

Voices from the COVID-19 frontline

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



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Overview

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.

This insight series and its recommendations have been developed with the aim of informing future policy-making, community service sector delivery as well as the public debate whilst illuminating:

- How COVID-19 (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.

This report reflects analysis of consultations with 300 BSL frontline staff that were conducted during June-August 2020 as part of our 'COVID-19 Listening Tour'.

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

In this report

We share key findings of the pandemic's impact on the children and families we work with¹, in particular, their experiences with and impact arising from the pressures of home-schooling. We also provide policy, program and practice recommendations to address the issues raised, as well as how families and children can be better supported in the recovery.

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, including our Background chapter.

Top 4 findings

1 **Whilst we knew that families would be experiencing overwhelming stress related to housing or financial instability, childcare and health concerns, that this has the potential to exacerbate financial debt, homelessness and social and economic exclusion more generally is concerning. Particularly when stimulus supports such as rental relief and JobSeeker and JobKeeper cease.**

"A lot of my clients are borrowing money off each other- \$30, \$10 whatever- but there's potential for this to blow out of proportion and they could lose that little bit of the social community they have if they can't pay it back. How will they pay this back? Four or five months down the track they owe their friends thousands of dollars."

"Many people are several months behind on rent and need more supports in addition to rental assistance."

2a Home-schooling

Whilst we knew that many families, especially those without formal education or who lack access to appropriate technologies, would find assisting their children's home-schooling difficult, what was concerning was the effect of stress and increased responsibilities strained the parent-child relationship. The sudden expectation to motivate learning decreased confidence in parents and this has caused friction, leading to a focus on repairing relationships.

"Families were panicking about home-schooling because they didn't have devices and didn't think the government would provide a laptop or iPad. They either went into debt or drew down on savings and bought them, so their kids had access. But this caused hardship for them. I told them to contact the school. Some waited for schools to provide devices. The parents didn't trust the school or government and they didn't want their kids excluded."

"Online learning was a real challenge. Parents from CALD backgrounds, who struggle themselves with English, were put in the situation of having to teach their children, and they didn't have the skills or know-how to do that, so that was a lot of added pressure. Pressure which has caused many parents to have a lack of confidence in parenting, so all the work we've done has been undone in some ways. There's been a severe breakdown in communication with their children. There's a lot of repair work that needs to be done."

2b Home-schooling children with a disability was largely overwhelming for parents, although some gained insights into both the learning support and intervention support their children require. High anxiety also arose when there was school refusal when restrictions ceased and concern about learning gaps and the need to facilitate a transition for those with behavioral problems. The carer burden was exhausting and meant job-seeking was put on hold and their own work and mental health was impacted.

"Lots of parents found it so difficult because needed intense support, given their children had classroom assistance and/or an aide at school. They have never witnessed their children learning. It is difficult for them to home

school their children as they have never done before. Many needed one on one support, watching them the entire time."

"The second round of home-schooling was wearing. Parents are very stressed, with many struggling to do their jobs with some having to reduce hours. Even the extra week of school holidays was very stressful. Especially for kids with special needs who have trouble managing themselves."

"We had reports of significant carer burden, especially for those doing home-schooling on top of caring for children with disability. Aboriginal NDIS participants who were exploring employment indicated much of this has been put on hold due to C19."

—Kendall English-Lane, Preston



"There's high anxiety where children are refusing to go back to school..... There needs to be consideration of enabling environments and proper planning to facilitate children's (with behavioural problems) transition back to school."

"There's concern that the learning gaps will increase and grow over time for kids who disengage."

3 There are increased fears and uncertainties regarding the welfare of vulnerable children during the pandemic, given they are being sighted less by professionals. We were especially concerned to hear that families on temporary visas thought that if they sought help, that this would reflect negatively on their applications for permanent residency, and so they had been coping alone.

"There's never been a time where there are 'less eyes' on vulnerable children. Many consultations are via phone due to the lack of digital devices. The maternal and child health nurse is not seeing them, family services staff are not seeing them and they're not going to any playgroups."

"Families on temporary visas fear negative consequences from Immigration Department if they seek help—they fear their children will be taken away from them if they're not coping."

Case study



Virtual parent coaching to help with home-schooling

Now, let's hear from Fay*, a BSL service user

As a single mother with four children, three of whom are teenagers and one who is six years old, Fay is juggling all their different needs as well as a new full-time job she's doing remotely. Prior to C19, Fay worked casually supporting her local Council's playgroups. As a result of these programs being suspended during C19 and her role being casual, she was ineligible for JobKeeper.

Fay arrived from Somalia, via a Kenyan refugee camp, 23 years ago. She didn't have any formal schooling beyond grade five back home, so the notion of suddenly teaching her grade one daughter how to read, whilst also navigating all the websites the school was sending, was intimidating. During Stage 3, she sent her daughter to school because she could not do home-schooling. When she heard that BSL was establishing a Family Learning Program (FLP) to help parents like her navigate home-schooling, she was happy. The FLP which provides virtual support to help parents navigate school tasks, also helps improve digital navigation skills for parents.

"The learning program was very helpful, the communication was very understandable. I learned to be comfortable, and not be stressed that I wasn't doing enough. They helped me realise that I am their first teacher on so many things". They told us we don't need to worry about it and to try our best. The team helped ensure I got an iPad from my daughter's school and alerted me to an online Homework Group - everyone's making online groups these days. I found about a Somalian Mother's Group in North Melbourne who have organised tutoring. Someone is helping my high school child and my daughter for one hour a week. I want my son to be able to get into year 12".

Together with her new job, where she's also been able to increase her digital skills, her confidence in helping her children with their schoolwork has improved. "I am more comfortable with technology now, not expert. I get IT training once a week and need more training for programs like PowerPoint, Excel and Word. It's made me think I might go back to part time study".

* A pseudonym has been used to protect the identity and confidentiality of the person

Other key themes

1 Women – particularly single mothers, those in family violence relationships, with special needs children, large families – are experiencing increased vulnerability, isolation and risks during lockdown without the ability to convey things directly to services.

“I have a number of participants who are single mums with high special needs children who are having to do the bulk of the care in isolation for kids who are having routines disrupted and experiencing a lot of distress.”

“One mum is in a very vulnerable position. We have quite serious concerns about her levels of isolation and her community connections, due to her number of children, and she’s having a baby. Her communication with the tutor completely dropped out. There was an issue with her phone, when someone went to her house her husband didn’t want the tutor to speak to his wife. He was quite controlling.”

2 Many families could not access technologies needed for remote service delivery and home schooling or telehealth needs.

“Two years ago we ran some stats on what our participants were saving for—over 70% were saving for a device. Most had only one device or zero. Lately 80% have been saving for a computer.”

“Some families had one device between a family of four. If the charger breaks, that’s it, they’ve got no device.”

3 Services have been flexible and adapted to the needs of families and communities – meeting later in the evening when their young children are in bed.

“We’ve had high levels of continuous engagement... One tutor was holding group telephone calls at 9pm with parents because that was the only time their home was quiet, and they wanted to use that time to support their kids. Even though they’d been helping their older children with schoolwork all day. We didn’t encourage that, but it shows the level of commitment and that even a pandemic couldn’t put them off.”

“Not having face to face has given us flexibility to do appointments late in the afternoon. During Ramadan, people don’t pick up the phone in the morning because they’re sleeping, or they were cooking. It gives them more opportunities to get in touch when they are available.”

“These families we work with are amazingly resilient. There was a lot of panic during the heightened pandemic periods, but they pulled through and were supportive of each other. They see their community members as family members... Moving forward in the ‘new-normal’ we have to continue to be flexible and versatile in our work... We walk beside our families; we don’t drag them along with us. This is a testament to the approach we take. It’s been a massive learning curve.”



– Rennie Ervinawati, Mernda

Recommendations

Leveraging existing resources:

- **Government messaging needs to be clearer** about how people can receive C19 supplements and from which Department.
- Change requirements in some government-supported programs to **allow families to have phone calls or video chats after C19 passes**, rather than insisting on in office presence.

New funding:

- **Resource kindergartens and schools to undertake community engagement work with families** to lift student outcomes and re-engage students with learning, ensuring cultural brokers are utilised with multicultural and Indigenous communities. (As we go to press, we welcome the Victorian Government's \$8.6 million for Family Engagement Initiatives, to support schools on this front with an additional 16 Koorie Engagement Support Officers and 60 additional bicultural workers, as a good start).
- **Provide access to a tutoring fund and/or catch up programs in schools** to allow for working with kids in small groups to bring them up to their required level and get their confidence back up. Particularly important for kids with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. (As we go to press, we acknowledge the Victorian Government's \$209.6 million for every government school to attract and employ 3500 tutors across the 2021 school year).
- Invest in broadband and telehealth technology access so that **every Australian has access to the internet** which they can utilise for home-schooling and remote service delivery in times of crisis, such as a pandemic and/or bushfires.

Further themes, as well as recommendations from other BSL research on this topic, is detailed in our [Children and Young People on the Edge of Care, Out of Home and Alone](#).

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Further reading

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

1 Through our family services program, BSL works with families with children up to the age of 17. This includes integrated family services like the Home Interaction Program for Parents and Youngsters (HIPPY) which aims to empower parents and carers to be their children's first teacher in their homes, and the Parents Next program which helps parents receiving the Parenting Payment prepare to re-enter the workforce as their child reaches school age. It also includes the Connie Benn Centre, the BSL Multicultural Team, and parent groups that operate in BSL offices in Jindi and Epping. These programs help parents and families to access education and employment and engage with workplace and skill building. They also offer English language courses and engage families when there are issues with a child's safety, wellbeing or development. Staff from these programs represent the communities of HIPPY North Melbourne, HIPPY Frankston North, HIPPY Dallas Broadmeadows, HIPPY Fitzroy, and Parents Next from Broadmeadows, Craigieburn, Dandenong, Epping, Fitzroy, Frankston North, Pakenham, and Reservoir.

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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