




**YOUTH**  
INSEARCH

# AUSTRALIA'S FORGOTTEN MIDDLE

THE YOUTH INSEARCH APPROACH TO END YOUTH SUICIDE

AUGUST 2022



Youth Insearch Foundation (Aust)  
Inc, acknowledges and pays respect  
to the past, present and future  
Traditional Custodians and Elders  
of this nation, and the continuation  
of cultural, spiritual and educational  
practices of Aboriginal and Torres  
Strait Islander peoples.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Suicide is the biggest killer of Australians aged between 14-25 years<sup>1</sup>. These young people have been described as the “missing middle” – but they are not missing – they are forgotten.**

All Australians deserve the very best chance for a healthy, rewarding and satisfying life. However, despite over \$11 billion invested by government, business and private funders each year, suicide remains the leading cause of death in young Australians, and many young people are not receiving the support they need. There is an estimated \$22 billion per year loss to the Australian economy from the impact of youth suicide<sup>2</sup>.

Described by Orygen as the “missing middle”,<sup>3</sup> these young people’s needs are not met by current mental health services. They are a heterogeneous group of youth comprising some of the most at-risk young people in our society.

**Since 1985 Youth Insearch has been working with the “missing middle” or what is more correctly termed – the “forgotten middle”. Young people who fit into this category are not missing. They have always been present though they have been “forgotten” by the mainstream medical solution approach currently in place, to address youth mental health and suicide rates.**

Research shows that **WITH THE RIGHT SUPPORT**, suicide, particularly in young people, is **LARGELY PREVENTABLE**, however, it has become clear that the **CURRENT MODEL** of care for mental health and suicide prevention in Australia is **NOT WORKING**.

Youth Insearch is Australia’s most effective peer-led youth trauma recovery organisation working to change these statistics. Since 1985, Youth Insearch has performed a key role in facilitating vital peer-to-peer engagement and connection through support groups and workshops. The Youth Insearch peer-to-peer program equips participants with skills and opportunities to develop their self-esteem, take control of their lives, and play a contributing role in society.

**Half of mental health disorders first emerge by the age of 14, and 75% by the age of 24. Crucially, suicide is disproportionately affecting minority groups across Australia. Members of the LGBTIQ+ community have the highest rate of suicidality of any group. Rural populations are two times more likely to die by suicide, and almost one in four young people dying by suicide in Australia are Indigenous, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations<sup>2</sup>.**

Youth Insearch data shows that 90% of the forgotten middle have experienced complex trauma, directly contributing to current levels of psychological distress and suicide risk. This is in line with current research findings which highlight the correlation between trauma and suicide.

**PEER WORK and LIVED EXPERIENCE are well recognised as effective ways to engage and work with people experiencing trauma and mental health challenges.**

<sup>1</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) (2022). *Deaths In Australia*. [www.aihw.gov.au/reports/life-expectancy-death/deaths-in-australia/contents/leading-causes-of-death](http://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/life-expectancy-death/deaths-in-australia/contents/leading-causes-of-death)

<sup>2</sup> Kinchin I, Doran CM (2018). The Cost of Youth Suicide in Australia. *Int J Environ Res Public Health*. doi: 10.3390/ijerph15040672.

<sup>3</sup> Lifeline (2022). Suicide Statistics. [www.lifeline.org.au/resources/data-and-statistics/](http://www.lifeline.org.au/resources/data-and-statistics/)

**Youth Insearch is proposing the following recommendations to the Federal Government:**

## **RECOMMENDATION 1: TRAUMA-INFORMED SUPPORT**

*Youth Insearch have the expertise and experience to inform Government on how to shift the focus of the sector to align with a trauma-informed approach.*

Since its inception, Youth Insearch has adopted a trauma-informed approach across all aspects of program design and delivery. This approach forms the overarching clinical framework beneath which all aspects of service planning and delivery sit. This framework utilises the healing power of relationships and connection to shift young people's trauma experiences.

Trauma-informed support adheres to the key principles of safety, trustworthiness, choice collaboration and empowerment.

Medical deficit-based approaches focus on clinical indicators, and often place the responsibility of healing onto the young person. In contrast, trauma-informed support focuses on identifying young people's strengths, and acknowledges that their struggles and 'symptoms' are coping responses to adverse events in their lives. The responsibility for healing is shared, as supportive social and community networks are activated.

## **RECOMMENDATION 2: COMMUNITY BASED MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**

*Youth Insearch is calling on the Federal Government to engage in greater conversations with communities to enable collaboration across the sector.*

This is required so that the correct support networks for young people's mental health needs can be resourced with a community-based approach.

Every Youth Insearch program implementation involves a comprehensive co-design process with community stakeholders, whilst maintaining core program consistency. This process ensures that the Youth Insearch program meets the needs of young people and the community.

Community based mental health services support communities to respond to their own needs. Its focus is on strengthening a sense of belonging for young people, and connecting them with a sense of community and culture.

Support networks must meet young people where they are at within their communities, as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach. As we look to recover from the impacts of COVID-19, we can expect the mental health impacts of the pandemic to be far reaching and lasting well into the future.

## **RECOMMENDATION 3: LIVED-EXPERIENCE, PEER WORKFORCE**

*Youth Insearch stands ready to support the Australian Government to build a lived experience workforce across the country.*

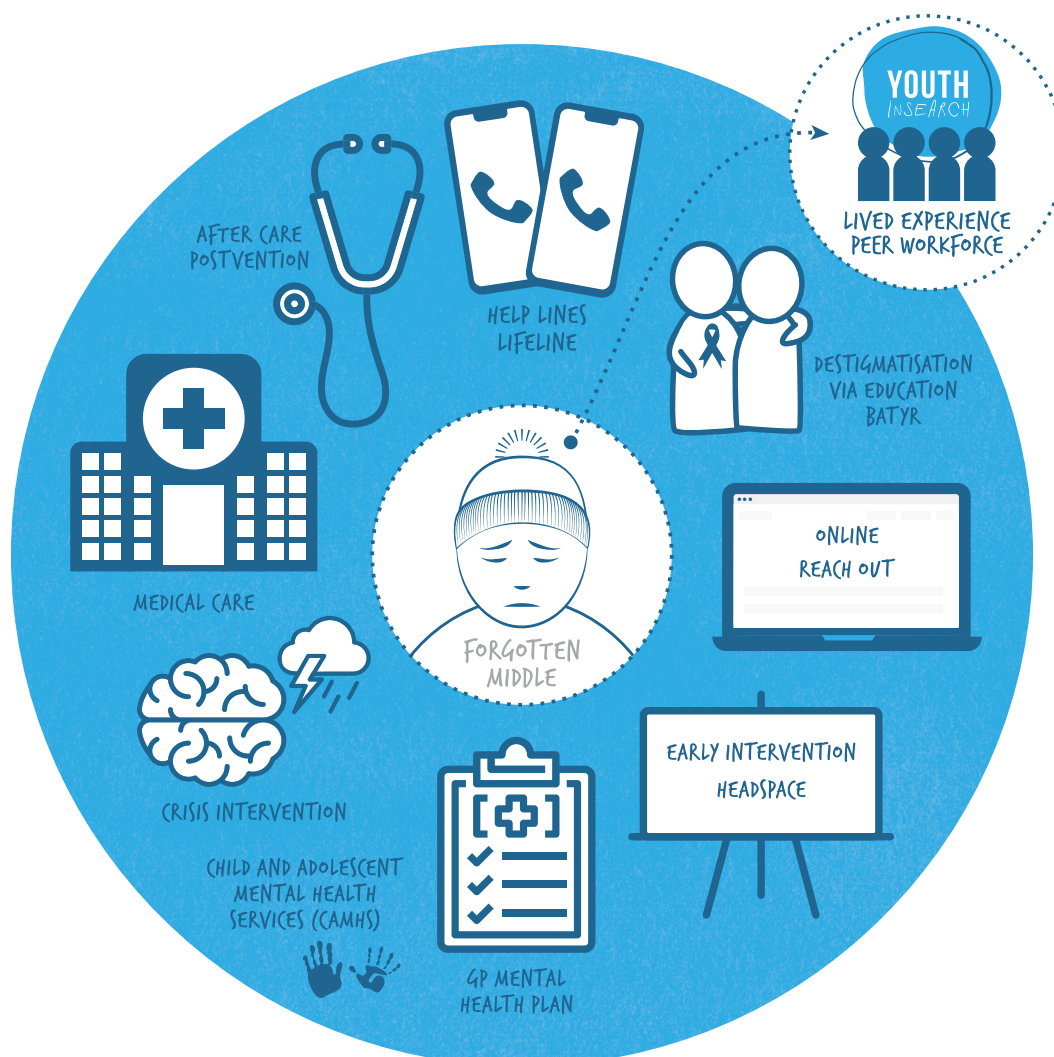
Youth Insearch has been delivering a lived experience, peer workforce solution since 1985; and is Australia's most effective peer-led youth trauma recovery organisation. Since its establishment, it has supported 32,000 at-risk youth to overcome their trauma.

Recent Government reports have called for the development of a workforce of peers with lived experience as part of the solution to addressing workforce shortages, and limited access/engagement with existing services.

Research tells us that a young person is much more likely to disclose their distress – and suicide intent – to a peer as opposed to a health professional or adult. Having a support network of youth with lived experience, supported by experts, is a key ingredient when it comes to both prevention and early intervention for suicide. Therefore, it is crucial for young people to have access to meaningful support, and a collaborative approach across the sector is needed.

The Australian government invests approximately 7% of the health budget on mental health compared to approximately 2% on average by other governments around the world<sup>1</sup>.

However, this medical approach is not working – especially for young Australians.



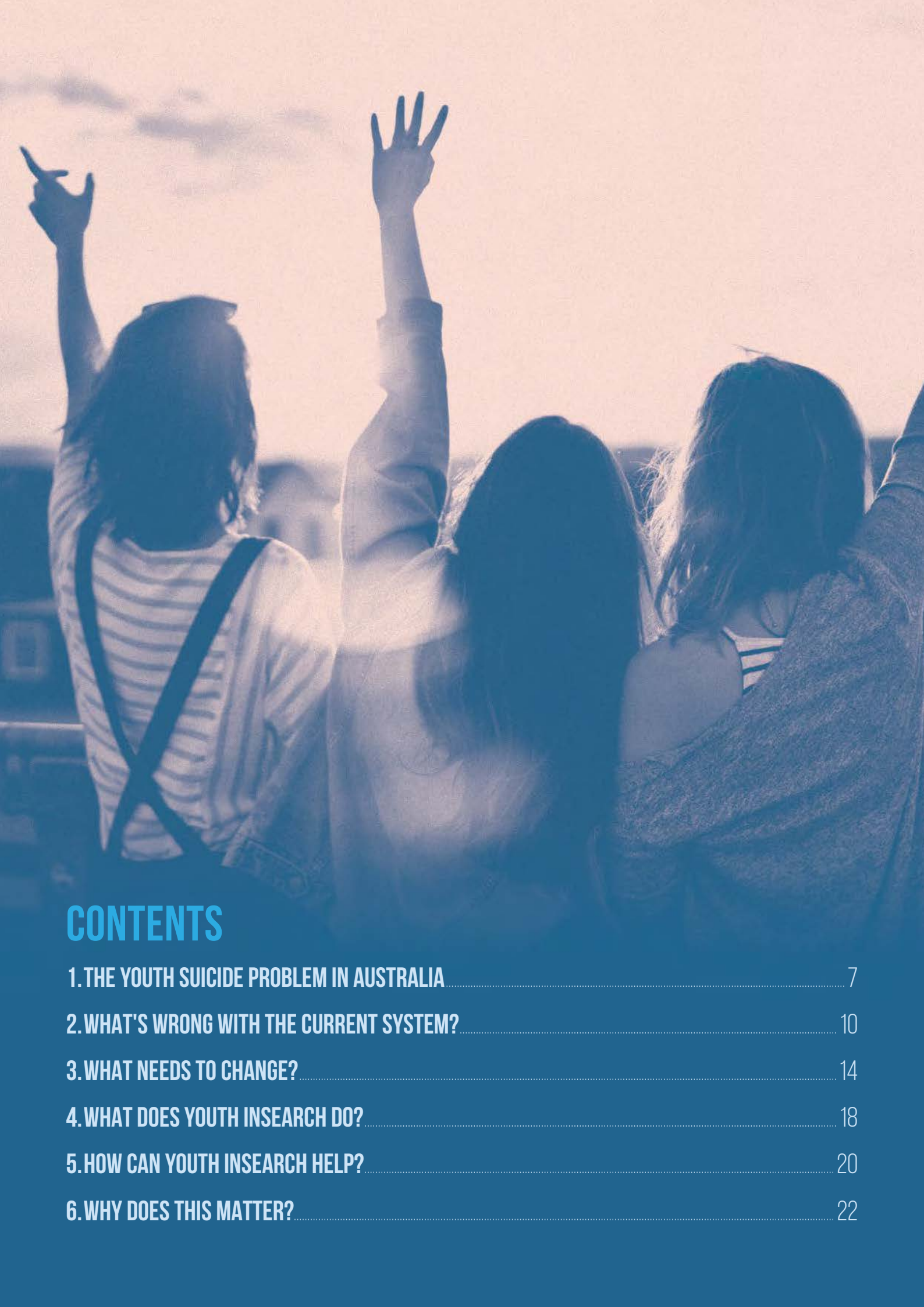
## THE "FORGOTTEN MIDDLE"

As we look to recover from the impacts of COVID-19, we can expect the mental health impacts of the pandemic to be far reaching and lasting well into the future. Trauma informed support, community-based mental health services and utilising a lived experience, peer workforce is the answer to youth suicide prevention and recovery.

We welcome the opportunity for engagement with the Australian Government and stakeholders to continue forging the path to reach and empower young Australians in need to overcome their issues and ultimately end youth suicide.

<sup>1</sup> Patel, V., Saxena, S., Lund, C., Thornicroft, G., Baingana, F., Bolton, P. (2018). The lancet commission on global mental health and sustainable development. *The Lancet*. doi: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)31612-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31612-X)





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