



## **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
- Youth specialist jobactive services in 26 locations, Transition to Work in 12 locations across four states, and ParentsNext in Port Pirie and adjacent communities in SA.
- Social enterprises and state employment services that aim to tackle youth unemployment and disadvantage.
- 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.

## Introduction

To date, Australia has fared well overall in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The economic and health policy responses of federal, state and territory governments have played an important part in this success. The Australian Government has, and continues to, provide critical investment into essential support services, increased welfare support and new initiatives to support individuals, families and communities weather the challenging impacts of COVID-19.

The challenge moving forward, will be to mitigate any medium to longer term social or economic impacts, particularly for children and young people.

In our submission, we set our three key priority areas for the Government in the 2020-21 budget:

- **Priority Area 1: Youth unemployment.** Escalating Youth unemployment rates are a matter of national significance and a national youth employment investment strategy is needed to address them.
- **Priority Area 2: Child and youth mental health.** COVID-19 is compounding mental health issues in our youngest generation and additional, ongoing support is required to meet the needs of children and young people.
- **Priority Area 3: The digital divide.** Digital literacy is a critical foundation for the Australian workforce and economy, and *all* young people must be equipped with the digital technology and skills they need to participate in education and employment.

We also present the following supporting recommendations:

- **Recommendation 1:** That Federal Government develop a national youth employment investment strategy to address youth unemployment, underemployment and long-term unemployment, which includes supply and demand, and short-and longer-term interventions, and changes to employment services.<sup>1</sup>
- **Recommendation 2:** 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 3:** That the Australian Government work with the state and territory governments to develop national strategies to ensure that no child or young person:
  - Is unable to access appropriate devices and data to undertake school work or training, or find work, or
  - Lacks the skills they need to engage with their learning online.

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<sup>1</sup> See our submission no. 417 to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 for more detail at: [https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/COVID-19/COVID19/Submissions](https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/COVID-19/COVID19/Submissions)

**Priority Area I: Youth unemployment.** Escalating youth unemployment rates are a matter of national significance and a national youth employment investment strategy is needed to address them.

Lockdown and the recession has disproportionately affected young people. They disproportionately work in the industries affected by lockdown and as casual employees, many of whom are ineligible for JobKeeper. As a result:

- Youth unemployment is up 4.7% nationally to 16.3%, compared to a rise of 2.3% to 7.5% for the wider population<sup>2</sup>
- New referrals to our jobactive and Transition to Work services have increased nationally by 94% (n.1,434 clients) and 174% (n.1,281 clients) respectively from 1 March to 31 July
- We have higher numbers of female referrals to our jobactive service, which have increased by 115% (n.743 clients) from 1 March to 31 July
- We have increasing caseloads of young men who are long-term unemployed. This cohort has increased by 15% (n.341 clients) in our jobactive and 141% (n.158 clients) in TtW over the same time period, whilst the female cohort has increased by 9% (n.142 clients) and 111% (n.109 clients) respectively.

These figures are of grave concern given that youth unemployment rates have remained consistently high since the GFC:

- Youth unemployment has not been below 10% since December 2008<sup>3</sup>
- The youth underemployment rate has increased by 7.1% since December 2008 to 19.6% in July 2020<sup>4</sup>
- The youth long-term unemployment has nearly trebled since 2008, from 0.8% of youth workforce to 2.3%.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, it is increasingly difficult for young people to access secure jobs given:

- Credentialism
- Fewer entry jobs
- The gig economy
- Increased competition with:
  - older people increasingly delaying retirement,<sup>6</sup> and
  - More experienced unemployed professionals now looking for work too.
- Mental health issues are increasingly affecting young people, with poor mental health recognised as a key barrier to finding work.

**Recommendation I:** That Federal Government develop a national youth employment investment strategy to address youth unemployment, underemployment and long-term unemployment, which includes supply and demand, and short-and longer-term interventions, and changes to employment services.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, 6202.0 - Labour Force, Australia, Jul 2020

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> In 2004/5 just 8% of Australians aged 45 and over intended to work until age 70, compared with 20% in 2016/17 <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/older-people/older-australia-at-a-glance/contents/social-and-economic-engagement/employment-and-economic-participation>

<sup>7</sup> See our submission to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19 for more detail

**Priority Area 2: Child and youth mental health.** COVID-19 is compounding mental health issues in our youngest generation and additional, ongoing support is required to meet the needs of children and young people.

Our Kids Helpline service has experienced a 31% increase in demand in service between January and July 2020, with **considerable increases in mental health and suicide-related concerns**.<sup>8</sup> The number of our duty of care interventions increased 32% over the same period due to suicide attempts (26%), child abuse (33%), and mental illness escalation (60%).

Children and young people contacting Kids Helpline:

- Shared their anxiety about COVID-19 and its impact on their daily lives and future plans.
- Had existing mental health concerns and issues **triggered and compounded** by COVID and government responses to it.
- 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.

The mental health of children and young people is particularly important as:

- 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>
- One in seven students (560,000) 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> and
- Suicide is the leading cause of death of children and young people, with 3,790 children and young people dying by suicide between 2012-18.<sup>13</sup>

Intervention early in life is particularly important because:

- It is during the transition from childhood to independent adulthood that foundational resources and conditions for a fulfilling and productive future are created<sup>14</sup>
- Mental health issues can impede education (including attainment and school engagement<sup>15</sup>), employment and relational outcomes
- Young brains are highly malleable and responsive to treatment and learning new skills
- Supporting children and young people with their mental health will result in considerable lifelong social and economic benefits for individuals, families and communities.

**Recommendation 2:** 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.

<sup>8</sup> When compared to figures covering the same period in 2019.

<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)

<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.

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

**Priority Area 3: the digital divide.** Digital literacy is a critical foundation for the Australian workforce and economy, and *all* young people must be equipped with the digital technology and skills they need to participate in education and employment.

The pandemic has also brought into sharp relief the digital divide, a reality that disadvantages many young people seeking education or employment. This was the case for young people engaged in our education engagement and employment programs.

For example, among clients in our Youth Engagement Program in Queensland:

- 36% did not have a computer to undertake home-learning
- 27% did not have internet access
- 20% shared a mobile phone with their parents and/or siblings
- 15% did not have access to any mobile phone.

This was compounded by:

- Schools not having sufficient laptops to lend to our clients
- Schools refusing to loan some clients school devices as the young people had in the past lost a cord or damaged them
- Public places providing free WIFI access being closed
- Poor internet reception and speed, particularly for those who live in rural areas, preventing the downloading of some materials or the streaming of videos.

Digital, remote learning was also particularly difficult for some of clients as:

- They lacked the digital literacy to engage in the required online programs, with many not knowing how to download and use software (e.g. email, Teams, Zoom)
- Face-to-face interactions and relationship-based approaches are critical elements to the way our clients engage and connect with our programs and their learning
- The parents of some clients could not offer the practical support their children needed to learn at home
- Some clients did not have a suitable home environment in which they could learn.

We are proud to say that our staff went above and beyond during the lockdown period to help address these issues:

- delivering hard copies to clients of school or program work
- coaching parents and students to use and install unfamiliar software and
- loaning suitable devices to clients or providing them with data.

But, despite the best efforts of support staff, disadvantaged cohorts of young people will be further behind their peers than ever before because of the digital divide and the pandemic.

**Recommendation 3:** That the Australian Government work with the state and territory governments to develop national strategies to ensure that no child or young person:

- Is unable to access appropriate devices and data to undertake school work or training, or find work, or
- Lacks the skills they need to engage with their learning online.