

HIDDEN

# Why we're losing

Reporter **KATHY SUNDSTROM** looks at why troubled teens battling suicide are staying silent on the Coast

TRUBLED Sunshine Coast teenagers are avoiding vital crisis counselling because they know their school-based counsellors and teachers will have to report anything they are told to authorities.

In one recent instance, Coast students who watched a teenager cut his wrists in the classroom say they avoided seeking help because of the lack of confidentiality in the process.

One witness, who said three teenagers in her close-knit community had allegedly taken their own lives in the past 12 months, said the lack of confidential counselling in her high school was frustrating.

The teen, who wished to remain anonymous, said a fourth schoolmate was hospitalised after cutting his wrists in the classroom two weeks ago but classmates received only limited counselling.

While there was a youth counsellor and a chaplain at her school, she and many of her friends didn't feel comfortable accessing this service.

## Access is the key to crisis support

**T**HE Sunshine Coast has excellent suicide prevention programs available, such as StandBy and Head High, but teenagers or schools and community groups need to access them independently.

An Education Queensland spokesman said state schools were encouraged to implement Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programs for all age groups to safeguard against destructive behaviours, including self-harm and suicide.

The spokesman said schools

also had access to support services, and students were provided with "critical incident debriefing and counselling in the event of a traumatic incident".

Staff across Queensland were also being trained in an Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training program.

"However, information about suicide itself is not routinely provided to students because evidence suggests that this may in fact be harmful, particularly for a small number of vulnerable or at risk young people," he said.

Sunnykids CEO Chris Taylor said the government report highlighted the "contagion element" to suicide. He said the single most effective way of preventing this type of suicide is to have an effective therapeutic relationship.

"The difficulty is most therapeutic structures are not meeting the needs of the young person," Mr Taylor said.

The Head High program, run by Sunnykids, provides a space for young people to get together with the support of a practitioner. It runs on the first Friday of the

month at the CYMHS in Beach Road, Maroochydore.

It was founded by a group of young people who had lost loved ones to suicide. To attend the free session, contact Sunnykids 5479 0394.

StandBy also runs a 24-hour coordinated response. It can be reached on 5442 4277 or, for urgent help, contact 0407 766 961 or Lifeline Australia on 131 114 or Kids Helpline, 1800 551 800.



Her feelings echoed the findings of the recent Sunshine Coast Youth Partnership Youth Summit, which showed teens no longer knew who to approach for help.

A Coast chaplain has spoken out on the Child Protection Act, which forced him

and other support services to disclose information of at-risk behaviour, saying it was stopping children from being open about their problems.

A Queensland government report, Death of Children and Young People 2008-09, revealed the number of

teenage suicides was increasing, with Queensland having nearly double the national average.

The report highlighted the strong "contagion" element to suicide, with nine of the 15 who suicided in 2008-09 having a family member, close friend or communi-

ty member suicide or attempt suicide.

A third of these young people had "implied their intent to someone prior to their death".

The Commissioner for Children and Young People and Child Guardian, Elizabeth Fraser, said the results drew attention to the need for new and better ways of preventing youth suicide in

Queensland and has called for suggestions.

Sunshine Coast Youth Partnership chief executive Jody Tunnicliffe said the October youth summit showed teenagers were concerned about their privacy and about a stigma attached to approaching the school counsellor or chaplain.

"It came back really strongly in the mental health workshop that young people are saying they have

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## Sunshine Coast Regional Council

### Pest Survey Program

Council has resolved to conduct a pest survey program in accordance with Section 241 of the Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route Management) Act 2002 ("Act"), within the whole of the Sunshine Coast region to monitor or enforce compliance with the requirements of the Act in relation to declared pests (plants and animals). The whole of the local government area has been selected to allow Council's authorised persons to deal with complaints expeditiously, which is Council's policy.

The Pest Survey Program will commence 19 December 2009 and continue until 15 March 2010.

#### The purpose and scope for the program is:

- to monitor compliance with the Land Protection (Pest and Stock Route Management) Act 2002 in relation to declared pests;
- to aid in monitoring/mapping the distribution and spread of declared pests;
- to promote to landowners Best Practice (including that in accordance with Section 9 of the Act) in the treatment of declared pests; and
- to assist in the enhancement of community awareness in relation to declared pests.

These inspections will be conducted on urban and rural properties within the Sunshine Coast. A copy of the Pest Survey Program is available for inspection and/or purchase during the period of the program at Sunshine Coast Regional Council's Customer Contact Centres, Currie St, Nambour, Ocean St, Maroochydore, Omrah Avenue, Caloundra and Pelican Street, Tewantin.

A copy of the program may be purchased for a cost 80 cents per A4 page, or \$1.30 per A3 page.

For further information, please phone Council's Customer Contact Centre between 8.30am and 4.30pm on (07) 5475 7272.

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**KILLER**

# our troubled teens

## Drugs, suicide top youth concerns

RELAXING under a palm tree, Ruby Sullivan and Sam Nicol looked like they didn't have a care in the world yesterday as they took a break from teaching school children how to surf at Alexandra Headland.

But the average life of young Queenslanders is far from carefree, according to a survey, which lists drugs, suicide and body image as the biggest concerns for those aged from 11 to 24.

Mission Australia surveyed 8827 Queenslanders and found one in four respondents ranked drugs, suicide and body image as their top concerns

Drugs were ranked in the top three by 27.8% of respondents, followed closely by suicide (27%) and body image (25.6%).

Ms Sullivan, 18, and Ms Nicol, 24, agreed body image was a big concern for young people.

Ms Sullivan said she taught girls as young as 11 or 12 who were self-conscious. "You just hear them say 'I'm fat', or 'my legs are so fat'," she said.

In contrast, Ms Sullivan listed violence as one of her



**VIOLENCE AND THE FUTURE:** Surf instructors Ruby Sullivan and Sam Nicol name their fears. PHOTO: KARI BOURNE/187118

greatest concerns.

"I think violence is a massive problem. These days you see girls punching on. I'm worried when I go out at night that I might get bashed or glassed."

Ms Nicol said her biggest worry was her career.

"I just don't know what to do with my life," she said.

Dale Kleinschmidt, 18, who also teaches children surf skills through the Alex

Surf Club, agreed.

"Where my future is going is my biggest concern. I want to be able to get a proper job after I finish my university degree in sports science," he said.

Mission Australia's survey also found that the number of young people involved in organised sport or cultural activities had dropped by half.

— SARAH CRAWFORD

## Groups put cost at \$17b yearly

A JOINT submission to a Senate inquiry into suicide in Australia estimated the economic cost of suicide at \$17.5 billion a year.

Research conducted for a collaboration of suicide prevention organisations showed the total cost equated to \$795 per person annually, yet spending on the National Suicide Prevention Strategy is just 91 cents per head.

The cost does not take into account the social or human cost of suicide, where grief and trauma can have long-term and devastating effects on individuals and communities.

The submission is calling on all levels of government and the community to undertake significant action to help prevent what is a leading, but mostly preventable, cause of death.

As many as seven Australians die each day by suicide, and almost 180 attempts are made daily.

Among the recommendations, the group is calling for:

- ▶ A truly National Suicide Prevention Strategy
- ▶ A massive increase in spending by all levels of government and the community on suicide prevention, bereavement and postvention
- ▶ A greater emphasis on training, education and awareness nationwide
- ▶ Greater focus on making suicide hot spots, like bridges or cliff faces where people frequently take their own lives, safer.

concerns about accessing school-based support," Ms Tunnicliffe said.

"There is concern about lack of confidentiality, as well as the lack of discretion (because everyone would know when someone was seeking help)."

Ms Tunnicliffe said the health nurses, chaplains and teachers were caught in-between, because they were legally required to report safety or at-risk inci-

dents disclosed to them.

"They have to tell the young person as soon as they walk in the door 'I am mandated to report' and, of course, the young person then doesn't want to tell them anything," she said.

"There is no confidentiality, as the support workers have to report it."

The statements were supported by one Sunshine Coast school chaplain, who said teenagers would rather

hide their horror secrets of abuse or rape.

The chaplain, who also wished to remain anonymous, has worked with children of all ages for many years and said several chaplains knew of students who had been sexually abused but didn't "want to tell us" about it.

"And that's the situation for many children," the chaplain said.

"In 1999, when Anna Bligh

was family services minister, she brought in the Child Protection Act and policies making it that people have to immediately report if a child is at risk

"The kids know it and they won't come and talk about the sexual abuse or self-harm, as they know I will have to pass on the information."

The chaplain didn't believe the changes in the legislation had improved the

safety of children.

"Initially (the results) were a bit of a smokescreen, as there were cases people knew about that came forward," he said.

"But then kids stopped talking about stuff."

The chaplain said the only way to get children to open up was to put chaplains' freedom at risk.

"If I say to them I won't pass on the information, then I put myself at risk."



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