



Submission

Introduction

YACSA is the peak body in South Australia representing the interests of young people, youth workers, organisations and networks throughout the non-government youth sector. Policy positions are independent and not aligned with any political party or movement. YACSA supports the fundamental right of all young people to participate in and contribute to all aspects of community life, particularly the decision-making processes that impact them.

YACSA welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the COVID-19 Response Committee given that young people have been – and will continue to be – disproportionately impacted by the pandemic.

The issues outlined in this submission are not necessarily new, but rather existing issues that have been exacerbated by the pandemic.

Throughout the pandemic, young people have been responding to a range of impacts that include a loss of employment, decreasing access to housing, social isolation, issues related to transitioning to online education platforms, and subsequent mental health challenges.

Different communities and populations have felt the impacts in different ways, and these issues, when coupled with the long-term effects of economic scarring, are expected to be felt for at least a decade. For young people aged 16-25 this is the second economic shock experienced in their lifetime, yet despite this reality young people have not featured prominently in response efforts.

The youth sector has been rapidly responding to the existing and emerging needs of young people throughout the pandemic and has transitioned services to online environments and ensured face-to-face services are conducted in a COVID-safe way. This has come at a significant cost to organisations, programs and sector workers with the sector reporting increased demand for services, increases in service-related costs and impacts to worker wellbeing.

This submission highlights some of the systemic issues facing young people, but through conversations with youth services we recognise there are compounding and unique impacts and response needs for different communities. We would welcome the opportunity to speak to these impacts.

The impact of the pandemic on young people

Employment and Unemployment

One of the most significant and pressing issues facing young people is the economic scarring resulting from pandemic restrictions and subsequent recession. A report by the Grattan Institute described the economic downturn as one of, if not the, worst economic downturn in Australia's history.

Youth unemployment and underemployment have been significant issues in South Australia and Australia for decades. The pandemic and associated restrictions have exacerbated this, decimating

industries that typically employ young people. In data released by the ABS in May 2020, jobs in the accommodation and food services industry decreased by 27.1%, and jobs in the arts and recreation services industry decreased by 19%. This led to a 14.6% decrease in employment for young people under 20 and a 10.7% decrease in employment for young people 20-29, which demonstrating the largest declines in employment in any age group.

Learnings from previous recessions indicate that in times of economic uncertainty older workers tend to stay in the workforce longer and job movement is stalled, reducing the opportunities for young people to find work, and restricting progress to leadership positions.

Economists have modelled the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent recession on the job market, and estimate that on average, a 21-year-old in Australia will have a collective loss of income of \$32,000 over the coming decade. Overall, EY estimates that the current cohort of young people will report a loss of as much as \$7 billion in income by 2030. This does not include the implications on superannuation, savings, and ability to acquire assets, which were already limited for many young people.

The recent unemployment figures showed that South Australia reported 56,000 unemployed people competing for 19,300 available jobs. In March, the unemployment rate for young people aged 15-24 was the highest in the country at 16.4% with 23,900 currently unemployed, see appendix A.

The economic impacts on young people's employability are clearly acknowledged by the sector with a significant portion of the state government funded Youth-Led Recovery Grants administered by the LGA focusing on employment.

Through the COVID-19 Recovery Project we have heard that work experience and placement opportunities have ceased, reducing opportunities for young people to gain workplace exposure and build important employment networks. As the newly unemployed look for opportunities to re-enter the job market, the risk of further exclusion of the long-term unemployed is compounded as competition increases. In addition, entry level jobs and apprenticeships often require a drivers' licence which can be a barrier for many young people who cannot afford lessons or a licence and do not have access to a qualified supervising driver.

We note that young women's experience of unemployment and underemployment is disproportionate and unique and understand our colleagues at the Working Women's Centre SA have provided the committee with an overview of these issues. We also acknowledge that experiences differ for members of multicultural communities, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people living with disability and members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Housing and homelessness

In addition to limiting access to appropriate employment opportunities the pandemic has exacerbated many of the issues that lock young people out of the housing market. The demand for housing, limited movement within the rental market and early access to superannuation has resulted in safe, stable, and suitable housing moving further out of reach for young people.

Research presented by Professor Emma Baker and colleagues at the 2020 AHURI conference on the experience of renters during COVID-19 found that across Australia, only half of the research participants were successful in receiving rental moratoriums, with young people in general missing out. Rental affordability was compounded for temporary visa holders with 42% indicating they have been concerned about becoming homeless since the beginning of the pandemic.

The researchers also noted more than 15% of young people were skipping meals to meet daily costs and 1 in 5 withdrew superannuation to cover housing costs. The implications of accessing superannuation early will likely limit retirement savings and eligibility for bank loans which will further disadvantage young people in the housing market. Young people will primarily be responsible for the repayment of public debt in the future, so it is critical that policy efforts are focussed on preventing future disadvantage.

Young people who are experiencing homelessness after leaving accommodation for safety or affordability reasons, currently find themselves waiting three weeks to two months for an initial assessment in the homelessness sector where the waitlist for short-term shelter and transitional accommodation is greater than the capacity of the system. The lack of movement has significantly stalled the pathways for young people to move out of homelessness, with those who have been lucky to secure temporary accommodation staying longer.

It is currently unclear what impact the State Government homelessness sector reforms will have, but limited availability of affordable housing pathways is likely to continue, placing increased pressure on a system already at capacity.

Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly impacted the mental health and wellbeing of young people due to lockdowns, restrictions and concerns regarding financial stability, employment, housing, and social connectedness.

Previous economic shocks such as the global financial crisis saw rises in unemployment correlated with increases in suicide rates and there are reports of increased suicidal ideation amongst young people in a number of settings across the youth and education sectors.

The pandemic's impact on the mental health and wellbeing of young people is clearly captured by the Mission Australia Youth Survey Report and the headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey, both completed during 2020. Other concerns included education, COVID-19 and social isolation.

Younger people aged 12-14 reported the pandemic had disrupted their daily lives and young women in particular reported a decrease in their ability to cope with stressors. This was also true for young people aged 22-25 who experienced disruptions to key milestones linked with finishing study, entering the workforce, becoming more independent, building new social connections, and moving into their own homes.

The Butterfly Foundation reported a 57% increase in contacts to its national helpline for eating disorders and body image concerns in August 2020 compared with January that year. The increase in eating disorder and body image concerns amongst young people is also being seen in some regions of South Australia where specialised supports are limited.

Consultation with the youth sector indicates that the mental health system in South Australia is currently beyond capacity resulting in lengthy wait times. Non-traditional mental health services are seeing increased complexity and severity of issues in the young people accessing their services. This is compounded by the lack of prevention and early intervention services, limited or scarce outreach services, and a lack of effective detection, assessment, and diagnostic services – particularly in rural and remote areas.

Youth services in homelessness, family safety and education and training have all reported increases in mental health presentations and complexity in young people seeking support. Due to the lack of

referral pathways and significant wait times, services find themselves filling these gaps without adequate training and support or additional resources.

These wait times and gaps are felt more so for LGBTQIA+, culturally and linguistically diverse, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities who tend not to access traditional one-to-one services, especially as restrictions limited availability of group programs and face-to-face services.

We note that the Mental Health Coalition of SA has provided evidence to the committee that the mental health sector is at capacity and confirms the observations and experiences of the South Australian youth sector.

Other impacts

Withdrawal of federal government protections (rental moratorium, income support supplements, etc.) will result in increased pressure on the community in areas such as rental stress, debt, relationship strain and unemployment.

The move to remote learning during the pandemic resulted in a significant reduction to young people's access to support systems and reduced the visibility of at-risk young people.

Since the pandemic began, research and reports from service providers have highlighted significant increases in forms of family, domestic and sexual violence, as well as rising rates of mental health issues in Australia. We understand a number of these issues have been addressed by Our Watch.

With decreasing work hours and increased unemployment, the numbers of people seeking food relief at least once a week has doubled in South Australia since 2019. Young people are disproportionately impacted by food insecurity with Foodbank SA revealing 65% of young people aged 18-25 years were unable to afford enough food at least once a week.

Casual workers and international students have also emerged as the two new food insecure groups accessing food relief each week. In fact, a report released in September 2020 on the experience of temporary visa holders in Australia found that 70% of respondents who were working had lost their job or at least significant hours since 1 March.

It is expected that now access to JobKeeper and the Coronavirus Supplement have ended, demand for food relief through services such as Foodbank SA will continue to increase.

The impacts of mixed communication during the pandemic on young people

The Parliament of Australia Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 identified in the first interim report that mixed communications and a lack of strategic direction in responding to the pandemic have added to the confusion and anxiety in our community,

In South Australia, YACSA has heard that some young people lived in lockdown unnecessarily due to confusion of public messaging, restricting their movements and social connections unnecessarily. When QR codes were introduced, we heard that some young people avoided public places and often didn't have appropriate technology to check in to locations.

Many frontline workers and services have been working to educate young people and keep them informed of relevant COVID-19 messaging, however the disconnect between young people and health messaging continues to exist.

Our colleagues in other jurisdictions are reporting similar challenges and are continuing to explore different ways of helping improve communication accessibility and resonance. An example South Australia could explore is the work of the Youth Network of Tasmania (YNOT), who received funding from the Tasmanian Government to develop a communication and marketing campaign with and for young people.

The *You(th) Got This, Tassie!* campaign focused on connecting young people and public health messaging during the peak of the pandemic using youth-developed designs to improve understanding of COVID-19 and supports available. The campaign reached over 187,000 people on Instagram and 110,000 people on Facebook in addition to a hardcopy campaign set up in public spaces.

Given the mobility of young people it is important that steps are taken to improve the accessibility and resonance of communications to ensure the desired health behaviours are maintained and participation in programs such as the vaccination rollout are clearly understood and promoted.

The impact of COVID-19 on the youth sector

In South Australia, the youth sector responded quickly to the pandemic and transitioned their services to phone or online platforms where possible. For services that operated essential programs such as face-to-face services, domestic and family violence counselling, AOD groups, emergency food relief and FLO school delivery, social distancing and hand hygiene processes were quickly implemented to ensure safe continuity of service for both clients and workers.

The transition to online or telephone services broke new ground for many organisations and presented a range of issues that included problems with adopting new technology, the limits of online platforms to deliver some services and the costs of transitioning services to online platforms. Social distancing requirements also meant that organisations had to rapidly implement unanticipated and costly changes to work practices while workers were also grappling with changes in community need and how they delivered services.

Other challenges existed in the differing COVID-19 safe plans and restrictions between organisations and schools, creating frustration for services that exist within larger organisations offering aged care and disability services and confusion for young people as to why school settings were different to service settings.

Compounding this, the sector also reported increased demand for services and additional complexity experienced by young people seeking support since the pandemic began. Much of this demand relates to assisting young people and their families to cope with the prolonged impacts and issues related to COVID-19 including housing, mental health, employment, and other supports.

The need to focus on individual service and program offerings has resulted in some disconnects within the community sector limiting visibility of how other services have responded and what is available for young people in some locations.

Delivering services during the pandemic has driven a significant cost burden to the community sector workforce, with increased feelings of burnout, and increases in stress and mental health concerns. In September 2020, the results of a survey of community sector organisations found:

- 46% of respondents felt the greatest impact on their workforce were the levels of COVID-19 related uncertainty and change.

- 37% of respondents believe the additional workload on staff and volunteers were having the greatest impact.
- 34% of respondents reported that staff and volunteer mental health and wellbeing was being affected by the pandemic.
- 30% of respondents reported issues managing online service delivery.

Alarming, the research showed that 8 in 10 respondents reported that the scarcity of resources and funding uncertainty in the community sector exacerbates feelings of anxiety and helplessness for themselves, their staff, and their volunteers.

Frontline youth sector workers have described requiring multiple COVID-19 tests to continue working and feeling the burden of duty of care and the need to “soldier on” to ensure service continuity. Some organisations have the resources to provide additional support and leave to staff whilst other workers have been required to utilise their annual leave entitlements. Many workers have reported that they have deferred personal leave and their usual self-care methods were no longer available to them.

The wellbeing of sector workers and an appropriately resourced sector is critical to providing effective services and achieving successful outcomes for vulnerable young people in South Australia.

Whilst there were a number of negatives, the sector has reported that COVID-19 provided increased flexibility for how they could connect and engage young people, which has enabled new programs and improved connection in some settings. A snapshot from a sector workshop at Netfest 2021 of what worked and what didn't is attached in appendix B.

Prevention and early intervention

Emergency and crisis responses related to epidemics, pandemics and disasters often lead to an increased focus on tertiary services to the detriment of prevention and early intervention services. However, with young people describing a range of damaging impacts from the pandemic, particularly regarding emerging or ongoing mental health issues, government needs to ensure that prevention and early intervention services are strengthened to address those needs.

Ensuring appropriate and responsive prevention and early intervention services are available to young people will be important in limiting the impacts on individual health and wellbeing as well as on future health budgets.

Funding and reporting flexibility

With significant changes to the way that the sector has delivered services to their client groups already, and any potential changes to service delivery instigated by the unpredictability of the pandemic, the sector could be better supported by improved funding and flexibility in reporting procedures to enable continued responsiveness to the needs of young people.

Involving young people and the youth sector in the COVID-19 response and recovery

Despite young people carrying much of the burden of the pandemic, they are virtually absent from narratives and policy surrounding the COVID-19 response. The fiscal and financial policies implemented through the pandemic response have not been informed by, or co-designed with young people. It is well documented that these responses have not met the needs of young people and in many cases excluded them.

For South Australia's recovery to be relevant, responsive, and informed, young people and the youth sector must be involved in the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation from the outset. Engagement from both young people and the youth sector should go beyond static feedback mechanisms such as YourSay and explore more sustained and representative engagement that changes over time and provides as many opportunities to engage as possible.

Research has revealed that young people in OECD countries' trust in government is reducing, but the pandemic provides an opportunity for government to rebuild this trust by creating enabling structures for young people to participate.

Ensuring young people and the broader youth sector are involved in the development, implementation, monitoring and review of South Australia's COVID-19 response and recovery means that projects, and other strategies can be informed by lived experience and practice knowledge and will more effectively reflect the ideas, opinions, expertise and needs of young people.

Conclusion

Young people are most likely to feel the ongoing impacts of decisions relating to the pandemic, particularly in terms of career impacts and public debt. It is important that the impacts of the pandemic are addressed in the response and not left to the recovery conversation, as job losses, housing instability and impacts of education and mental health are being felt already.

YACSA believes it is imperative that the following issues feature in response and recovery efforts:

- Ensuring appropriate resourcing to youth services to increase capacity to support the newly vulnerable in addition to working with existing vulnerable clients.
- Ensuring prevention and early intervention services form the focus of the COVID-19 response, particularly services and programs addressing unemployment, housing, mental health and family, domestic and sexual violence.
- Identification of mechanisms for young people and the youth sector to participate in COVID-19 response and recovery planning.
- Reviewing and improving communications to ensure they are appropriate and accessible to young people.
- Ensuring that information and data that captures the experience of the 12–25-year cohort is obtained to improve government and services ability to monitor impacts and progress of young people through pandemic response and into recovery.

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SA unemployment figures 15-24 March 2021

March 2021
SA unemployment rate
15-24

16.4%



March 2021
SA unemployment total
15-24

23,900



March 2021
SA unemployment total
15-64

56,800



February 2021
SA job vacancies

19,300

A snapshot of sector responses from Netfest 2021

COVID-19 WORKSHOP SNAPSHOT

YACSA received state government funding to help ensure the COVID-19 response and recovery efforts meet the needs of young people.

To better understand the impacts of COVID-19 on the youth sector, YACSA held an interactive COVID-19 workshop at Netfest 2021 on what worked, what didn't, and what's next for the sector. The workshop included an update from the Hon Tammy Franks MLC, Chair of the state parliament COVID-19 Response Committee.

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Sector participants

Representing:

- 7 youth sector networks.
- 35 organisations.
- 1 government department.



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Ideas for what to focus on in a COVID-19 recovery plan

Top 3 responses:

- Mental health & wellbeing 43%.
- Employment/unemployment 34%.
- Housing/homelessness 16% & Youth participation in recovery planning 16%.

Ideas for what to include in a recovery plan:

- Better and faster access to mental health care and assessment.
- Activities for young people to connect post COVID-19.
- Youth employment in the regions.
- Safe, well paid and stable jobs for young people.
- Traineeships/apprenticeships that don't require a drivers licence.
- Driving lesson support.
- Transport.
- Safe, secure accommodation.
- Bridging of the digital divide.
- Input of young people into the recovery plan.
- Flexible, sustainable funding for the sector.



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*A snapshot of sector
responses from Netfest
2021*

COVID-19 WORKSHOP SNAPSHOT

Things the sector identified as challenges in supporting young people during COVID-19

- Zoom fatigue.
- Inconsistent guidelines between organisations and other places like schools.
- Expectation that peer connection can still occur online in the same way it does in person.
- Not all young people wanted to meet online, and some couldn't due to limited technology and/or data.
- Managing teams remotely.
- Having to take on additional tasks due to the temporary closure of other external services.
- Inability to plan ahead.
- Additional paperwork and application processes to run activities.
- Lack of suitable alternative options when events and programs were cancelled.

What the sector identified as working well

- Increased openness to creative ways to engage young people and meet them where they're at.
- Rethinking program delivery models.
- Flexibility to work from home and greater work/life balance.
- Use of video conferencing making regional involvement and partnerships more accessible.
- Flexibility in options for service delivery for clients.
- Increased Income Support.
- Additional COVID-19 funding providing extra support for young people.

Things the sector would like to see continue

- Training opportunities via Zoom/webinars.
- Flexible service delivery: online, telephone and in person.
- Flexible working conditions.
- Focus on staff wellbeing.



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