

THE ROLE OF ILLICIT AND PHARMACEUTICAL DRUGS IN NON-FATAL SUICIDE AND SELF-HARM AMBULANCE ATTENDANCES IN YOUNG AUSTRALIANS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

NAOMI BEARD¹, MICHAEL MCGRATH¹, ROWAN P. OGEIL^{1,2,3}, DEBBIE SCOTT^{1,2,3}

¹Turning Point, Richmond, Australia, ² Eastern Health Clinical School, Melbourne, Australia, ³Monash Addiction Research Centre, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Presenter's email: naomi.beard@easternhealth.org.au

Introduction and Aims: Suicide, self-harm and mental health were brought to the forefront of public health conversations throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In Australia, over 3,000 people die by suicide each year, and for young Australians (aged 15-24-years-old), suicide is the leading cause of death. Rates of intentional self-harm hospitalisations in young Australians have shown steady increase since 2008, and pharmaceutical drugs represent a key modality for self-harm amongst young adults. This study describes and characterises the role of illicit and pharmaceutical drugs in non-fatal suicide and self-harm behaviours in young Australians in the pre-pandemic and pandemic era (2018-2021).

Design and Methods: Quarterly snapshot data from the National Ambulance Surveillance System was used to describe the characteristics, and role of illicit and pharmaceutical drugs in non-fatal suicide and self-harm behaviours in young Australians aged 15 to 29 years in four jurisdictions. Both descriptive and trend analyses were conducted.

Key Findings: Increases in female non-fatal suicide and self-harm related attendances were observed in three jurisdictions. The 15-19-year-old age group accounted for the highest proportion of attendances. High proportions of pharmaceutical drug co-occurrence was observed in all jurisdictions. Increases in illicit drug co-occurrence was seen in Victoria and Tasmania.

Discussions and Conclusions: COVID-19 public health interventions varied in intensity and length across Australia, yet changes in substance use accompanied with self-harm and mental health presentations, were observed across all jurisdictions. Youth substance use and suicidal behaviours are intrinsically linked, and this study highlights the urgency in addressing youth mental health and substance use in parallel.

Implications for Translational Research: This study supports other Australian research suggesting that investment in alcohol and drug services targeted at youths could help curb further rise in suicidal behaviours, mental ill-health and concurrent substance use.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

This work was supported by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW).