

# 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 provide an overview of the experiences of young people<sup>1</sup> during the pandemic, in particular the impacts on their education, training and employment pathways including hearing from one of our youth participants Gabriel\* about the impact of the Coronavirus supplement on his Youth Allowance. We also provide policy, program and practice recommendations to address the issues raised as well as how they 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 3 findings

### 1 Young people will need long-term solutions to prevent lasting damage to their employment and training trajectories.

*"Now more than ever we need to look at how to support young people for education and employment because they're going to be hit the hardest."*

**"Young people are often unaware about career pathways, so it's not just about finding any job, but about showing a young person the entry point and the career trajectory that this can put them on a pathway towards. It's also about working with a broad range of stakeholders to ensure that skills and training aligns with employment opportunities in areas of high demand."**

— Courtney Green, Broadmeadows



*"People get opportunistic bits of employment... and young people might do anything to get the money and experiences, but it falls away really quickly and then you're left really disadvantaged in the job market longer-term. And young people are already disadvantaged in the job market because of lack of experience. There needs to be a real combination of experience and training and then how the government supports people to have an adequate income while they're training and not pushing them into short term or low skilled jobs. That's the really big policy piece here."*

### 2 Engagement rates in our employment readiness services have remained high, as young people increase their engagement in education and training, with many exhibiting a deep need for social connection, guidance and support to navigate the changing world. However, some of our disengaged students have struggled to maintain focus in an online environment.

*"We're still seeing about 85-90% engagement with our employment participants currently. Young people ring our staff back every day if they miss their calls, because they really want to have conversations."*

**"The really high engagement for our newly arrived young participants is around social connection, going to English classes, and the health and wellbeing side of things."**

*"Understandably, the motivations and aspirations of young people are challenged in the current climate. Furthermore, many are struggling with the online learning environment."*

**"We've spoken to lots of other providers in the regions and their engagement is low. It comes back to our model and how we engage with young people. We're a voluntary program, they don't have to engage with us, but they actually see real value in the relationship they're building with their coach. You have to shift the way you're working. You can't just always be nuts and bolts- you have to look at the whole picture and say this is what this young person is needing today."**

— Rebecca Willmott, Frankston



### 3 The Coronavirus Supplement for Youth Allowance is not only pulling people out of poverty and giving them the ability to eat properly and pay bills on time, but it's also reducing financial and social exclusion by helping young people avoid debt and be more job-ready in future. Those ineligible for JobKeeper or Youth Allowance, sought support and referrals for life's basics.

*"We've had young people that have just been managing who are only now being able to buy the bare necessities that everyone takes for granted."*

**"A large percentage of our young people received the supplement. Some are expectant parents, some are putting money away to buy a car, some young people living in a family violence situation are saving up for a bond to lease their own property."**

**– Adriano Gioia, Frankston**



**"One young person told us that they saved up and bought themselves a laptop because they couldn't go to the library anymore to do more job-searching."**

**"Homelessness, food, and mental health referrals were the top three requests. And technology – so phones, phone credits and referring them to where they could get food vouchers."**

**– Emina Sivic, Broadmeadows**



**"We have a large cohort that aren't eligible for any support at all. We link them in with services in the local area. We buy them Coles vouchers so they can buy food and other needs. Another thing that takes time is that we reapply with them for benefits. It could take up to 20 hours for one young person to apply."**

## Case study

### **Gabriel\* – young, unemployed & being a jobseeker during C19**

Gabriel is 21 and lives in Broadmeadows.

After leaving school in Year 11, he's completed various short courses, but struggled to get a job.

He started a Certificate III in Food Processing Apprenticeship, but it wasn't for him. Then he thought he wanted to pursue a career in the performing arts, as he was into music and dancing, but he's since decided to focus on becoming a professional boxer, as well as run a personal training business.

Over the past four years of being unemployed, he's lost count of the number of jobs he's applied for. "It's definitely over 500. It's hard to find entry-level jobs. I've had interviews, but nothing.... I get told I don't fit the criteria for some reason. Often I think it's because of where I live or because of how I've filled out the application. Based on my chats with my mates, I think it's more about your connections. I don't have the networks. I know it's tough with not many jobs out there right now, but I'm still going to keep eyes on the prize. I can't just sit there and say, 'Oh yeah, they got the job and I didn't. I want to work and I'll keep trying'.

At the start of C19, Gabriel was living with relatives and the C19 supplement to his Youth Allowance helped him contribute to the rent as well as other necessities. "Being able to cover food easier has given me a breather. Before the supplement, it was just enough for food for

the two weeks and paying rent. No room for saving. Everything was a necessity, but it was the necessity things that I was stressing about". Gabriel has been persistent in using any money towards saving up for a car. "Even though it's been slow and it will take me a while to get there, I know that having wheels will make it easier to get a job as some jobs say you need access to a reliable car or if I have personal training clients, I have to be able to get to them".

Gabriel is part of BSL's [Transition to Work program](#). "Ed, my caseworker, has been helping me look for work. He's been letting me know about job opportunities like Working for Victoria that I've registered for. I got to a second stage interview, but then the Stage 4 restrictions came in and they put the customer service job I applied for on hold....Ed is a great advocate with jobs and reassures me that I'm doing all the things that I can do but there's just nothing out there. So I'm focusing on things that will help me get to where I can get to. I might be taking an alternative route, but I'm going to get to my goal. We all have our struggles, but I've found my way out. I want to make something out of myself because I'm getting older and one day I want to get my own house eventually, and that sort of stuff". Gabriel's Certificate IV Personal Training course was initially postponed due to C19 but will now be going ahead online. He's looking forward to being able to run gym classes and boot camps. Watch out world!

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



## Other key themes

**1** Lacking access to technology and face-to-face interaction, has negatively impacted young people's schooling, especially those who are newly arrived to Australia.

*"A lot of people are really struggling with online learning, and some have unfortunately dropped out of school because of that."*

*"Young people study or work part-time before they move into full-time work, but all the study options were moved online. For a lot of young people transitioning to that was a real process.*

*There were issues with connectivity, but they're also used to having face to face. They haven't chosen to study online, if you haven't chosen that, it makes it tricky."*

—Stacey Miller, Frankston



**2** Young people are experiencing long wait periods for mental health supports. It's also impacting on their sense of worthiness and eventual desire to get help.

*"There are not enough mental health supports available to young people. We can have a young person experiencing significant mental health issues but when you ring the Youth Services, it is an 8-12 week wait for an intake appointment. That's not to be serviced, that's just the screening appointment to understand the needs of the young person. They don't want to ring the 1300 numbers—they want and need personalised support."*

*"Long waiting lists for mental health services is a huge issue for young people in the Frankston area. It causes distress from a pragmatic standpoint but also indicates to them that they are not of value in their community or not 'worthy'. The result is that they give up trying and resist attempting to get help."*

—Jodie Long, Frankston



## Recommendations

### Leveraging existing resources:

- **Programs and services working with young people experiencing disadvantage are encouraged to utilise capabilities informed practice approaches such as Advantaged Thinking** to ensure young people have access to the necessary opportunities, resources and networks required to establish meaningful and sustainable livelihoods
- **Federal and state governments need to develop strong employment pathways** with long term outcomes for young people by creating connections between employers, TAFEs, and young people to provide skilled pathways to work that can meet both the short and long term needs of employers, communities and young people. Further work is being done by the [National Youth Employment Body](#) that BSL convenes.
- **Government can play an active role in job creation.** This includes expanding entry level positions as part of social procurement hiring policies; redistributing funding to communities to build digital or physical infrastructure; and advocating for investment in the trialling of adaptive models for local training system responsiveness.

### New funding:

- **Provide young people with flexible income support** that does not penalise them as they move between unemployment, education, training and work.
- **Ensure JobKeeper is expanded to include those in casual employment** given the disproportionate impact on young people

- **Improve access to youth specialist employment services such as Transition to Work.** This should include:
  - ensuring that all young people who are experiencing disadvantage are eligible for rapid engagement with specialist youth employment services such as Transition to Work.
  - investment in community-led solutions which address local youth unemployment
  - funding to support business-led Community Investment Committees that marshal government and community resources which directly link supply and demand so as to improve employment and benefit whole communities.

[More details here.](#)

Our website also features a [COVID-19 snapshot video](#) to deepen understanding of what's happening now for young people across Australia. This video also features Employer Champions working locally and nationally with Transition to Work providers to harness the community effort and create pathways to employment for young people.

Further themes as well as recommendations are detailed in our [Children and Young People on the Edge of Care, Out of Home and Alone.](#)

## Acknowledgements

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## Further reading

Visit [bsl.org.au/covid-19/voices-from-the-frontline/](https://bsl.org.au/covid-19/voices-from-the-frontline/) to continue reading.

**1** Through our Youth Services programs, BSL works with young people aged 15-24 in programs like the Education First Youth Foyers (EFYF), Transition to Work (TtW), the David Scott school (DSS). These programs help young people stay connected, or reconnect with schooling, help young people prepare for and find jobs, and helps them build and utilise social capital within their communities. The young people served by these programs might be living at home with parents, in out-of-home care, might live in our youth foyer housing, or might be engaged in non-traditional schooling. Staff from these programs directly represented the communities of Broadmeadows, Frankston, and the Mornington Peninsula. Indirectly, communities across Australia are also represented through feedback from the TtW National Communities of Practice (CoP). The young people who utilise the services and programs of BSL often have overlapping characteristics of being school-aged, being a jobseeker, or transitioning into independent living—all of which are activities that have been made more difficult with the pandemic and ensuing lockdown.

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](https://bsl.org.au)



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