



**FASD-CAN**

Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder  
Care Action Network

## FASD-CAN AOTEAROA INFORMATION SHEET

# FASD, Mental Health and Suicide: The Facts

### Background – the numbers

Te Whatu Ora | Ministry of Health estimates that 3–5% of babies born each year in Aotearoa have Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). This equates to around 60,000 children and young people under 18 currently living with FASD.

FASD is more prevalent than autism spectrum disorder, Down syndrome, and cerebral palsy *combined*, yet only about 5% of people with FASD ever receive a formal diagnosis. Limited diagnostic capacity leads to under-reporting, poor data, and inadequate research and funding, despite the serious life outcomes associated with FASD.

**Earlier international research has shown that life expectancy for people with FASD may be as low as 34 years, with suicide identified as the leading cause of death.**

There is currently no New Zealand-specific research on FASD and suicide. However, international evidence from Canada and the United States highlights the significant and unmet mental health needs of this population:

- 90% of people with FASD have at least one co-occurring mental health condition (compared with around 20% of the general population)
- Depression (45–50%) and anxiety (20–40%) are the most common conditions
- Substance use rates are five times higher than the general population
- 35% will develop an alcohol or drug use disorder
- One third will experience suicidal ideation
- Suicidal ideation is significantly higher in people with FASD (25.9%) compared with the general population (3–12%)
- Suicidal thoughts and attempts occur at much younger ages
- Adolescents with FASD require medical assistance for suicide attempts at 5.5 times the rate of their peers
- Substance use increases suicide risk 6.7 times, and emotional regulation difficulties nearly double the risk
- Bullying and social exclusion further increase suicide risk.

People with FASD experience higher levels of trauma and adversity than the general population:

- they have an average Adverse Childhood Event (ACE) score of 3.4
- 46% have experienced four or more ACEs
- 13% have experienced six or more ACEs.



These rates are significantly higher than those seen in other disability groups and the general population, and are closely linked to increased mental health challenges.

**Parents and caregivers of people with FASD** experience very high levels of stress, often exceeding those reported by caregivers of people with autism. Ongoing concern about safety, mental health, and suicide risk has a significant impact on caregiver wellbeing, family functioning, and quality of life.

### **Current Initiatives – and what’s missing**

In 2019, the Government released [‘Every Life Matters’ - The Suicide Prevention Strategy 2019–2029 and Action Plan 2019–2024 for Aotearoa New Zealand](#) (now superseded by the [Action Plan 2025-2029](#)). There is also a [Centre of Māori Suicide Prevention](#).

However, these initiatives do not specifically address FASD, despite its high prevalence and the markedly increased suicide risk. There is also insufficient FASD-informed training across the mental health workforce.

Research consistently highlights the critical need for FASD-informed suicide prevention and mental health services. Without systems that understand and respond to the unique neurodevelopmental needs of people with FASD, interventions will continue to fall short.

### **Why This Matters**

Without appropriate supports, people with FASD continue to experience stigma, isolation, anxiety, depression, substance use, self-harm, and suicide risk. Their families and whānau carry this burden alongside them.

Addressing suicide for those with FASD in Aotearoa requires recognising it as a significant and currently overlooked contributor to our statistics, and committing to prevention, intervention, and workforce development that is truly FASD-informed.

For access to the original research cited in this information more detailed information on this topic see our expanded website resource.

