

**COVID-19**

A submission to the:  
**Senate Select Committee**

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## Introduction

**yourtown** welcomes the Senate's inquiry into the COVID-19 pandemic and the Australian Government's response. The scale of the effects of the pandemic, the pandemic's unknown duration and the nature of the response to it require robust and rigorous national scrutiny and debate to ensure that Australia is best prepared to overcome the expected long-term impacts and to respond to similar, future disasters.

Today, it is clear that overall Australia has fared well in relation to the pandemic and the responses of both federal and state and territory governments have played an important part in this success. Nonetheless, lives have been lost, and the countless detrimental emotional, social and economic effects have touched all individuals, families and communities. The significant impacts that the pandemic and the response to it has and will continue to have on Australia's youngest generations has been widely noted.

Our Kids Helpline service has experienced a 36% increase in demand to the service, with considerable increases in mental health and suicide-related concerns.<sup>1</sup> Contacts have shared their anxiety about the pandemic and its impact on their daily lives, whilst others have had existing mental health concerns and issues triggered and compounded by it. Many children and young people have contacted Kids Helpline owing to the closure of their face-to-face support services, and/or as they have been unable to employ their usual coping strategies.

Some contacts have called Kids Helpline having lost employment due to COVID crisis, expressing concern about how to meet their immediate financial needs as well as despair about what effects the crisis will have on their future career. Indeed, our employment services have already met, or are braced for, significant increases in jobseekers as young people work in industries hardest hit by the lockdown, and are typically hardest hit by a recession. The digital divide has also prevented many young people who access our education and employment engagement services from being able to effectively engage with online school and **yourtown** programme work.

We have also seen evidence of the expected increase in family and domestic violence in our communities, whilst survivors have also struggled to access crisis payments due to the increase in demand on Centrelink. Kids Helpline counsellors have also had to respond to increased numbers of contacts relating to child abuse, resulting in 43% more actions being undertaken by our staff to keep them safe.<sup>2</sup>

Thanks to the Federal Government, **yourtown** has been better positioned to respond to these challenges. We have used additional funding to Kids Helpline to recruit additional qualified counsellors, develop self-help resources and content for digital platforms, and increase capacity for remote working. We have strongly welcomed initiatives of which the Australian Government has been a part, such as the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan, as well as the higher profile of mental health issues that the Prime Minister has afforded them. We have welcomed the unprecedented economic support the Federal Government has given to those permanent staff who have lost their job due to the lockdown, and to businesses to help them survive.

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<sup>1</sup> When compared to figures covering the same period in 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

However, many of the issues that the pandemic and lockdown have created for many young people, have long been issues for significant cohorts of young people, with the pandemic further compounding them. Hence, we not only urge the Federal Government to continue to deploy the same energy and zeal to its work on addressing the mental health needs of communities and to providing the financial support to the unemployed, but also to use this crisis as an opportunity to disrupt and respond to the many deep and persistent issues that have long confronted Australia's most disadvantaged.

In our submission, we present our insight into the challenges that the pandemic and the lockdown has had on our clients in relation to mental health, unemployment, family and domestic violence and the digital divide, alongside the Government's response and our recommendations for future policy directions and investment.

## **yourtown services**

**yourtown** is a national organisation and registered charity that aims to tackle the issues affecting the lives of children and young people. Established in 1961, **yourtown's** mission is to enable young people, especially those who are marginalised and without voice, to improve their life outcomes.

**yourtown** provides a range of face-to-face and virtual services to children, young people and families seeking support. These services include:

- Kids Helpline, a national 24/7 telephone and on-line counselling and support service for 5 to 25 year olds with special capacity for young people with mental health issues
- Employment and social enterprises, which support young people into employment, including programs for youthful offenders and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific services.
- Education engagement programmes supporting young people at risk of disengaging from formal education early.
- Accommodation responses to young parents with children who are at risk and to women and children seeking refuge from family and domestic violence
- Young Parent Programmes offering case work, individual and group work support and child development programs for young parents and their children
- Parentline, a telephone and online counselling and support service for parents and carers
- Mental health service/s for children aged 0-11 years old, and their families, with moderate mental health needs

### **Kids Helpline**

Kids Helpline (KHL) is Australia's only national 24/7, confidential support and counselling service specifically for children and young people aged 5 to 25 years. It offers counselling support via telephone, email and via real time webchat. In addition, the Kids Helpline website provides a range of tailored self-help resources. Kids Helpline is staffed by a paid professional workforce, with all counsellors holding a tertiary qualification.

Since March 1991, children and young people have been contacting Kids Helpline about a diverse group of issues ranging from everyday topics such as family, friends and school to more serious issues of child abuse, bullying, mental health issues, drug and alcohol use, self-injury and suicide.

In 2019, Kids Helpline counsellors responded to nearly 150,000 contacts from children and young people across the nation, with an additional 1,414,591 unique visitors accessing online support resources from the website. During 2018, Kids Helpline made its 8 millionth contact response.

## yourtown submission

In our submission, we address four key areas of our work as well as areas that have been significantly affected by the pandemic: mental health, unemployment, family and domestic violence and the digital divide.

### Mental health

It has been evident across the globe that the effects of the pandemic have been detrimental to the mental health of many people, both young and old, as they seek to manage the impact of the virus itself and the social and economic implications of its management. Indeed, given the important and distinct roles that Kids Helpline plays in the nation's mental health infrastructure supporting children and young people, we have seen firsthand the repercussions that the pandemic is having on the mental health of the nation's youngest generations and, thanks in part to additional funds from the Federal Government administered during the event, have sought to meet their continued and escalating needs.

In this section, we present the challenges Kids Helpline has faced during the pandemic and how the Federal Government's acknowledgement of the repercussions COVID-19 has had on mental health has helped to overcome them. Our hope for the future is that mental health continues to receive the attention it has during the pandemic by the Federal Government and becomes a national policy priority.

- **Kids Helpline during the pandemic: 36% increased demand**

Contacts to Kids Helpline over April and May 2020 have increased when compared to the same period last year by 36% overall, with attempts to the service standing at 85,481 in 2020 compared to 62,661 in 2019 over the same period. In addition, when looking at data from April 2019 compared to April 2020, counselling contacts have seen large **increases in contacts about concerns relating to mental health and emotional wellbeing** as set out below.

Concern	April and May 2020	April and May 2019	% Increase
Mental health concerns	4,479	3,230	39%
Emotional wellbeing	3,827	2,526	52%
Suicide-related concerns	2,243	1,774	26%

Mental health concerns were the most common counselling concern in April and May 2020 for two age cohorts of Kids Helpline contacts – those aged 13-18 (2,439 contacts) and those aged 19-25 (1,429 contacts). When looking at the nature of their concerns, or their sub-concerns, the multi-faceted role that Kids Helpline plays in supporting children and young people with both undiagnosed and diagnosed mental health needs is evidenced.

The top three sub-concerns for those aged 13-18 were:

1. Seeking support and/or strategies to manage established disorder or diagnosis (1,132 contacts, 46% of mental health contacts from this age group),
2. Mild, emerging or occasional symptoms or concerns (undiagnosed) (673 contacts, 28% of mental health contacts from this age group), and

3. Substantial or significant mental health symptomology (undiagnosed) (480 contacts, 20% of mental health contacts from this age group).

Similarly, the top three sub-concerns for young people aged 19-25 were:

1. Seeking support and/or strategies to manage established disorder or diagnosis (964 contacts, 67% of Mental Health contacts from this age group),
2. Mild, emerging or occasional symptoms or concerns (undiagnosed) (173 contacts, 12% of Mental Health contacts from this age group), and
3. Substantial or significant mental health symptomology (undiagnosed) (151 contacts, 11% of Mental Health contacts from this age group).

The nature of the sub-concerns reveals Kids Helpline's many roles in the mental health system, including:

- Its **prevention role** within, and role as a '**front door**' to, the mental health system. Given young people can contact Kids Helpline 'any time, any reason' using three different modes (phone, webchat and email), counsellors can assist by talking to children and young people early and helping them to articulate and identify their needs and navigate the mental health system to access support before they escalate. There have been many new contacts during the coronavirus crisis who have articulated increased anxiety or early symptoms of depression, and counsellors have talked through coping strategies with them, referred them to appropriate services or encouraged them to make contact with Kids Helpline again.
- Its role as '**soft entry**' into the mental health system for those contacts displaying significant but undiagnosed mental health symptomology. Kids Helpline enables soft entry into the mental health system owing to the nature of its delivery and the ability to remain anonymous when contacting it if preferred. This role has been particularly helpful at a time when the pandemic has compounded or triggered mental health issues for many contacts.
- Its role as a '**safety net**' and **case manager** to those children and young people with diagnosed mental health needs and who are unable to access their support after hours, due to long waiting lists, lack of available services – or as in current times – when face-to-face services are not in operation. There have been many contacts during the pandemic who have found that their normal coping strategies are no longer available, their mental health support services are closed or the anxiety that the pandemic has produced in them has left them less resilient to deal with their existing conditions. Kids Helpline has clearly played an important role in filling these increased service gaps and holding these clients until 'normal' life resumes.

Many of the children and young people who contacted Kids Helpline during April and May discussed the impact of COVID-19 on their lives (2,661 contacts, 9% of all contacts). Some young people contacted us as they were worrying about and struggling with the impact that the pandemic and its response was having on their daily lives – whether that be in relation to their school or university closing, not being able to do team sport or go to the gym, not being able to see their family, friends or boyfriend/girlfriend and, in some extremely worrying cases, having to deal with increased, existing parental abuse and family conflict.

There were vulnerable unemployed young people calling us who have been made unemployed due to pandemic or were already unemployed and are struggling with/worrying about how to pay rent or whether they will ever find work. Some young people told us about how their family was already struggling due to the bushfires and now their parent/s are desperately trying to find work or access income. Others had concerns about the pandemic's impact on their future, on Australia and/or on the planet.

Additionally, some young KHL clients called us as the current pandemic is compounding or triggering existing mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, self-harm, eating disorders, and suicidal ideation, as they find the normal coping strategies are no longer available, additional support services are closed or the anxiety that the pandemic has produced in them has left them less resilient to deal with these existing conditions.

UNICEF Australia in April 2020 also undertook research with just over 1,000 children and young people aged 13 to 17 years about the effects of COVID-19 and the national response on them.<sup>3</sup> In response to questions on access to psychological and wellbeing support, the survey found that: 22% of respondents were unsure if the support options that existed before the pandemic response still applied; 24% felt isolated and unsure about the support options available outside family/carers, and 30% reported that social distancing rules had negatively impacted on their ability to access support outside the family unit.

- **Kids Helpline during the pandemic: increasingly severe needs**

In addition to increasing demand, counselling contacts to Kids Helpline have included **increases in some of the most serious concerns relating to mental health, including those related to suicide**. Counselling contacts relating to suicide increased by 26% in April and May 2020 when compared to April and May 2019, a rise from 1,774 contacts to 2,243 contacts.

The largest increase in suicide-related counselling concerns during this time have related to the 13-18 year age group, with their top three sub-concerns being:

1. Suicidal thoughts or fears (1,072 contacts, 80% of Suicide related contacts from this age group)
2. Concerned about another person (156 contacts, 12% of Suicide related contacts from this age group), and
3. Immediate intention (93 contacts, 7% of Suicide related contacts from this age group)

As a result of escalating needs, between 1 January and 30 April 2020, Kids Helpline **initiated 17% more actions to keep a child or young person safe in relation to a suicide attempt**, some 138 actions compared to 118 last year. Actions included duty of care notifications, safety planning and case-management and conferences with external services.

In addition, Kids Helpline recorded a considerable increase in contacts about child abuse, which resulted in **43% more actions undertaken by counsellors in relation to child abuse** between 1 January and 30 April 2020.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.unicef.org.au/our-work/unicef-in-emergencies/coronavirus-covid-19/young-people-survey-australia>

- **Kids Helpline: response to the challenges of the pandemic**

Future funding needs to cater for the operational impacts of a pandemic and frontline staff. The conduct of an essential service such as Kids Helpline requires clear strategies to ensure that the workforce can be fully operational. To help alleviate the high levels of anxiety many staff felt due to the increased demand and on personal wellbeing due to the pandemic, we developed a second, makeshift counselling centre at our head office in Brisbane and increased the number of counsellors who could work remotely. We also had to ensure that counsellors felt supported to manage stress and anxiety related to higher contact volumes, and therefore, equipped Kids Helpline shift and practice supervisors with webcams so they could regularly check-in with counsellors and undertake practice supervision and virtual debriefs with counsellors and support them during high-risk contacts.

In addition, given the demand on Kids Helpline and our experience working in this area with children and young people, we recognised early in the lockdown that online digital support services had an important role to play in response to meeting their rising mental health needs. Hence, we tailored our ongoing programme Circles, which delivers online peer-to-peer support and counselling to groups of children and young people, to meet the specific needs of 496 young people during lockdown. We delivered two 'My Circles', one to a cohort aged 13-17 years old and another to a cohort aged 18-25 years old. The programmes attracted new clients in addition to supporting those clients who interact with Kids Helpline occasionally. Critically, the programmes provided much needed additional support and intervention service for clients of other services, which may have closed due to the pandemic. Nearly half of these Circles clients (47%) were receiving counselling support outside of Kids Helpline, a third were currently taking medication for a mental health diagnosis, and eighty seven percent (87%) reported moderate to severe psychological distress on the CORE-10 with 38% reporting severe distress.

In the review of My Circles, nearly a quarter (23%) of Kids Helpline Circles participants reported being highly socially isolated with poor support networks and nearly half (44%) perceived low social support from their family. Participants who completed both assessment time points reported better engagement with family support post program, with 63% reporting moderate or high family support compared with 50% at time point 1. These participants also displayed reduction in distress levels on the CORE-10. Fifty-five percent (55%) of participants agreed that they felt their overall mental health had improved as a result of their involvement in My Circles and 77% agreed that they felt more empowered to tackle the challenges that confront them.

In keeping with our Kids Helpline approach to support, we also swiftly developed, and continue to update and develop, a whole suite of new online resources about COVID-19 (<https://kidshelpline.com.au/coronavirus>) given that the needs of many children and young people can be adequately supported through appropriately tailored online information and support resources.

Finally, we have had more frequent contact with other health and social services since the commencement of the pandemic due to increased client referral and case management, but also as we have been sharing the lessons and experiences of our organisation, staff and clients with them. For example, the National Online Telephone Support Services (NOTSS) network at the start



of the lockdown began to meet every week, and we are now meeting every two weeks. We have found that all those involved in the network are finding these more frequent meetings a useful way to share information and learnings, and we have shared how we approached remote working and the new processes and protocols we have put in place to support this, as well as the many benefits we have noted from remote working (e.g. counsellors not having to attend the office for night shifts and lower absenteeism).

- **The Federal Government response to mental health needs amongst children and young people during the pandemic**

Early recognition of the detrimental impact that the response to the pandemic and the lockdown would have on the **nation's mental health**. On 29 March, the Government announced \$1bn additional financial support for a range of support services including those targeting mental health. Recognising that more children and young people would turn to Kids Helpline during this time, these funds included \$2m for Kids Helpline. The funding enabled us, together with new funds from the New South Wales and Victorian Governments, to recruit more counsellors and, as a result, were able to increase Kids Helpline responses by 20%, an additional 5,214 more contacts, during April and May 2020.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, the funds enabled the purchase of additional remote working kits to facilitate greater numbers of remote working opportunities for counsellors.

In addition, the formation of the **National Cabinet** gave its critical commitment to supporting and responding to the National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan (discussed below) - a comprehensive and vitalising plan for the sector that has long-been needed - and committed an additional \$48.1M investment in support of its priority actions.<sup>5</sup> The appearance of the CEO of the National Mental Health Commission and National Suicide Prevention Adviser to the Prime Minister, Christine Morgan, alongside the Prime Minister during national briefings about the Federal Government's response to the pandemic, helped to raise the profile of this policy area.

Furthermore, the Federal Government's relatively **decisive action** and leadership on addressing the crisis combined with the approaches of the state and territory governments eased anxiety the population has experienced in relation to COVID-19. However, the inconsistent approach by jurisdictions managing the pandemic has caused confusion, uncertainty and significant impact on organisations and business throughout Australia and it is suggested that renewed pandemic planning in the future seeks to reach agreement on a nationally consistent course of action.

- **Cross-government response to the mental health needs amongst children and young people during the pandemic**

On 15 May, Christine Morgan launched the **National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan** (the Plan) on 15 May, which was co-led by the Victorian, New South Wales and the Australian governments on behalf of the state and territory governments. It is a plan that we strongly support and we are impressed by its acknowledgement of how crises such as the

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<sup>4</sup> This percentage and increase is based on the comparison of the April and May 2019 number of responses to April and May 2020.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/getmedia/1b7405ce-5d1a-44fc-ble9-c00204614cb5/National-Mental-Health-and-Wellbeing-Pandemic-Response-Plan>

coronavirus pandemic, and its economic and social fallout, impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the population. Such is the Plan's scale and suggested pace, that it can be suggested that the mental health sector has in many ways benefited from the crisis in that long, unaddressed mental health system issues are being - finally and appropriately - accelerated, prioritised and acted upon.

### **The National Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan**

The connections that the Plan has made to the pandemic and Australian governments' response to it (such as family conflict and violence, unemployment, homelessness, financial difficulties, and use of alcohol and drugs) and both the short-term, long-term and compounding effects on mental (ill) health and suicide are welcome. The plan is also welcome for recognising that the intersection and interaction of these issues require a comprehensive and holistic system approach. However, whilst we strongly acknowledge and support the need for a specific plan to respond to rising mental health owing to COVID-19, it must be noted that these issues are not unique to the pandemic. These interrelated and persistent social and economic issues have long confronted individuals, families and communities across the nation and detrimentally affected their mental health.

### **The Plan's underpinning principles**

We also strongly support the Plan's underpinning principles, such as participation and the need to embed lived experience in the design, development and implementation of solutions. Following our research with children and young people about suicide,<sup>6</sup> **yourtown** has developed a Lived Experience Network of young people with a lived experience of suicide - be that having experienced suicidal thoughts, survived a suicide attempt, cared for someone through suicidal crisis, or been bereaved by suicide. Today, we have five young people aged between 19- 28 who have undertaken a two-day training course with Roses in the Ocean in how to present their personal experiences to advocate on the issue and who would be keen to speak about their experiences with the Senate if requested.

We support the principle of a community-based approach to care. In our response to the Productivity Commission's Draft Report on into the social and economic benefits of improving mental health we highlighted how mental health issues are of particular concern for our unemployed clients and the need for employment services that are tailored to support their mental health needs also (see more on this in the following section).

### **The Plan's ten priority areas**

- 1.1.2 Implementing new models of care

In relation to the implementation of new models of care, we strongly support the need for increased provision of digital mental health services. Research, including our own, shows that children and young people are particularly responsive to digital mental health support, and a

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<sup>6</sup>

<https://www.yourtown.com.au/sites/default/files/document/2.%20Preventing%20suicide%20by%20children%20and%20young%20people.pdf>

significant and increasing cohort of Kids Helpline clients choose to connect with it digitally.<sup>7</sup> However, we also know – and are involved in an ARC research project looking into this issue – that there is a digital divide within Australia amongst children and young people. Some children and young people whose families do not have access to digital devices, who live in rural and remote areas with poor digital connection or who have parents who are not digitally literate, are unable to or struggle to access digital support services – yet they are cohorts who would arguably most benefit from being able to access support online. Any plan to increase digital support services must therefore go hand in hand with investment into supports for disadvantaged families and communities to enable them to be able to connect digitally.

- 1.1.6 Meeting the needs of vulnerable populations

We particularly welcome the Plan's identification of the need to focus on meeting the needs of vulnerable populations, including children, young people and their families, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, people experiencing family, domestic and sexual violence (for more on our insights into this issue in relation to the pandemic please see section below), LGBTI people, CALD groups and those living in rural and remote communities. These are all population cohorts that we identified to the Productivity Commission in its inquiry on mental health as being high-risk and in need of increased specialist support.<sup>8</sup> We would add to this list children, young people and families affected by intergenerational disadvantage, who often are confronted by interrelated and complex deep and persistent social and economic issues that detrimentally affect their (mental) health.

A focus on children and young people is particularly important given that, whilst mental health issues can affect anyone from any background at any stage in their life, they typically start in people's younger years. Half of all lifetime mental illnesses develop before the age of 14,<sup>9</sup> and 75% of all mental health problems first appear before young people reach 25 years old.<sup>10</sup> In Australia, one in seven students aged 4-17 years have experienced a mental disorder in the previous 12 months,<sup>11</sup> 1 in 10 adolescents have engaged in self-harming,<sup>12</sup> whilst suicide is the leading cause of death of children and young people.<sup>13</sup>

By targeting the mental health needs of children and young people that have surfaced due to the pandemic with effective policies and interventions, there are significant opportunities to prevent and reduce the escalation of mental health issues and the considerable, detrimental, social and economic effects that they have on individuals over the life course, as well as on their families and communities. Intervention early in life is particularly important for a child's mental health because it is during the transition from childhood to independent adulthood that foundational resources and

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<sup>7</sup> E.g. Pretorius C, Chambers D, Coyle D Young People's Online Help-Seeking and Mental Health Difficulties: Systematic Narrative Review J Med Internet Res 2019;21(11):e13873 URL: <http://www.jmir.org/2019/11/e13873/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.yourtown.com.au/sites/default/files/document/2.%20Preventing%20suicide%20by%20children%20and%20young%20people.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Kessler, R.C., Berglund, P., Demler, O., et al. (2005) Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the national comorbidity survey replication. *Archive of General Psychiatry* 62 (6).

<sup>10</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2014). *Australia's Health 2014*. Canberra: (Cat. no. AUS 178).

<sup>11</sup> The Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing (2013-14): <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/mental-health-services/mental-health-services-in-australia/report-contents/summary/prevalence-and-policies>

<sup>12</sup> Lawrence, D. et al (2015) *The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents: Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, Department of Health, Canberra.

<sup>13</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data on Causes of Death, Australia, 2017.

conditions for a fulfilling and productive future are created.<sup>14</sup> Since mental health issues can impede education (including attainment and school engagement<sup>15</sup>), employment and relational outcomes, it is critical that more is done to support the mental health of our younger generations to prevent lifelong issues from developing with increasing levels of social exclusion.

- 1.1.10 Strong governance and integrated coordination

**yourtown** collects significant data in relation to contacts to Kids Helpline and works with a number of different referral organisations in supporting our clients. We have long advocated for national facilitation and coordination of national datasets and nationally agreed indicators on mental health to inform effective decision-making and service and system design and development. We strongly welcome the Government's swift response during the pandemic to collect and use existing datasets, such as Kids Helpline, to monitor and inform response to the arising issues. Currently, we provide Kids Helpline contact data every week to the Department of Health and to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare to inform the Federal Government's continued response to the pandemic.

We are keen to be involved in the future development of any national indicators relevant to children and young people as KHL is the only national tele-web counselling provider to children and young people under 25 years. In addition, **yourtown** can contribute to any work relating to the sharing of data amongst service providers to improve the support clients receive.

#### Recommendations

**Recommendation 1.** That the Federal Government continue to promote mental health issues nationally and invest in mental health and suicide responses. To reduce the impact of long-term mental health issues, greater prioritisation of children and young people's mental health needs, including those under 12, is required.

**Recommendation 2.** That the Federal Government maintain an adequate funding base dedicated to digital mental health supports, such as Kids Helpline and Circles, and prioritisation of investment into strategies to support increasing digital access and literacy of vulnerable cohorts of children, young people and their families .

**Recommendation 3.** Include organisations such as **yourtown**/Kids Helpline in the development of specific indicators in relation to population wellbeing and distress

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<sup>14</sup> Purcell, R. Goldstone, S. Moran, J. Albiston, D. Edwards, J. Pennell, K. and McGorry P. (2011). Toward a Twenty-First Century Approach to Youth Mental Health Care. *International Journal of mental health*. 40(2),72-87.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. Orygen Youth Health Research (2014) Tell them they're dreaming: Work, Education and Young People with Mental Illness in Australia.

## Youth unemployment

With no certain end to the lockdown/s across jurisdictions and with the impact of the GFC still evident on the unemployment rates of young people in Australia, there has been considerable coverage on how the response to the pandemic and the subsequent economic downturn has and will continue to disproportionately affect youth employment.

It is a concern that we share since, despite Australia uniquely having experienced economic growth for some 30 years, youth unemployment has not been below 10% since 2008 (it was at its lowest in August 2008 at 7.4% and peaked at 21% in February 1992 and 1993)<sup>16</sup>, and in recent years has stubbornly hovered between 10-15%.<sup>17</sup> In April 2020, it stood at 13.9% - an increase of 1.2% from March 2020<sup>18</sup> - and it is widely expected to rapidly rise when the full effects of the recession and the end to the Jobkeeper allowance are felt.

As a provider of jobactive for young people (in 26 locations) and of Transition to Work (TTW, in 12 locations), and of social enterprises designed to tackle long-term youth unemployment, **yourtown** has long sought to respond to and advocate on strategies to overcome youth unemployment challenges. In this section, we present our insight in relation to these long-standing challenges alongside the many issues of the current employment services model, largely ill-suited to meeting the needs of the young unemployed, and particularly in light of this unprecedented crisis. We ask the Federal Government that it develop and implement a national long-term investment strategy to address youth unemployment, including investment in specialist employment services for young people such as our model to overcome long term youth unemployment (**your job, your way**). We outline the many actions that we believe need to be taken in this strategy to overcome not only the emerging effects of the pandemic on youth unemployment but also the long evident challenges with which young jobseekers have had to contend.

- **youth employment and the economic downturn**

Youth unemployment has long been a significant social and economic issue, with the unemployment rate being significantly higher than (about double) the unemployment rates of those aged over 25. Furthermore, unlike that of the older population, youth unemployment has not responded to economic upturns, with the effects of the GFC still evident in youth employment figures today. Long-term youth unemployment is also considerably higher than that of those aged over 25, doubling since the GFC to just over 18% in October 2019, with one in 10 unemployed young people now long-term unemployed.<sup>19</sup>

A number of different factors contribute to high youth unemployment; lack of experience; credential inflation; the increasing casualisation of employment and; fewer low-skill, entry-level roles, resulting in a reduced pool of accessible and secure jobs for young people. In an economic downturn, these factors are accentuated and then further compounded by older people delaying retirement, whilst the 'scarring' effect of economic downturns on young people has been found to

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<sup>16</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics Labour Force data (April, 2020)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid

<sup>18</sup> Ibid

<sup>19</sup> [http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/11694/1/BSL\\_Prospertys\\_children\\_youth\\_unemployment\\_Dec2019.pdf](http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/11694/1/BSL_Prospertys_children_youth_unemployment_Dec2019.pdf)

be lifelong, particularly for those most disadvantaged.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, the mental health and wellbeing of young people suffers the longer they remain unemployed, with long-term unemployment itself is a contributing factor to mental ill-health, and in turn poor-mental health being a barrier to finding work.<sup>21</sup>

With young people disproportionately working in the industries affected by the lockdown, and disproportionately working as casual employees ineligible for Jobkeeper, the scale of the predicted challenge to youth unemployment presented by the pandemic is of deep concern. If young people are not appropriately supported, the pandemic could be responsible for developing a generation of young people unequipped to participate socially and economically in our communities, which given the forecast decline in immigration and an ageing population, would leave communities and labour markets unable to meet society's challenges and needs.

- **yourtown employment services and the pandemic**

To date, only our Transition to Work programmes have seen significant increases in clients due to pandemic, with those registered in TTW doubling since April to 2,449. We are also expecting to see significant increases in caseload in relation to our youth specialist jobactive subcontract.

The same contingency arrangements for jobactive that were applied during the bushfires have been enacted during the pandemic. These arrangements override the compliance measures of jobactive and, subsequently, clients do not have to attend services in person. This makes the work of our jobactive consultants more challenging as establishing a trusted relationship face-to-face with young people is fundamental to the success of employment outcomes for vulnerable groups of young people. Hence, whilst we do not support a compliance-focused system that does not flexibly respond to the needs of every client, we do deem some contractual elements useful when discretely used to stimulate the engagement of young people.

The temporary contingency measure also places more financial pressure on the viability of the current jobactive model as providers are financially dependent on employment outcomes for the majority of the funding, whilst the ability to achieve employment outcomes will also be greatly affected by the economic downturn. The financial viability of jobactive was already in doubt given the contract was simply extended for two years in 2020 with no indexation of provider rates since its commencement in 2015 despite annual inflationary cost increases of 7%. In 2019-2020, we expect to breakeven but, even before the pandemic, we were forecasting the need to have to subsidise our jobactive services in 2020-2021 since it is ever more difficult to achieve a 26-week employment outcome given the increasing proportion of casual and part-time work available.

Furthermore, from experience we know that jobactive is ill-equipped to meet the needs of young unemployed people, and particularly long-term young unemployed people. Issues with the model and system that supports it include:

- **The ineffective jobactive assessment tool (the Job Seeker Classification Instrument, JSCI).**
  - the existing jobactive classification system does not place adequate weight on disadvantaged jobseekers, such as early school leavers, Aboriginal and Torres

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<sup>20</sup> <https://theconversation.com/the-next-employment-challenge-from-coronavirus-how-to-help-the-young-135676>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.yourtown.com.au/sites/default/files/document/Tackling%20Long-term%20Youth%20Unemployment%20Position%20Statement.pdf>

Strait Islanders, ex-offenders and those at risk of or who are long-term unemployed; which means those who need most support do not automatically receive it and they can be lost in, and become unresponsive, to the system. For example, to date, 39% of our Stream A jobactive caseload are long-term unemployed (57% of our whole jobactive caseload are long-term unemployed).

- JSCI has been found to inaccurately stream clients, and as a result many clients with complex issues such as mental health, homelessness or integrating back into the community post detention find themselves placed into Stream A, which is designed to assist job seekers with a high level of independence.<sup>22</sup> In such incidences, we will reassess them so that their needs can be better met in a different stream but this is a long and bureaucratic process.
- JSCI is conducted by Centrelink (and by phone currently) which is not conducive to uncovering the critical challenges (such as mental illness) that a young person might face. If the assessment is to uncover the real issues that confront disadvantaged jobseekers the assessment must be undertaken face-to-face by someone that the client knows and trusts. Our clients see the current JSCI as a hurdle to accessing income, as that is their immediate priority when contacting Centrelink. Hence, in addition to not knowing the Centrelink staff member, they will also not want to present with their issues for fear of causing delays to accessing their income or complicate the process in other unforeseen ways. An improved assessment questionnaire and assessment process is needed.
- **Inadequate support for disadvantaged jobseekers in jobactive.**
  - Unlike TTW, mainstream jobactive services are not resourced to provide the intensity of support and engagement necessary to address barriers and improve the life chances of disadvantaged young people.<sup>23</sup> Employment funds are also no longer appropriately flexible or adequate to enable staff to provide jobseekers with supports they need to overcome personal and practical barriers.
  - Given resources, the case load of jobactive staff is too large, consisting of clients from a range of streams, and staff are therefore unable to provide the intensive support that disadvantaged unemployed young people need.
  - Many disadvantaged young people cannot access work due to having no drivers' licence, lacking the support to gain the required driving hours needed and the means to purchase a vehicle. Indeed, local employers cite this as a reason they cannot hire some young people.
- **Overly prescriptive service points.**
  - The current jobactive contract designates prescriptive service points at which job seekers are required to undertake activities that satisfy government policy or community expectation, e.g. contacts with providers.
  - The level of prescription regarding these activities detracts from providers' ability to tailor placement strategies to the individual needs and circumstances of job seekers. Providers should be able to work out the best approach to assisting job seekers to connect with the labour market rather than mandating a 'one size fits all' servicing regime.

<sup>22</sup> Education and Employment References Committee Report 'Jobactive: failing those it is intended to serve' (February 2019): [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Education\\_and\\_Employment/JobActive2018/Report?fbclid=IwARlkN7eisltnZ8dlHiiOeylLOMln0kxhimusAmz2uEGYUbeNF6Z-dXmDuEU](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Education_and_Employment/JobActive2018/Report?fbclid=IwARlkN7eisltnZ8dlHiiOeylLOMln0kxhimusAmz2uEGYUbeNF6Z-dXmDuEU)

<sup>23</sup> Melbourne Institute Policy Brief No.4. 16, June 2016.



- **jobactive has no relationship with students.**
  - Many students who finish school fall through the gap created by a state-based education system and a Federal Government employment service.
  - The first time that most young people will have heard of jobactive will be when they become unemployed, which is too late as they may already be out of routines and regular habits, demoralised and disengaged from formal support.
  - This is why, as a youth specialist employment service, we would like to be able to be invited into schools so that we can start to build the important relationships of trust with young people early and even start to work on their employability skills. This would mean that on leaving school they would know who to contact for support, if needed, and that we could seamlessly work with them to find work as soon as possible.
  - Furthermore, students need to have the opportunity to learn at school how to write their resumes, where to look for and apply for jobs and what to expect at interviews – all skills we currently have to spend considerable time working on with our clients, delaying their access to the job market.
- **Disadvantaged students have poor knowledge about post-school pathways.**
  - In a survey we conducted with 408 young people aged 12-30 in late 2019 to inform our submission to the Education Council in relation to post school pathways,<sup>24</sup> the level of information that students receive about employers, labour markets and finding work is piecemeal, highly variable depending on school and location and insufficient.
  - As a result, many **yourtown** clients do not understand employers' expectations, and often, are not aware of basic expectations, such as that they must show up on time or keep regular hours, what to do if they are sick or running late, or what to wear. They also lack knowledge about getting paid, terms and conditions, and their rights or setting up a bank so they can be paid.
  - We also know that many schools are not informing students about possible pathways they can pursue in their local area. For example, there are increasing numbers of jobs in human services and aged care but these are not areas of work that schools seem to be discussing with students. In some areas in which we work, we know that advanced welders are imminently retiring but there are no suitable employees to take their place.
  - It would be helpful for those students who are keen to work straight after leaving school or who wish to study for a trade or particular profession that schools look to the needs of the local labour market and employers, collaborate with them and seek to harmonise expectations. This could even include the development of local courses for students to undertake after school in preparation for a specific job locally. In some areas, for example, we have worked with local employers and TAFE to develop specific training that directly meets the needs of local employers, whilst taking into account the skill base and needs of our clients.
- **Inadequate levels of welfare support for jobseekers.**
  - As we set out in response and evidence to the Senate in relation to the adequacy of Newstart, we believe that inadequate levels of financial support is incongruous

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.yourtown.com.au/sites/default/files/document/Senior%20secondary%20pathways%20into%20work%20-%20submission.pdf>



with supporting jobseekers to find employment, and for disadvantaged jobseekers in particular, only further compounds and entrenches the deep and persistent issues they must overcome.<sup>25</sup>

- **yourtown solutions to youth unemployment**

To help young people overcome the barriers to employment, **yourtown** has developed two models to improve employment outcomes: 1) social enterprises, and 2) your job, your way. We briefly set the features of these models out below.

#### **yourtown social enterprises**

**yourtown** has operated social enterprises for more than 20 years, providing paid transitional work and training for unemployed young people as a stepping stone to open employment.

The enterprises deliver fee-for-service work for local councils, state government agencies and head contractors and not-for-profit organisations such as community housing providers in areas such as building refurbishment, landscaping, fencing, property maintenance and environmental rehabilitation. **yourtown** focuses on projects which help young people learn practical skills and appropriate workplace behaviours in a real work environment, while providing social, economic and environmental benefits to local communities.<sup>26</sup>

Research and evaluation we have undertaken with our social enterprise clients about their experiences and their outcomes of them have demonstrated a range of different positive results from involvement with the programmes, including improved self-esteem and confidence, day-to-day structure and purpose, professional, soft and other life skills, and ultimately paid work experience that is more likely to lead to paid work.

#### **your job, your way**

From extensive research we have undertaken on long-term youth (un)employment, we have developed a specific model to help long-term unemployed young people into work – **your job, your way**. Given this cohort's complex needs, our model is designed to meet a range of different needs throughout the life of a long-term unemployed young person's journey into work. In addition, it recognises that long-term unemployment is a barrier to finding work itself and compounds existing issues that prevent job obtainment.

**your job your way** targets young people aged 16-21 who have been unemployed for over 52 weeks, and are at high risk of social exclusion and permanent detachment from the labour market. Central to its approach is the delivery of intensive, concurrent services and support to small active caseloads of around 25 young people. This is achieved through the provision of a dual support team of a qualified case manager (pathways coach) and an employment mentor – both of whom have been recruited for their knowledge and skills in identifying and working with people with mental health issues – who work with the young person using a collaborative strengths-based, trauma-

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.yourtown.com.au/sites/default/files/document/Adequacy%20of%20Newstart%20-%20submission.pdf>

<sup>26</sup> A two minute video which features young people and Enterprise Trainers speaking of their experiences in **yourtown** enterprises can be accessed at: <https://www.yourtown.com.au/what-we-do/yourtown-social-enterprises>

informed approach, coupled with targeted employer engagement and intensive 'in work' mentoring to 26 weeks.

We are currently funding two pilots of the model in Elizabeth in South Australia and Caboolture in Queensland and a third site is being funded by the Federal Government's Try, Test and Learn initiative in Davenport-Burnie in Tasmania – three areas of high disadvantage and high rates of long-term youth unemployment. The model is being also being independently evaluated by the Centre for Social Impact (University of New South Wales) to ensure that the effectiveness and impact of these pilots on young people and the community is thoroughly tested and measured.

In the interim evaluation report, it has been found that, despite the model's approach focusing on addressing barriers to employment before prioritising placing a client into employment, a higher proportion of **your job your way** clients have found jobs (i.e. had a placement) between July 2018 and June 2019 compared to jobactive clients of the same cohort: 51% of your job your way clients compared to only 33% of jobactive clients. Compared to jobactive clients, your job your way clients were also more successful at attaining 4-, 12-, and 26-weeks outcomes. The placement conversion rate to 12 weeks outcome was 79% for your job your way clients compared to 61% for jobactive clients and the conversion rate to 26 weeks was 75% for your job your way clients, more than double that of jobactive clients.

- **Helping young people into work: what needs to change**

Given the scale of the economic downturn, which the current employment service is ill-equipped to accommodate, we call for the development of a national, cross-cutting investment strategy to address youth unemployment and long-term youth unemployment, that includes both supply and demand policy approaches set out in our recommendations below. We see this crisis as an opportunity to address many long-standing issues that have prevented all young people from reaching their potential and contributing to society in ways they would like to.

#### **Recommendations**

**Recommendation 4.** That the Federal Government develops a national investment strategy to address youth unemployment and long-term youth unemployment that includes:

- **Youth specialist employment services** to reflect the different needs and engagement preferences of those aged 15-24, centred on the delivery of **intensive and face-to-face support** to **small, active caseloads of jobseekers**. New contracting arrangements should be modelled with a split between service fees and outcome fees and outcomes should reflect the realities of the labour market.
- **Revision of the weightings in the JSCI** to recognise comparative levels of **disadvantage for high risk groups** based on Priority Investment Data. This should include identifying long-term unemployment as a barrier in itself and prioritising groups at risk of long-term unemployment such as those with low skills or who have left school early. There is also a need to streamline the current process for changing the classification quickly where necessary.

- **A strengths-based approach** to activation of jobseekers through a thorough and more engaging and collaborative intake and assessment process conducted by professional staff **face-to-face** who have the appropriate qualifications, skills, time and execution.
- The jobseeker assessment should also be **more relevant to jobseekers with mental illness**. Appropriate support and referral pathways will need to be in place to ensure jobseekers' mental health needs are effectively met. This would be assisted by the provision of funding for the placement of specialist mental health practitioners within jobactive programs. Their role would be to upskill and increase the capacity of employment services staff to appropriately support people with mental health concerns, and furthermore, they would provide a direct case management and counselling response
- **Wage subsidies** should be retained as they are effective tools for leveraging placement of job seekers at high risk of long term unemployment.
- **Place-based response models** for priority high unemployment areas so that local solutions can be developed to the local context, such as **your job, your way** that has been proven to improve outcomes for long-term unemployed young people, and collective impact strategies like those being led and developed by the NYEB.
- **Greater flexibility** in the application of the Target Compliance Framework given the inherent complexities of poor mental health and other barriers that can prevent jobseekers from meeting compliance targets and engaging with the service.
- Government and large employers should set **social procurement targets** to stimulate job creation and growth of social enterprises, particularly in low socio-economic areas, with specific **quotas for youth employment**. New infrastructure, green and circular economy projects would be optimal areas with which to commence.
- **More structured support for school to work transitions** for students who are disengaged or at high risk of disengaging early from education. This would involve Providers being able to engage with at risk young people while they are still at school.
- Practical solutions to address young people's **transport issues**, including the problem of accessing a vehicle and accumulating sufficient practice hours to sit for their licence.
- Acknowledgement and response to the increasing casualisation of the workforce, including some level of **security and stability built into the system** so that vulnerable cohorts cannot be left to fall through the gaps again.
- **A reinvigorated TAFE sector** that provides quality and accredited training that leads to employment and is tailored to the local needs of employers.
- **Continued adequate youth unemployment payments**, required to ensure that economic hardship does not compound the barriers to work and so young people can appropriately focus on their job search or training.

**Recommendation 5:** That the Australian Government work with state and territory governments to instigate a review into the delivery of literacy and numeracy education across the school system. The review should seek to establish what needs to be changed to ensure that every student leaves the education system with the required level of literacy and numeracy needed in all post-school pathways (e.g. checkpoint systems).

**Recommendation 6:** Review the current provisions concerning professional and life skills development within the National School's Curriculum – including obtaining a drivers' licence –

and consider how to both expand the current development of these skills and to accredit them (e.g. through micro-credentialing).

**Recommendation 7:** Educate students about employers' expectations, the local labour market and how to find work and connect them with employment support services in school to help minimise periods of unemployment. Schools should work closer with the local community, including local employers, training providers and employment support providers (e.g. jobactive) and invite them into school to help prepare students for their post-school transition.

## Family and domestic violence

**yourtown** provides a refuge and support services in Queensland for women and children escaping from family and domestic violence. In addition, many of the disadvantaged children and young people we work with in our education, employment and parenting support programs have had their lives deeply shaken by the effects of family violence.

Our insight into how the pandemic and its response has affected those experiencing family and domestic violence comes directly from staff at our refuge. The first key issue that presented to survivors of domestic violence in Queensland was there being significant delay and **difficulty in accessing crisis payments from Centrelink** given the rise in demand of the service from those seeking to lodge their applications for jobkeeper payments. Having access to funds that enable women to escape or maintain their independence from the perpetrator is vital to preventing domestic violence and delays in accessing them are simply unacceptable as it risks the safety of women and their children.

Providers of supports and services to family and domestic violence survivors are expecting a surge in demand as the pandemic continues. In rural areas in Queensland, police referrals have increased which may be as a result of women seeking face-to-face support. In addition, services intended to support survivors of family violence have received calls from male perpetrators who are seeking help to prevent their perpetrating during the lockdown.

Furthermore, the pandemic has identified an issue in relation to there being no plan or process in identifying or putting in place alternative arrangements for the care of children should a survivor of domestic violence be unable to care for her children temporarily (e.g. if she had to go to hospital). Since alternative care arrangements could be grandparents, the nature of COVID-19 has meant that they might be a vulnerable cohort and unable to care for their grandchildren. Hence, there is need for a framework to guide this issue in relation to the pandemic, but also other unforeseen issues that might arise.

The legal system has adjourned family and domestic violence matters and sentences since the lockdown and this will obviously stretch a system already under resourced and struggling to process cases in a timely fashion, which ultimately jeopardises the safety of survivors of family and domestic violence.

Furthermore, the Respect campaign promoted help-seeking for women and men as victims and perpetrators of family and domestic violence but there was no mention of children. The voice of children and young people affected by domestic and family continues to be under-represented.

#### **Recommendations**

**Recommendation 8.** Create a priority, separate line to enable the timely assessment of Centrelink payment to those experiencing family and domestic violence.

**Recommendation 9.** Further invest in support services for both survivors and perpetrators of family violence, including increased advocacy support for survivors and counselling services for perpetrators, and continue to promote the issue nationally.

**Recommendation 10:** Increase capacity for the criminal, child and family law courts to resolve issues relating to family and domestic violence in a timely manner.

**Recommendation 11.** Develop family and domestic violence campaigns to support children and young people and encourage help-seeking through services such as Kids Helpline.

### **The digital divide**

The transition of many services to online delivery in response to COVID-19 restrictions assisted children and young people to continue to access the support they need, continue with their education and engage with a range of other activities important for their health and wellbeing and development. However, for many children and young people confronted by deep and persistent disadvantage, difficulties in accessing online services – or digital exclusion – were compounded by the lock down. This was the case for young people engaged in our education engagement and employment programmes in South East Queensland (Youth Engagement Programme, YEP and Get Set For Work, GSFW) and South Australia (Flexible Learning Options, FLO).

Access issues included:

- **No access to a laptop, tablet or PC.** Many young people participating in our education engagement programmes do not have appropriate devices at home on which they could work (including for programme, school or TAFE work), particularly those from large families. They only have mobile phones, and often old phones that are incompatible with new apps or function poorly, while some do not have smart phones. Many of the schools we work with did not have laptops to lend to our clients and even when they were supposed to lend out devices (e.g. in South Australia) they did not provide as the young people had in the past lost a cord or damaged them, or schools simply did not have enough.

As a result, programme staff undertook a range of different approaches to assist clients and keep them engaged:

- They organised to lend them **yourtown** laptops and tablets. Agreements were set up to assist this process, and in some areas laptops were lent to clients during the school day hours only to avoid unforeseen issues in relation to their misappropriation, which meant staff dropped them off and picked them up every day.
  - Where schools declined to deliver hard copies of school work to students, they organised to collect paper copies of school work from schools and drop them off at clients' homes at the start of the week and pick them up at the end of the week to return to the school. Many clients felt that admitting they did not have a device they could use at home to teachers was embarrassing and would not go to school to collect school work.
  - Provided a number of young people with a mobile phone. For example, the family of one of our female clients only have one phone between eight people. She has significant mental health issues and needed to access headspace and Kids Helpline virtually so we gave her a smart phone to enable her to access the support she needed and therefore continue to engage with our programme.
  - Advocated on behalf of clients to schools in relation to the provision of laptops in the future to students who do not have them.
- **Limited or poor internet access.** The households of our clients do not all have Wi-Fi or access to unlimited internet data, whilst public places providing free WIFI access were closed. Some clients, particularly those who live in rural areas, do not have good internet reception and cannot download certain school/programme activities such as videos, whilst software such as Zoom takes up significant amounts of data. We assisted clients with unlimited internet access by providing them with OPTUS sim cards with data credit and providing them with tablets with internet connections. In addition, protection was put in place to ensure only suitable websites could be accessed.
  - **Digital literacy issues.** Whilst young people are digital natives in relation to smartphones, social media apps and games, in many cases that does not correspond to having the digital literacy to engage in other online programs. Our staff had to help many young people download and use software relating to school or **yourtown** programme (e.g. email, Teams, Zoom). Often staff had to coach them through using online platforms and even with tasks such as the activation of sim cards as they struggled with instructions.
  - **Digital platforms ill-suited to teaching some vulnerable cohorts.** In our experience, digital platforms are ill-suited to disadvantaged cohorts in terms of: 1) ability to engage, and 2) the level of support/assistance it can provide, and 3) lack of suitable environment as explained below.
    - **Ability to engage.** Education engagement programmes are designed around relationship-based programming, with face-to-face interactions an important

element of this. Whilst programme staff connected (or attempted to) virtually with them, or attempted to, many clients simply did not want to engage on this platform.

Sometimes this was due to their poor digital literacy and sometimes this was because they had fallen out of the routine set by face-to-face activities, slept in and spent days gaming or watching TV series and with this came notable changes in mood and even symptoms of depression. Even for those clients who initially engaged online, this proved to be due to it being a novelty, and they increasingly disengaged the longer the lockdown persisted. Some students have said that they will go back to school in the **new year** due to the impact the pandemic has had and them having missed so much. In terms of our programme engagement, all staff acknowledged that it will entail significant work to reengage clients and make up progress lost.

Young parents on our parenting programmes felt they did not have time for engagement online, or did not want to engage online about issues relating to their children's health and wellbeing as they feared this would have implications in relation to child protection (e.g. they feared it would be recorded or there would be a more visible record of what they said). Some young mothers did not want to engage online as they live with a perpetrators of family violence and feared they would find out about them discussing issues with us.

- **Level of support.** Our programme staff found that they had to help young people undertake their school work, search the internet for questions they might have relating to it and/or liaise with teachers to help explain some parts. We also had to support many parents of young people who were trying to help their children with work but becoming overwhelmed and anxious about their ability to assist them.

Referrals of children to our services from parents (and not schools) has also increased, especially of siblings of young people already engaged in the service whilst we are also working harder to support the needs of young people's families who have lost their jobs and require financial and other support.

Many young people did not want to ask teachers for help and the process has made some schools realise the size of the gap that some students have in learning and that the traditional approaches they employ are not helpful and instead are allowing them to slip through gaps (some schools ended up setting work online for the year below because of this). On the plus side, some clients found that they liked to do school work online due to spellcheck and said they would like to do school work online in the future.

- **Lack of suitable environment.** Sadly too many of our clients do not have suitable home environments in which they could undertake their work, and too many had issues of family violence and conflict to manage. Often the way they manage this is to leave the house and sometimes this resulted in them engaging in unconstructive activities with their friends.

### **Recommendations**

**Recommendation 12:** That the Federal Government work with state and territory governments to develop national strategies to ensure that no child or young person is unable to access appropriate devices to undertake their school work or training, or access free unlimited internet access if they do not have the resources to afford them.

**Recommendation 13.** Review the school curriculum in relation to digital learning at school to ensure that it accommodates the needs of vulnerable students.

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