mental health issues (60 per cent).
- Twenty-four of the 55 women and children who had been admitted to hospital, had been admitted on one or more occasions for intentional self-harm (44 per cent).
- Three of the 55 women and children admitted to hospital had a recorded diagnosis of suicidal ideation.



# Contact between hospitals and the 68 women and children (continued)

- Excluding attendance where a person died by suicide, 59 of the 68 (87 per cent) attended an emergency department on one or more occasions between 1 January 2012 and the date of their death.
- Further, most of the 59 women and children attended an emergency department on multiple occasions, with only nine attending an emergency department on a single occasion (15 per cent).
- Ten of the 11 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women and children known to have experienced family and domestic violence prior to their suicide, also attended an emergency department (91 per cent).
- Nine of the 11 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander women and children attended an emergency department on more than one occasion, and only one was attended an emergency department on a single occasion (10 per cent).

# Contact between hospitals and the 68 women and children (continued)

- Thirty-five women and children attended an emergency department on one or more occasions for mental health reasons (59 per cent) on 114 occasions.
- Twenty-three women and children had multiple recorded emergency department attendances for mental health reasons (40 per cent).
- Twenty-four of the 59 women and children that attended an emergency department, attended on one or more occasions for intentional self-harm (41 per cent).
- Twenty of the 59 women and children presented to an emergency department for reasons relating to suicidal ideation on 43 occasions (34 per cent).

# Contact between hospitals and the 68 women and children (continued)

- Thirty-four of the 59 women and children who attended an emergency department between 1 January 2012 and their death in 2017, presented at an emergency department within the 90 days prior to their death (50 per cent)
- Twenty of the 55 women and children admitted to hospital between 1 January 2012 and their death in 2017, were discharged from a hospital admission within the 90 days prior to their death.

# Contact between child protection services and 13 children and young women known to the Department of Communities

- The Department of Communities received information about the wellbeing of 13 children and young women who died by suicide in 201 interactions;
- All of the 13 children and young women known to the Department of Communities were the subject of multiple referrals;
- Four of the 13 children and young women known to the Department of Communities were the subject of a Child Safety Investigation as children and two children were in the care of the Chief Executive Officer at the time they died by suicide;

# Contact between child protection services and 13 children and young women known to the Department of Communities (continued)

- The Department of Communities recorded family and domestic violence as an issue in 66 of the 201 interactions relating to the 13 children and young women, while the Office identified family and domestic violence in 110 of the 201 interactions relating to the 13 children and young people;
- The Department of Communities recorded the outcome of 'not departmental business' or 'assessed as no further role' in 35 per cent of interactions where the Office identified family and domestic violence;
- Of the 110 interactions relating to the 13 children and young women where the Office identified family and domestic violence, the Department of Communities progressed to intake for additional actions on 26 occasions (27 per cent);
- Nine of the 13 children and young people known to the Department of Communities were first in contact with the Department as a child between the ages of 0 and 13;

# Contact between child protection services and 13 children and young women known to the Department of Communities (continued)

- Referrals to the Department of Communities regarding the 13 children and young women occurred most frequently at age one and between the ages of 14 and 17 years;
- Family and domestic violence related interactions for the 13 children and young women occurred most frequently between the ages of 10 and 13 years and again between the ages of 14 and 17 years; and
- Intake of concerns for the 13 children and young people by the Department of Communities occurred most frequently at ages 1 and 13. Intake of family and domestic violence related interactions occurred most frequently at age 1 and between the ages of 10 to 13 years.

# Key principles of trauma informed responses

- Trauma informed approaches to service provision are underpinned by five key principles:
  - **Safety:** Ensuring physical and emotional safety
  - **Trustworthiness:** Maximising trustworthiness through task clarity, consistency, and interpersonal boundaries
  - **Choice:** Maximising consumer choice and control
  - **Collaboration:** Maximising collaboration and sharing power
  - **Empowerment:** Prioritising empowerment and skill building

# The need for trauma informed responses

- In other Australian jurisdictions, significant work has been undertaken on trauma-informed responses.
- Certain Western Australian strategic frameworks recognise the association of family and domestic violence and suicide, but there is no identifiable cross-sectoral public sector guidance about what it means to be trauma informed.





# Recommendations

- Nine recommendations have been made about ways to prevent or reduce deaths by suicide of women and child victims of family and domestic violence
- We are pleased to inform you that the WA Police Force, Department of Justice, Department of Communities and Mental Health Commission have agreed to the recommendations.
- Our office will provide a report to Parliament on the implementation of the recommendations in 2023.