

SUICIDE PREVENTION

SERIES: TAKING A STAND

EXPLORING THE ARMY'S INTERNATIONAL POSITIONAL STATEMENTS

Members of the International Moral and Social Issues Council (IMASIC) reflect on The Salvation Army's International Positional Statements.

STATEMENT OF POSITION

The Salvation Army believes that every possible means should be taken to prevent a person from intentionally taking his or her own life, or seeking the assistance of someone else to do so.

While suicide may be primarily a medical or mental health problem (among others), protective factors such as social support and connectedness play a significant role in its prevention.

Suicide prevention is everyone's business. Prevention may be a matter of a caring person with the right knowledge, being available at the right place at the right time.

Download the complete *International Positional Statement on Suicide Prevention* at salvationarmy.org/isjc/ips

The Salvation Army has been involved in suicide prevention work since as early as 1905, when General William Booth established its Anti-Suicide Bureau. The Army is credited as 'the first organisation in the world to provide suicide prevention programmes'¹ – a work that was, at that time, revolutionary. Although society in general had little knowledge of mental health or its link to suicide, the Army leapt into a ministry which saw it caring for people who were dealing with a whole array of social issues – and doing so with compassion and fervour.

In October 1922, *All the World* remarked that churches have their Sunday schools, sewing guilds and missionary societies, but whoever heard of one having an Anti-Suicide Bureau?² And as the Army pressed on with this work, it did so upon the backdrop of a wider Church which more often than not added to the trauma of the bereaved by emphasising the 'mortal sin' associated with taking one's life. In the early days of William Booth's Anti-Suicide Bureau 'taking a stand' against suicide involved recognising that nothing 'will be able to separate us from the love of God' (Romans 8:39).

This extravagant love – with which those of us who are followers of Christ are so familiar – is so revolutionary that it changes the discourse not only around life itself,

FOR REFLECTION

- * What does it look like for you to 'take a stand' against suicide in your context today?
- * In what ways can you, and those around you, embody the belief that 'all people – without exception – are of value to [God], holding a special place in his creation'?⁵
- * Is the topic of suicide openly discussed in our corps/centres or is it a taboo subject?
- * How can we actively support our youth workers in being a trustworthy discussion partner for young people with suicidal thoughts?

“The Army is credited as ‘the first organisation in the world to provide suicide prevention programmes’ ...”

but also around issues such as suicide. The Army's wholehearted belief in, and expression of, this limitless love sees it work to reduce the stigma around suicide and minister to those experiencing bereavement with compassion rather than criticism.

As *The War Cry* stated in 1907, '[Suicide] is on the increase in every land and among all classes',³ so too is suicide widespread today. Instances of suicide are increasing around the world, with the World Health Organization recently stating that almost 800,000 people die due to suicide per year – that is one person every 40 seconds.⁴ It affects people of all genders, cultures, socio-economic status and personalities. It is an issue that is not only still relevant, but perhaps even more relevant for us to take heed of in 2021. So, what does it look like for us to 'take a stand' against suicide today? »

MYTHS ABOUT SUICIDE

How can we help if we are worried about someone else? Understanding the facts can help you to help someone struggling to cope. Go to [samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/](https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/), the website run by the Samaritans, a UK-based charity that offers listening and support to people and communities in times of need.

In prisons, schools, hospitals and on the rail network, Samaritans are working with people who are going through a difficult time and training others to become Samaritans. Every life lost to suicide is a tragedy, and Samaritans' vision is that fewer people die by suicide.

ENDNOTES

¹ *International Positional Statement on Suicide Prevention*, [salvationarmy.org/.pdf](https://www.salvationarmy.org/.pdf)

² 'Suicides prevented and troubles eased', *All the World*, October 1922, p 35

³ 'The Commissioner', 'Anti-Suicide Bureau', *The War Cry*, 1 June 1907, p 9

⁴ who.int/teams/mental-health-and-substance-use/suicide-data

⁵ Ibid¹



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PERSONAL REFLECTION SUICIDE PREVENTION IS EVERYONE'S BUSINESS

Recently, upon chatting to the friend of a young man who had died by suicide, my heart ached – not only for this young man's family and the pain that his friends were feeling, but also for the overwhelming sense that this was not how things were meant to be. This sense – that this was not God's plan for this young man's life – stayed with me for days. I could not shake off the verse from Psalm 144 – 'Then our sons in their youth will be like well-nurtured plants' (v 12) – and the feeling that the life of this 'well-nurtured plant' had been unnaturally cut short. It is my firm belief that God had much more in store for this man's life, and that the world had had a hand in seeing it end early.

The Salvation Army's business is bringing God's Kingdom to earth. It strikes me then that in seeing 'life in all its fullness' become a reality for those who are contemplating suicide, part of our business is also working to prevent suicide.

It was my privilege for some years to work for The Salvation Army Hope for Life programme in Australia which ran from 2006 to 2017. The programme was designed to support those bereaved by suicide, under the leadership of Envoy Alan Staines (Order of the Founder). His passion for those contemplating suicide, and those bereaved by it, echoes General Booth's passion for the issue in the early 1900s,¹ and it continues today. He shares that 'For every suicide there are approximately 8 to 10 people – family, friends, work colleagues, school students – who are affected'.² These people are at

higher risk of taking their own lives than the general population.

There is a dire need for increased government and other investment in specialised suicide prevention and bereavement support services right around the world, and The Salvation Army must learn from medical and other professionals how best to care for those experiencing suicidal thoughts and the bereaved. However, as Salvationists, we must also recognise the call on our lives to be in deep relationship with those around us.

While The Salvation Army has a rich heritage of specialised suicide prevention programmes, we must ask ourselves if we have since become complacent on this issue. While the epidemic of suicide continues, we run the risk of becoming so used to hearing of suicides, or contemplation of suicide, that it becomes the norm. We must invest more, become more active in its prevention, be more deeply moved. Something which is so blatantly opposite to the Kingdom of God should personally offend us, moving us to action. As the IPS states – 'suicide prevention is everyone's business'.³

ENDNOTES

¹ 'The Commissioner', 'Anti-Suicide Bureau', *The War Cry*, 1 June 1907, p 9

² Esther Pinn, 'Shining Light into a Dark Place', [issuu.com/salvos/docs/pipeline-july-2011](https://www.salvos/docs/pipeline-july-2011), p 12

³ *International Positional Statement on Suicide Prevention* [salvationarmy.org/.pdf](https://www.salvationarmy.org/.pdf)

PERSONAL REFLECTION TO TALK CAN SAVE LIVES

Every single suicide is a tragedy that affects families and entire communities and has a long-lasting effect on those left behind. Suicides do not only occur in high-income countries, but they are a global phenomenon and affect all regions of the world. In fact, in 2019 more than 77 per cent of global suicides occurred in low-income and middle-income countries,¹ and suicides kill more people than malaria, breast cancer, war or homicide.² Suicides represent the tip of the iceberg, as the number of people who attempt or think about suicide is considerably higher. This makes suicide prevention a global task.

International studies show that tighter gun laws lead to a reduction in suicides. Switzerland has a militia army. This means that every male citizen is obliged to perform military service. It was also part of the tradition that members of the army kept their service weapons at home. This practice was restricted through various measures. As a result, suicides by firearms have fallen by almost 50 per cent since 2000 and their proportion has dropped from 27 to 18 per cent of all suicides.³

In many countries, suicide is on the increase among adolescents and young adults. Exposure to interpersonal trauma has been repeatedly linked with suicide risk. It is also known that substance use facilitates the transition from suicidal ideation to action. Evidence suggests further that youth and young adults are using social media platforms to communicate suicidal thoughts or intent.⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic

proved to be an additional risk factor for young people in 2020. An important strategy for facilitating the recognition of youth at risk of suicide is to train community members in a manner that is supportive and facilitates linkage to professional services. The Salvation Army is strongly involved in youth work in many countries. Through appropriate training of their youth workers, there is a significant potential for active suicide prevention in this age group.

Finally, I would like to point out that the possibilities of suicide prevention on an individual level should never be underestimated. Take action if you notice warning signs of suicide in a person around you. The first and most important step is to offer to talk to the person you are worried about. It is not true that people will harm themselves more if you talk to them about suicide. On the contrary – you can assume that just your open ear and your willingness to talk about suicidal intentions will offer relief. Those affected report that their suicidal thoughts diminished after they were able to talk to someone about it. They felt understood and less alone.

Supporting people in suicidal crises is not only a task for health professionals, but it is a task for society as a whole. Everyone can participate, be it as a family member, friend, work colleague or professional. To talk can save lives!

ENDNOTES

¹ [who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide)

² [who.int/publications/i/item/9789240026643](https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240026643)

³ obsan.admin.ch/de/indikatoren/suizid-und-suizidhilfe

⁴ King, C.A. et al., 'Emerging Trends in Adolescent Suicide Prevention Research', *Curr Opin Psychol*, 2018, 22:89-94



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PERSONAL REFLECTION BREAK THROUGH CULTURAL BARRIERS

On 22 February 2021, a local newspaper reported that a 38-year-old woman committed suicide by jumping from a height. I hear news reports about suicide almost every week. However, this incident caught my eye because the victim was a friend of mine whom I had met just recently. During that meeting, she appeared very normal. She seemed to have a positive outlook on life and even shared her successful career story. I couldn't believe the news that I was reading!

In 2019, statistics in Hong Kong showed a suicide rate of 13 per 100,000 people. A total of 974 deaths were recorded; an average of 2.6 people committed suicide every day. Among them 30.6 per cent were aged over 65.¹ These numbers reflect that the whole community is not doing good enough in suicide prevention.

Today, suicide is a major public health issue worldwide, but it is still a taboo topic in the Chinese community.² The Chinese culture is deeply infused by Confucian ethics. There is an idiom saying that 'family shames must not be spread abroad', similar to the English expression 'do not air your dirty laundry in public'. Such an attitude not only prevents people who feel suicidal from asking for help, but it also blocks friends around them from offering personal care or assistance because of the social norm of not getting involved in other people's family issues.

Suicide prevention is everyone's business because God treasures

every human life.³ Most people who commit suicide do not actually want to die, they are just unable to overcome the difficulties.⁴ As Christians, we need to break through any cultural barriers to care for people around us. The Bible teaches us in Galatians 6:2, 'Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.' If I'd been more active to care for my friend and shown more empathy with her, could I have prevented her from taking her life? I don't have the answer to that question, but I believe I have lessons to learn.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hong Kong Jockey Club Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention, Hong Kong University, [csrp.hku.hk/statistics/](https://www.csrp.hku.hk/statistics/) (Provisional figures for 2019)

² 95 per cent of the population in Hong Kong is Chinese. Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong, [byecensus2016.gov.hk/data/16bc-summary-results.pdf](https://www.byecensus2016.gov.hk/data/16bc-summary-results.pdf)

³ Genesis 1:27

⁴ Samaritans, 'Myths about suicide', [samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/](https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/)