



The Compassionate Friends Victoria Inc.

Bereaved Parent & Sibling Support & Information

Patron: Rhonda Galbally, AO

FACT SHEET

BEYOND THE DEATH OF A CHILD: Social Impacts and Economic Costs Following the Death of a Child.

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Funded by the William Buckland Foundation.

INTRODUCTION

The experiences of bereaved parents and siblings who have contacted and attended The Compassionate Friends Victoria support groups have provided strong anecdotal evidence that the financial cost and impact on family relationships following the death of a child are significant

Before now, no known systematic Australian research had been carried out that validates the bereaved families' anecdotal experiences.

The Compassionate Friends (Victoria) commissioned a study, funded by the William Buckland Foundation to measure the economic cost & social impact to families. The findings and recommendations of the two year study, *BEYOND THE DEATH OF A CHILD: Social Impact and Economic Costs Following the Death of a Child*, were released in August 2007.

PARTICIPANTS

Two major research instruments were used: an extensive questionnaire to 103 bereaved families and 17 interviews with members of seven families.

Two-thirds of the bereaved families lived in metropolitan Melbourne and one-third in regional Victoria. The majority of parents whose children had died were in their thirties and forties, that is, in mid-life and mid-career.

The major causes of death were vehicular accidents; other accidents; suicide; SIDS; still-birth/miscarriage; cancer; and other chronic illnesses.

KEY FINDINGS

ECONOMIC COSTS

Almost half (46 per cent) of the respondents indicated that members of their family had incurred out-of-pocket medical, hospital and health-related expenses as a result of the death of a child. Nearly one third of these indicated that they found it very or extremely difficult to meet these expenses.

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The average cost for mental and psychological health-related expenses was around **\$2100 per family**. General medical expenses provided by GPs and specialists averaged **\$1060 per family**.

Family members believed these costs were directly linked to the death of their child. Of these, over 70 per cent experienced moderate to extreme difficulty in meeting such expenses.

Funeral costs for a child are a significant unbudgeted expense for many families. Of 102 respondents 42 per cent found funeral expenses to be a significant economic burden. The one-off costs associated with funeral expenses amounted to a substantial figure of **\$3,800 per family**.

Nearly 80 per cent incurred out-of-pocket funeral and burial expenses and almost half of these experienced considerable difficulty in meeting such expenses.

THE IMPACT ON EMPLOYMENT

The most common impact of the death of their child on employment involved parents taking leave without pay, often after exhausting other forms of leave.

As many as three-quarters of respondents saw the impact on their work performance as very or extremely significant. Parents cited lack of concentration, lack of motivation, depression, and other emotional responses as being the major ways in which their work performance was affected.

The periods of leave from employment taken as a result of a loss of a child varied from a low of two weeks to a high of two years and eight months, with an average leave without pay of 15.5 weeks that cost family members around \$8000 on average.

Of the 103 bereaved families, 23 parents chose, or were forced, to resign from their employment following the death of a child. Parents' *estimates* of their lost income varied from a low of \$2500 to a high of \$600,000 with an average of \$59,500.

Some 15 per cent of responses referred specifically to experiencing depression following the death of their child or sibling. These varied in degree, with some experiencing extreme and debilitating depression, which prevented them from working.

A number of respondents spoke about a sudden surge of sadness, often resulting in sudden crying at work, whether on the farm or in a classroom or office.

As many as 50 per cent cited a lack of interest in and motivation to undertake household chores. This covered all aspects of the work around the house such as cleaning, cooking, gardening and paying bills.

SOCIAL IMPACTS

RELATIONSHIPS

The strongest impact of the death of a child is felt on the relationships between the parents and between parents and children.

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32 per cent of parents surveyed indicated that the death of their child had a negative impact on their relationship with their partner. This included an inability to support each other during the first year; grieving processes that took the form of increased risk behaviour, drinking and depression; emotional distance; blame; guilt; and poor verbal communication.

In general, relations between parents, in terms of mutual support and closeness, decreased during the three years after the death when compared to the period before the death. Nearly 50 per cent of respondents reported that they experienced less support and closeness over the three years following the death of their child.

Families' awareness of the value of family relationships increased, but it also led to an increase in the valuing of life itself. Almost 25 per cent of parents indicated they became over protective of their other children.

SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

The impacts of the child's death on the social activities (such as recreational, sporting, charitable and hobbies) of parents and children were similar in that they led to a decrease in frequency of social activities for both groups.

76 per cent of respondents said the death of their child resulted in a decrease of social activities.

Furthermore, both parents and children rated social activities as less important after the death of the child than before.

SUPPORT

The survey asked parents to rank in order of importance those people whose support was considered of significance to them immediately after death and after 3 years.

Over the three years the major support for bereaved parents came from within their immediate family followed by extended family, friends, and bereavement organisations.

Of particular concern was that 47% of parents stated that they received less emotional support than they needed in the first days and weeks and this had actually increased to nearly 50% after 3 years.

Between 40% and 50% of parents received essentially the practical, organisational, emotional, professional and spiritual support they needed over the 3 years.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The report put forward 20 recommendations directed to government and non-government bodies covering: bereavement support programs, economic costs, employment, education and research.

These include:

- That appropriate organisations such as the Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement and The Compassionate Friends Victoria Inc be requested to include grief-related financial counselling as part of its suite of programs.

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- That state and local governments, as appropriate, expand the program of Home Help to enable more ready and affordable access to bereaved families.
- That existing bereavement support programs in government and non-government schools be expanded to include three levels of grief support:
 - programs directly supporting bereaved children
 - information and training programs on bereavement support for students
 - information and training programs on bereavement support for school staff (teaching, administration and maintenance).
- That the Victorian State Government make provision for subsidised grief and bereavement counselling similar to that provided by Transport Accident Commission and WorkCare for families whose child dies from other causes.
- That the Victorian State Government initiate a community awareness program targeted at appropriate bodies such as banks, insurance companies and funeral homes to encourage families to make provision for future funeral and burial expenses, by either pre-paying, putting aside savings, or insuring against death in the family.
- That the Victorian State Government initiate an information program on the debilitating impact of the death of a child on paid and domestic employment, together with measures to assist people back into the workplace. The program to be targeted at employers, employer organisations, unions, Occupational Health Safety personnel and government agencies such as WorkSafe and CentreLink.
- That employer and union bodies support the expansion of Occupational Health and Safety policies and programs in work places to provide greater support for bereaved family members, including through the provision of extended compassionate leave.

To request the report or for interview questions and requests, please contact: Laraine at The Compassionate Friends, 03 9888 4034 or email laraine@compassionatefriendsvictoria.org.au

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