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**Community-based Strategies to Address Youth Suicide:
Development, Implementation and Formative Evaluation**

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**A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
University of Auckland, 1995.**

Abstract

This thesis describes the Youth Suicide Prevention Project, the aims of which were to develop, implement, and evaluate community-based strategies to address youth suicide. The focus of the evaluation was formative and was designed to constructively influence all the components of the project. The overall goal of the project was to provide information likely to improve the health and wellbeing of young people and thereby contribute, in the long term, to a reduction in youth suicide. This project, which was undertaken by Ms Coggan over a period of 26 months, involved collaboration with the Mental Health Foundation, and included the participation of community groups and young people.

While several community-based strategies to address youth suicide were developed and implemented as part of this project, only three were central components of the Youth Suicide Prevention Project. The first strategy involved the use of a questionnaire designed to obtain information on the range and level of risk-taking behaviours occurring among young people and their perceptions of health-harming activities. The information obtained both assisted a local community to develop strategies to enhance the health and wellbeing of its young people and provided information to policy-makers on the extent of risk-taking behaviour and its association with self-harm.

The second community-based strategy was the development and trialing of a teaching resource for use in forms three and four. This resource (Mental Health Matters) was designed to provide students with an opportunity to acquire information and skills to better promote and protect their mental health. The final strategy involved the conduct of a community action programme focused exclusively on youth health. Included in this programme was the provision and dissemination of local information on youth health and the conduct of three workshops: i) developing a mentally healthy school; ii) improving the identification, referral and acute management of suicidal young people; and iii) a community activation workshop designed to allow a community to prioritise strategies to improve youth health.

Four aspects of formative input to the Youth Suicide Prevention Project are reported in this thesis: the developmental phase, the Youth Health and Risk-taking Survey, the Mental Health Matters programme, and the Youth Health Community Action Programme. This has involved the review of literature; the use of archival data and records; attendance at meetings; participant observation; the identification of evaluation procedures and methods; the design of data collection techniques; qualitative and quantitative data analyses including consultation with a statistician; and report preparation and timely dissemination both to the participants and to the wider community.

The main findings of this evaluation indicated: that adopting a range of 15-24 years for youth was not realistic; that the occurrence of youth suicide and attempted suicide was spread evenly within the North Health region; that young people and school personnel saw a need for health promotion strategies to be developed; that young people identified a need for information on how to help themselves and others in times of crisis; that young people at school would provide information on a range of risk-taking activities; that high levels of risk-taking were occurring among young people at school; that an association exists between certain risk-taking behaviour and self-harm; that the provision of local information on youth risk-taking behaviour could act as a stimulus for the development of community-based strategies to address these; that a curriculum based programme with a positive focus on mental health should, with modification, be implemented nationally; that there is a need for the wider community to have information to dispel the myths surrounding suicide and suicide ideation; and that it is possible to successfully conduct a community action project exclusively focused on the health needs of young people.

Major implications identified for future projects were the importance of providing relevant and local data to enable a community to develop strategies to address youth health issues and the need to further examine the high levels of risk-taking behaviours and the association of risk-taking behaviour and self-harm. This project also showed that teachers and students supported the further development of a curriculum-based programme called Mental Health Matters. This project also highlighted the need for an

ongoing process of interaction between the community and research-based knowledge to ensure that strategies proposed by the community are able to be implemented. Finally, while there is a need to focus on youth at risk, this thesis has demonstrated a need to provide the wider community with information and resources to dispel all the myths that surround suicide and suicide ideation.

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Contents

	Page
Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	iv
Contents	v
List of Tables	ix
List of Figures	x
List of Appendices	xi

Chapter One: Project Rationale

1.1	Overview	1
1.2	Definitions	3
1.3	Rationale for Project	4
	1.3.1 Occurrence of Youth Suicide	4
	1.3.2 Impact of Youth Suicide	7
	1.3.3 Economic Costs of Youth Suicide	12
	1.3.4 Conclusion	12
1.4	Rationale for Project Orientation	13
	1.4.1 Injury Prevention	13
	1.4.2 Health Promotion	18
	1.4.3 Health Promotion/Injury Prevention	23
1.5	Youth Suicide Prevention Project	25
	1.5.1 Project Aim	25
	1.5.2 Project Development	25

Chapter Two: Formative Evaluation & Outline of Project Methodology

2.1	Overview	28
Section One	Formative Evaluation	29
2.2	Rationale for Formative Evaluation Research Approach	29
2.3	Evaluation Issues of Community Action Projects	33
Section Two	Project Methodology	36
2.4	Research Orientation	36
2.5	Research Aims and Objectives	37
2.6	Research Evaluation Participants	38
	2.6.1 Involvement of Ms Coggan	38
	2.6.2 Involvement of Mental Health Foundation	39
	2.6.3 Involvement of Young People	40
	2.6.4 Involvement of Community Groups	40
2.7	Data Sources	41
2.8	Data Processing	41
2.9	Timeline and Outline of Major Research Activities	42
2.10	Summary	44

Chapter Three: Formative Research: Needs Assessments

3.1	Overview	46
3.2	Needs Assessment: Secondary Schools	47
	3.2.1 Introduction	47
	3.2.2 Methods	48
	3.2.3 Findings	49
3.3	Contact Directory: Youth Suicide Services	51
	3.3.1 Introduction	51
	3.3.2 Procedure	51
	3.3.3 Dissemination Activities	52
3.4	Area Analysis of Suicide & Attempted Suicides	54
	3.4.1 Introduction	54
	3.4.2 Methods	55
	3.4.3 Results	56
3.5	Implications of Needs Assessments for Project Planning	75
	3.5.1 Needs Assessment: Secondary Schools	75
	3.5.2 Contact Directory: Youth Suicide	76
	3.5.3 Regional Data on Suicide & Attempted Suicides	77

Chapter Four: Formative Research: Focus Groups with Youth

4.1	Overview	78
4.2	Methodology	79
	4.2.1 Sampling Design	80
	4.2.2 Conducting the Sessions	80
	4.2.3 Evaluation, Analysis and Dissemination of Findings	81
4.3	Findings	82
	4.3.1 Description of Focus Group Participants	82
	4.3.2 Pressures Faced by Young People	82
	4.3.3 Suicide: Is it an Issue for Young People	83
	4.3.4 Services/Resources Used by Young People	84
	4.3.5 Barriers to Utilising Existing Services/Resources	91
	4.3.6 Health Promotion/Prevention Strategies	92
	4.3.7 Debriefing Sessions/Follow-up	100
4.4	Summary and Implications	101

Chapter Five: Formative Research: Youth Health and Risk-taking Survey

5.1	Overview	104
5.2	Aims and Objectives	106
	5.2.1 Study Aim	106
	5.2.2 Objectives	106
5.3	Methodology	106
	5.3.1 Ethical Approval	106
	5.3.2 Sampling Procedures	107
	5.3.3 Development of Questionnaire	107
	5.3.4 Administration of the Questionnaire	108
	5.3.5 Data Analysis	110
5.4	Results	110
	5.4.1 Response Rates	110

	5.4.2 Demographic Characteristics	110
	5.4.3 Perceptions of Important Issues	111
	5.4.4 Road Safety	112
	5.4.5 Substance Abuse	115
	5.4.6 Sexual Behaviour	118
	5.4.7 Personal Safety	119
	5.4.8 Perceptions of Risk-taking Behaviours	123
	5.4.9 Examination of Relationship Between Risk-taking Behaviours and Self-harm	123
5.5	Discussion	126

Chapter Six: Formative Evaluation: Mental Health Matters

6.1	Overview	133
6.2	Development of Mental Health Matters (MHM)	134
	6.2.1 Context Surrounding the Development	134
	6.2.2 Development of Mental Health Matters	135
	6.2.3 Content of Resource	140
	6.2.4 Training Materials	142
6.3	Implementation of Mental Health Matters	142
	6.3.1 Teacher Development	142
	6.3.2 Implementation of MHM Programme	143
6.4	Impact Evaluation of Mental Health Matters	144
	6.4.1 Evaluation of Teacher Development Day	144
	6.4.2 Evaluation of MHM Programme	146
6.5	Conclusions and Recommendations	153
	6.5.1 Programme Development	153
	6.5.2 Programme Implementation	154
	6.5.3 Programme Evaluation	155
	6.5.4 Recommendations	156

Chapter Seven: Formative Evaluation: Case Study Youth Health Community Action Programme

7.1	Overview	158
Section One	The Programme	160
7.2	Programme Outline	160
7.3	Programme Components	161
	7.3.1 Selection of Community	161
	7.3.2 Initial Community Liaison	162
	7.3.3 Recruitment of Local Programme Co-ordinators	163
	7.3.4 Data Collection and Analysis	163
	7.3.5 Feedback and Dissemination	165
	7.3.6 Training Sessions	166
	7.3.7 Mental Health Matters	166
	7.3.8 Activation Workshop to Develop Plan	166
	7.3.9 Follow-up Phase	174
Section Two	Formative Evaluation	176
7.4	Formative Evaluation Outline	176
7.5	Formative Evaluation Activities	177
7.6	Summary of Evaluation Findings	181
	7.6.1 Youth Health Data	182
	7.6.2 Youth Health and Risk-taking Survey	182

	7.6.3 Focus Group Discussions	183
	7.6.4 Key Stakeholder Interviews	184
	7.6.5 Evaluation of Seminars	185
	7.6.6 Evaluation of Follow-up Phase	188
7.7	Discussion	190
7.8	Conclusion	195

Chapter Eight: Summary and Implications

8.1	Overview	197
8.2	Review of Project Aims	198
	8.2.1 Development	198
	8.2.2 Implementation	200
	8.2.3 Evaluation	202
8.3	Implications of the Youth Suicide Prevention Project	204
	8.3.1 Research Implications	204
	8.3.2 Policy Implications	207

References211
-----------------------------	-------------

Appendices224
-----------------------------	-------------

List of Tables

Table No	Title	Page
3.1	Suicide and Attempted Suicides Among Young People in the North Health Region, 15-24 Years of Age: Number and Rates/100,000 Population	58
3.2	Methods of Suicide and Attempted Suicide by Gender for 15-24 Years of Age in North Health region	59
3.3	Regional Analysis for Male Suicide/Attempted Suicide	61
3.4	Regional Analysis for Female Suicide/Attempted Suicide	64
5.1	No Helmet --- Bicycle	112
5.2	No Helmet --- Motorcycle	113
5.3	Driving Without a Licence	113
5.4	Involved in Crash	114
5.5	Drunk/Driving	114
5.6	Passenger with Drinking Driver	115
5.7	Current Regular Smokers	115
5.8	Drinking Alcohol (Weekly)	116
5.9	Drinking Five Drinks/Session	117
5.10	Cannabis (Weekly)	117
5.11	Not Always Using Contraceptives	118
5.12	Not Always Using Condoms	119
5.13	Being Physically Harmed	119
5.14	Doing Physical Harm	120
5.15	Being Harmed by Person Carrying Weapon	120
5.16	Carrying Weapon with Intent to Harm	121
5.17	Damaging or Stealing Property	121
5.18	Contemplating Self-harm	122
5.19	Attempting Suicide	122
5.20	Association Between Risk-factor Variables and Self-harm Ideation	125

List of Figures

Figure No	Title	Page
1.1	Age and Ethnic-specific Suicide Rates 1988-1992	6
3.1	Suicides for Males 15-24 years-Auckland Urban Area	62
3.2	Suicides for Males 15-24 years-Whangarei Urban Area	63
3.3	Suicides for Females 15-24 years-Auckland Urban Area	65
3.4	Suicides for Females 15-24 years-Whangarei Urban Area	66
3.5	Attempted Suicide for Males 15-24 years-Auckland Urban Area . .	70
3.6	Attempted Suicide for Males 15-24 years-Whangarei Urban Area .	71
3.7	Attempted Suicide for Females 15-24 years-Auckland Urban Area	73
3.8	Attempted Suicide for Females 15-24 years-Whangarei Urban Area	74
7.1	Graphic for Sexual Behaviour Section Youth Health and Risk-taking Questionnaire	194

List of Appendices

- 1 Copy of Cover/Contents Pages of 'Intentional Injury in New Zealand'**
- 2 Data Collection Form - Secondary Schools Needs Assessment**
- 3 Contact Directory of Services**
 - 3a Data Collection Form
 - 3b Sample of Contact Directory of Services
- 4 Interview Schedule Focus Group Discussions with Youth**
- 5 Youth Health and Risk-taking Survey**
 - 5a Youth Health and Risk-taking Questionnaire
 - 5b Frequency Tables of Results of Youth Health and Risk-taking Survey
- 6 Mental Health Matters programme**
 - 6a Background Consultation List
 - 6b Mental Health Matters Draft Manual
 - 6c Format of Teacher Development Day
 - 6d Data Collection Teaching Experience
 - 6e Feedback Sheet - Teacher Development Day
 - 6f Follow-up Interview Schedule - Teacher Development
 - 6g Teacher Feedback Form - Implementation Phase
 - 6h Student Feedback Form - Implementation Phase
 - 6i Frequency Tables of Quantitative Responses
- 7 Youth Health Community Action Programme**
 - 7a Seminar Outline 'Creating Mentally Healthy Schools'
 - 7b Seminar Outline 'Suicide Workshop'
 - 7c Seminar Outline 'Community Activation Workshop'
 - 7d Key Information Interview Questionnaire
 - 7e Interview Schedule Focus Group Discussions
 - 7f Feedback Sheet - Seminars
- 8 Abridged List of Activities**