

Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people

Mental health

Overview

From April to July 2020, the Commission for Children and Young People conducted consultations to develop a point-in-time snapshot of the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people. We heard from 644 children and young people and 172 staff from 70 organisations providing services and

supports to children and young people to understand the impact of the pandemic.

This snapshot focuses on mental health. It aims to share what we have heard and inform improvements in responses to children and young people during and after COVID-19.

Changes during COVID-19

On 16 March 2020, the Victorian Government declared a State of Emergency to prevent the spread of COVID-19. So far, during the pandemic, different levels of restrictions have been put in place that inhibit people's movement. This has included state-wide measures, including the 30 March 'stay at home' restrictions, and area-specific measures, such as the 7 July 'stay at home' restrictions for Melbourne and Mitchell Shire. More recently, the Victorian Government introduced Stage 4 restrictions in Melbourne on 2 August, and re-introduced Stage 3 restrictions in regional and rural Victoria on 5 August.

The Victorian Government's COVID-19 response has included additional funding for mental health services. This has included \$59.4 million of surge funding for the mental health system announced in April, \$19.5 million in funding for additional mental health resources, staff and programs announced in May, and \$59.7 million in new funding to further strengthen surge capacity of mental health services announced in August. Components of these packages involve specific supports for children and young people including funding for Orygen Youth Health to deliver a new online platform that provides online therapy and peer support

for young people, and funding for Kids Helpline to expand online and phone counselling capacity. They also include funding for Melbourne-based headspace centres to do more proactive outreach throughout the pandemic and 15 additional beds for young people with existing mental health issues.

The Victorian Government's response has also included \$28.5 million in funding, announced in August, to help students struggling with mental health and assist vulnerable students who have experienced disengagement to remain connected to their education. This includes establishing local governance and collaboration networks involving health services, regional education offices, local government youth services and headspace. Networks will support risk assessment and responses to these risks and improve pathways to care across the continuum from early intervention to specialist services.

This snapshot describes what the Commission heard during and after the first period of stage 3 restrictions between April and July.

Our consultations

Who we heard from

644
children and young people

417
aged under 18

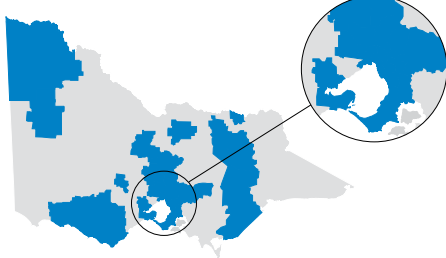
176*
aged 18 or over
**51 respondents did not specify.*

42*
identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander
**71 respondents did not specify.*

122*
speak a language other than English
**64 respondents did not specify.*

87*
have lived experience of disability
**89 respondents did not specify.*

Located in:



- metropolitan Melbourne and regional & rural Victoria
- In local government areas indicated in blue.

Housing situation:

- family home
- living independently
- informal arrangement (e.g. with friends)
- supported accommodation
- residential care
- foster care

172

staff

from over **70 organisations** working with **children and young people**

Organisations included:

- Aboriginal services
- Multicultural and refugee youth services
- Child Protection
- Disability services
- Family services
- Family violence services
- Youth Justice
- Maternal and Child Health
- Mental health services
- Youth services
- Education & training
- Housing and homelessness

How we heard from them

63 individual phone and online consultations with children and young people

36 online group consultations involving **286** children and young people

295 online survey responses from children and young people

172 phone and online consultations with staff

When we heard from them

April 2020 to July 2020

What they spoke about

- Family, friends and community
- Safety
- Education and training
- Income and employment
- Housing
- Mental health
- Justice system
- Health
- Information and having a say

The Commission's Youth Advisory Group (4 young people) guided the Commission in designing, implementing and evaluating the consultation program.

Summary

Children and young people had mixed experiences during the pandemic. Some children and young people reported feeling unaffected or said there were some positive impacts associated with the restrictions, as they had the chance to slow down, self-reflect or avoid situations they find stressful. However, most children and young people the Commission heard from reported negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing, and this was reinforced in consultations with service providers. Children and young people described experiences of loneliness and isolation, disruption to routines and coping mechanisms, worry for loved ones and increased stress associated with remote learning, precarious employment or unstable housing.

Children and young people also reported mixed views about changes in service delivery. Some reported adapting easily to telehealth or online services and strong support from service providers where they had existing relationships with mental health professionals, but most reported a preference for face-to-face services. Children and young people who had not previously accessed help for mental health concerns said they were unlikely to seek help for the first time by phone or online. Some spoke about cost being a barrier to accessing timely mental health supports,

leading in some cases to young people rationing their Medicare funded sessions by spacing them out. Service providers reported efforts to adapt to a changed environment but also acknowledged the limits to virtual services. Reductions in services and community-based programs was also identified as an issue, contributing to long wait times and increased pressure on more intensive services.

How has the pandemic impacted the mental health of children and young people?

Most children and young people told us their mental health had been negatively impacted by the pandemic, although some also reported feeling relatively unaffected or even positive impacts to their mental health and wellbeing. Children and young people told us factors that negatively affected their mental health and wellbeing included isolation and loneliness, fear for impacted family or friends, distressing and negative news filtering through social media, and worry for the future due to uncertainty or disruptions to education, employment and other plans.



Some children and young people reported coping well with restrictions and changes and even had some positive experiences associated with having more time to reflect or spend with family, or a reduction in anxiety triggers, such as crowds or public transport. A similar number reported feeling relatively unaffected, with limited change to their lives and routines. Many reported friends, music, exercise, hobbies, study and work as things that helped them cope and stay resilient.

What we heard from young people

“It made me re-evaluate everything. I decided I want to live while I can. I want to travel. I’ve started saving. Not being able to has made me want to so it’s changed completely my plans for the next few years. I want to do stuff more suited to me. It’s been really good for me to work out my future. I needed that time alone to work it all out.”

(High school student, regional)

“What the virus has done is forced us to slow down our lives, some of us have unhealthy fast-paced lives, going from one commitment to another. So I’ve found a positive is that I’ve had more time to relax and stay home with my family and do the things we love.”

(High school student, aged 15, metro)



Most children and young people felt the pandemic had a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing. Key issues reported included a lack of social contact, loss of routine, precarious employment or housing and general uncertainty about the future. Some young people reported feeling worried about friends or family members or expressed fears for their own health, particularly where they felt at risk of contracting the virus.



Some young people reported that the pandemic exacerbated their existing mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. Many service providers also reported seeing increases in these experiences and acknowledged disruptions to some services or programs contributed to or exacerbated these issues.



Some children and young people discussed the issue of suicide; they spoke about being affected by peer suicide in their communities during the pandemic or about being worried about their friends expressing suicidal thoughts. Some services talked to us about the concerning number of youth suicides in their areas since the pandemic began. Young people expressed disappointment and sadness about not being able to attend friends’ funerals.



Some young people – particularly from African-Australian communities and Aboriginal young people – reported being heavily affected by international events associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. Some also reported feeling targeted and harassed by police in the enforcement of lockdown restrictions.

How has the pandemic impacted the mental health of children and young people? continued

What we heard from young people

“I have seen and talked to friends who have more severe mental health who are also concerned, worried about how they will maintain their mental health and go back to society and function at a level that is healthy. From a personal perspective and friends’, everyone is really struggling with motivation to look after themselves, the days rolling into weeks, the weeks rolling into months.”

(University student, regional)

“The main thing I was worried about was my mental health. And getting my schoolwork done which impacted my mental health. Then worrying about friends and family. That all just made me really depressed and upset and made my anxiety get worse.”

(High school student, regional)

“Not being able to see friends and family was very difficult. My mental health took a turn for the worse, particularly around unemployment. It halted job seeking and there was no ability to get work.”

(Young person, aged 21, metro)

“Initially, kind of scary, played on some anxieties, but as we settled into the lock-down, started to feel a lot better. As I started to feel better, but now I’m starting to feel a little more anxious about restrictions being lifted and worried about what might happen again.”

(University student, aged 24, metro)

“Before COVID, I had been on my own and in a toxic relationship. I had to recreate myself as a person. I was doing ok and then COVID happened and now I’m back to square one.”

(Young person with disability, aged 20 years, metro)

“The biggest challenge, in the past I have had quite severe anxiety and before COVID I was managing it, but since COVID I’m worried about it worsening. I was seeing people at least once a week, being outside my house, but I have seen and talked to friends who have more severe mental health who are also concerned, worried about how they will maintain their mental health and go back to society and function at a level that is healthy.”

(University student, regional)

“Biggest thing loss of employment and isolation. It’s been quite hard and difficult to afford bills and groceries. As a young person it’s quite challenging already. But the isolation has really impacted my mental health. Psych, psychiatrist, dietician, everyone else I see – haven’t been able to see my care team. Felt quite lonely and I ended up having to have an inpatient treatment in hospital as I made an attempt [of suicide].”

(University student, aged 21, regional)

How have children and young people engaged with mental health supports?

Reduced ability to offer face-to-face services has decreased service availability and forced services to adapt to online or telephone-based services. While changed services worked well for some, many young people reported that this limited their ability to engage effectively. Some said it stopped them accessing services they relied on at a time they needed them the most.



Many services adapted quickly to the pandemic by transitioning to online mental health supports (including telehealth and online support groups) and developed strategies to try and encourage safe engagement, for example, sharing strategies to protect privacy at home.



Some children and young people talked about being able to access effective supports for mental health through psychologists, school counsellors or other case workers, although many also stated a preference for face-to-face services. Service providers noted some young people expressed greater interest in phone-based or online services compared to face-to-face services and noted they may be more flexible and accessible to some young people, for example, in regional areas where there were limited local service providers.



A significant number of children and young people reported inadequate access to mental health services, including the unavailability of programs, long wait lists and the lack of services tailored to young people.



Some struggled with the shift to virtual services or were not comfortable engaging with telehealth or online supports, particularly if they were engaging with services for the first time or if the consultation counted towards limited government-subsidised sessions, deciding to hold off until face-to-face services resume. Some participants reported friends choosing not to access mental health services because they were daunted by having to use telehealth.



A lack of privacy or online access in the home was also a concern for children and young people as it impacted their ability to meaningfully access these supports.



After an initial drop in demand for mental health services, some services reported seeing a surge in demand to address serious or escalating mental health issues, including from primary school-aged children. We heard that disruptions to service delivery placed increased pressure on already long waiting lists and a reduction in community-based services was placing increased pressure on in-patient services.



Some services reported increases in drug and alcohol abuse for young people they worked with. They also talked about closures or reduced capacity of withdrawal and rehabilitation facilities limiting treatment options.

How have children and young people engaged with mental health supports? continued

What we heard from young people

“Telehealth is a different experience. I thrive with face-to-face supports. But it has been great to check in and the psych has adapted strategies for this period to time.”

(Young person, aged 24, metro)

“During COVID, I have had to see my psychologist via telehealth and I haven’t responded particularly well to that, much prefer face-to-face appointments. The other issue about this is that the sessions still come out of the provided 10 sessions you get per year from Medicare, even though they are not face to face appointments.”

(University student, aged 24, metro)

“I tried to ask for help from counselling services but they seem busy. I booked three weeks ago, and I need to wait for three weeks before getting the counselling service.”

(Young person, aged 25, regional)

“It’s [telehealth and mental health] good for young people that have issues with transport but still important for young people to have face-to-face support for mental health... This is the gold standard.”

(Young person, regional)

“At the start I didn’t want to see my psychologist cos it was online and I didn’t have experience with Zoom – I felt a lot of anxiety come up. I have heard people say, ‘I’ll wait til this is all over and then see someone’. I have to maintain my mental health though – it’s really important. It can be confronting when it’s something new.”

(University student, regional)

“We don’t have access to services – you can’t go somewhere (for mental health) because waiting lists are too long.”

(High school student, regional)

“I tried to ask for help from counselling services but they seem busy. I booked three weeks ago, and I need to wait for three weeks before getting the counselling service.”

(Young person, working full-time, regional)

“It’s kind of a grey space of sort of being viewed as an adult, sort of being viewed as a teenager there are unique challenges around finances, living situations and the services don’t really know enough about how to approach this age group in regards to things like – counselling, AOD, grief services.”

(Young person, aged 22 years, metro)

“There is a gap in the system for support for young adults. There’s heaps of support for children and adults available. There is a gap in peer knowledge. I would find it amazing if there was information on how to support my friends.”

(Young person, aged 23 years, metro)

Contact us:

Commission for Children and Young People

Level 18, 570 Bourke Street
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000

Phone: 1300 78 29 78

Email: contact@ccyp.vic.gov.au

ccyp.vic.gov.au



@ccyp_vic



CCYPVictoria



@CCYPVictoria

