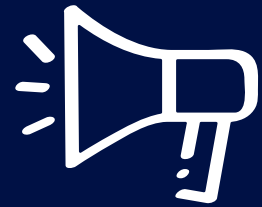


Voices from the COVID-19 frontline

Findings and recommendations about how we can minimise COVID-19's impact on Victorians experiencing disadvantage



Chapter 1 – Background

Chapter 2 – Cross-cutting insights

Chapter 3 – Employment & economic security

Chapter 4 – Families & home-schooling

Chapter 5 – Young people

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Overview

The COVID-19 (C19) pandemic and its accompanying isolation restrictions have had an unequal social, health and economic impact on the disadvantaged. The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) sought to understand and unpack how a pandemic can further exacerbate financial and social exclusion of people who face disadvantage. As a social justice organisation working to address poverty and disadvantage in Australia, amplifying their voices is our contribution to the public debate.

This insight series and its recommendations aim to inform future policy-making, community service sector delivery, as well as the public debate whilst illuminating:

- How C19 is disproportionately impacting disadvantaged communities;
- Ways that communities are utilising their strengths and/or how government could further harness their assets; and
- Insights we didn't expect as well as verification of themes already canvassed in the media.

Acknowledgement of Country

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways on which our organisation operates. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging.



**Brotherhood
of St Laurence**

Working for an Australia free of poverty

We established a **COVID-19 Listening Tour** to learn from our staff and program participants about the impacts the pandemic has had. We sought to hear both the negative impacts as well as the positive ways in which communities harnessed their strengths and resilience. While these findings about community members must be understood as being mediated through their caseworkers, they provide important insights. We've also complemented this with the direct voices of the people who receive BSL services or programs who, through their firsthand accounts, illustrate the key themes. Apart from it being timely feedback for BSL, we hope that this report offers insights to the broader community to help us all collectively improve participation, practices and policy advocacy.

Reports in this series

This report is one of eight which explore different focal areas and cross-cutting themes. Please refer to the chapter list at the front of this document for links to each report for further reading.

Aims of the Listening Tour

This Listening Tour is a two-part, mixed-methods qualitative data collection project. BSL services have been simultaneously engaging with the frontline impact of this pandemic whilst adapting and continuing service delivery to support communities since the pandemic began. The findings will be shared within BSL programs and within the community sector, as well as various various decision makers to inform meaningful improvements in people's lives.

The purpose of the BSL staff interviews was to include learnings about their participant engagement and needs; the practices of service delivery during C19, and the issues that require further policy advocacy. Specifically, we aimed to:

- learn how BSL service participants are faring during C19
- learn aspects of any practice innovations and adaptations that we would like to maintain at BSL to assist accessibility or address other barriers
- inform the sector and government about practice challenges and innovations &
- document this historic time in the community sector and prepare ourselves for future crises of this nature

The purpose of the one-on-one interviews with people who use BSL services was to learn about their experiences during C19 to inform and powerfully convey our advocacy. Subject to funding and resources, two rounds of follow-up interviews may be carried out with the same participants to track any changes to their circumstances. Our aims were to:

- Put a human face to impacts and challenges of C19 on different population groups;
- Convey policy areas which require urgent attention given the impact of C19 impact; &
- Showcase positive resilience and harnessing of community connections.

Methodology

First, from June–July 2020, BSL staff members were interviewed in small groups over video conferencing apps. A SurveyMonkey survey was also created to capture data from those unable to join the group interviews. **Second**, in mid-August, people who utilise BSL services or programs were interviewed individually to collect case studies.

Recruitment: Part 1—Interviews with BSL Program Staff

In mid-June 2020, BSL service delivery staff were invited to participate in semi-structured group interview sessions over video conferencing. Interview questions were designed to allow the interviewees to tell share observations their participants had shared and when needed, the researcher asked for more detail.

In total, 300 BSL staff who work with jobseekers, families, young people, people with disability, multicultural communities, and in aged care attended the virtual sessions. The largest group included 45 staff members and the smallest was one single individual interview. It is important to note that even though 300 staff were consulted, not every single person spoke up during the group interviews. Often in each session several people responded to the questions while others were quiet. Staff were also informed they could respond to the list of questions by email if they preferred. One group sent the researchers the minutes from their meeting as it was relevant to the discussions. All staff were also given the opportunity to complete an online SurveyMonkey survey if they could not or chose not to join the video interviews – five staff completed the survey.

Each semi-structured interview with BSL staff lasted up to one-hour, with a few lasting between 15-30 minutes as staff were understandably pressed for time. Some group interviews were conducted as part of an existing standing meeting to accommodate everyone's schedules. BSL staff members, ranging from managers to front line staff in the following programs (shown in Table 1 below) participated.

Analysis: Part 1

As this was a nimble analysis to provide time-sensitive findings to influence government and the service sector, researchers utilised the rigorous and accelerated data reduction (RADaR) technique (Watkins, 2017). This entailed researchers checking all interview notes against their corresponding video files for accuracy and

Table 1 BSL Services and programs by population segment served

Population segment served	Programs and services	Communities served
Young people	Transitions to Work (TtW); Education First Youth Foyers (EFYF); RESET program, David Scott School	Broadmeadows; Frankston; Mornington Peninsula; (various locations around Australia through the TtW National Community of Practice)
Parents	Connie Benn; HIPPY; Parents groups; Parents Next	Broadmeadows; Craigieburn, Dandenong, Epping, Fitzroy; Frankston; Inner Melbourne; Jindi; Pakenham; North Melbourne; Reservoir; Sunbury
Aged care	Aged care in either homecare, respite or residential setting	Across Victoria
Multicultural communities newly arrived migrants or refugees, or people seeking asylum	Various programs, in particular through the Multicultural Communities' Team (MCT): Given the Chance and family programs	Dandenong; Epping; Flemington; Inner Melbourne
People with disability	NDIS Local Area Coordination (LAC); NDIS Early Childhood Education Intervention (NDIS)	Bayside Peninsula; Brimbank Melton; Hume Moreland; North East Melbourne; Western Melbourne
Jobseekers	Jobs Victoria Employment Network (JVEN); Given the Chance (GTC); Centre for Work and Learning (CWL); Transitions to Work (TtW);	Dandenong; Epping; Flemington; Inner Melbourne
General public seeking money management help; small business training and mentoring for CALD communities	Financial Inclusion services: SaverPlus, Money Minded; Stepping Stones to Small Business	Statewide: Stepping Stones participants concentrated from Banyule; Greater Dandenong; Hume; Moonee Valley; Moreland; Whittlesea; Wyndham

then organising and coding the findings through a data table. The coding matrix was created by researchers first talking through the key findings across participants, practice, and policy, which mirrored the main foci of each interview. These were the main sections of the data table. These sections were then divided into subsections which catalogued the positive and negative experiences to each, the enablers and disablers of service delivery, and the findings around Jobseeker and Jobkeeper stimulus impacts. Insights from the researchers and stand-out or surprising quotes were also documented in each subsection of the coding matrix. This was an efficient way to complete the analysis, as NVivo was not available.

Recruitment: Part 2—Individual interviews with people who utilise BSL services/ programs for case studies

This part of the project received approval from BSL's Ethics Committee. After the group interviews were completed and analysed, researchers began recruiting five people who are BSL service users. BSL staff members were sent an email template with the Plain Language Statement that asked if they could refer individuals to the researchers who fit specific profiles. These profiles were selected based on multiplier of challenges surrounding C19. Our staff interviews revealed five distinct profiles who were experiencing distinct impacts to their lives under C19—people seeking asylum, family who had benefited from the increased JobSeeker rate, people with disability, single mothers, and unemployed young person (aged 15-24). The rationale for reaching out to these differently impacted individuals was multifaceted – firstly, to learn the direct lived experiences and complexities of people who utilise BSL services or programs; secondly to better learn about the systems/supports that improves their lives, and lastly to lift up examples of community supports and strengths.

Those interested in participating in the one-on-one interviews were sent a consent form to review which they could either sign and return by email,

or we offered to record verbal consent during the virtual interview. Interviewees were told that interviews would be a recorded video chat using Zoom, owing to social distancing restrictions in Victoria, and also so that we could consider usage for future digital storytelling. The phone interview was also given as an option. Participants were provided with options to have their image/voice included in BSL digital materials (reports, social media, and website) or to opt out of sharing their image/voice and keep their identity anonymous. Interview participants were asked to sign releases per the Brotherhood's Media and Communications policy. All interview participants were given a gift card valued at \$50 as an honorarium in recognition of their contribution.

Analysis: Part 2

Researchers transcribed the interviews and constructed case studies from the interviewees' responses. Each case study was shared with the participant to check for accuracy and approval before inclusion in this report. Where relevant, all identifying data was removed and pseudonyms were used upon request.

Acknowledgements

This project had oversight from **Lucia Boxelaar** (Director, Community Programs) and Professor **Shelley Mallett** (Director, Research & Policy Centre). It was led by **Hutch Hussein** (Senior Manager, C19 Policy & Programs Taskforce), who jointly conducted and analysed consultations and interviews with staff and participants, with **Seuwandi Wickramasinghe** (Senior Research Officer), **Lisa Conley** (Research Fellow) and **Naser Fekrat** (Research Officer), with administrative support from **Inae Araujo Braz** (Administrative Assistant).

Further reading

Visit bsl.org.au/covid-19/voices-from-the-frontline/ to continue reading.

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence is a social justice organisation working alongside people experiencing disadvantage.

Our mission is to pursue lasting change; to create a more compassionate and just society where everyone can thrive.

To learn more please visit bsl.org.au



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