

**MISSION**  
**AUSTRALIA** | together  
we stand

**Supplementary  
pre-budget  
submission 2020-21**



## About Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a national, non-denominational Christian charity that has been helping vulnerable people move towards independence for more than 160 years. In the 2018-19 financial year, we supported over 160,000 individuals through 519 programs and services across Australia.<sup>1</sup>

We work with families and children, young people and people experiencing homelessness and provide specialist services for those living with mental illness, disability and alcohol and drug issues.

## Overview

Mission Australia put forward a pre-budget submission for 2020-21 in January of this year. Since then, the COVID-19 pandemic has utterly changed the economic and social circumstances of Australian communities. While our initial submission stands, and we continue to support the priorities and needed Government measures that we identified at the time, we are making a supplementary submission to highlight the new issues facing the people we serve and the solutions to addressing their needs.

This supplementary submission focuses a range of issues that have either emerged or been heightened by the pandemic, including homelessness and affordable housing, income support, employment, support for people experiencing family and domestic violence, and support for people experiencing mental health issues.

## Homelessness and affordable housing

### Key recommendations

- The Federal Government should support the Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program (SHARP), which would build 30,000 social housing units over a four-year period and create up to 18,000 jobs.<sup>2</sup>
- Over the longer-term, the Federal Government should lead the development of a National Housing Strategy with State and Territory Governments that includes investment in the development of 500,000 social and affordable homes to end homelessness in Australia. This strategy should consider the diverse needs of different cohorts within the population, including in particular the housing needs of young people and older women.
- The Government should also partner with State and Territory Governments to invest in energy efficient upgrades to social housing and the homes of low-income earners to reduce the amount tenants spend on utilities and raise living standards.

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<sup>1</sup> Mission Australia, Annual Report, 2019, accessible at:

<https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/annual-reports/annual-report-2019/1320-annual-report-2019/file>

<sup>2</sup> Community Housing Industry Association, Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program (SHARP), 2020, accessible at: <https://www.communityhousing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SHARP-Full-Report-1.pdf?x59559>

## Issues to be addressed

### Homelessness is likely to increase due to COVID-19

- The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for homelessness are significant. The number of people experiencing homelessness and in need of assistance is likely to increase considerably due to the impacts of COVID-19 with unemployment, domestic and family violence, mental health and alcohol and other drugs as drivers.
- Young people are likely to be particularly vulnerable to this, as they will be disproportionately affected by unemployment (see: **Employment**) and are also being impacted by mental health concerns related to COVID-19 (see: **Support for people experiencing mental health issues**), both of which are known drivers of homelessness.
- Older women are also likely to be particularly vulnerable to this, as they often have limited savings or superannuation to fall back on and were at heightened risk of homelessness even before the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Suitable employment options have also not generally been part of the employment or economic stimulus packages to date, further restricting their opportunity for economic security.
- Without more housing that low- and moderate-income earners can afford to rent, the COVID situation will worsen current homelessness rates around Australia.

### Housing underpins economic growth and is a key economic stimulus prospect at this time

- Evidence demonstrates the effectiveness of housing stimulus in times of economic downturn.
- The Social Housing Initiative (SHI) represents the largest single commitment of funding to social housing in Australia's history.<sup>4</sup> The Federal Government provided funding of \$5.638 billion to the SHI over three and a half years (2008-09 to 2011-12). Of this, \$5.238 billion was allocated to the construction of new dwellings and \$400 million was allocated to repair and maintenance of existing social housing dwellings.<sup>5</sup> A key benefit was the impact on GDP (the additional value to the economy in terms of wages and profit in each industry). The SHI is estimated to have contributed approximately \$1.1 billion in average annual value-added (GDP) over the four-year period.<sup>6</sup>
- Considering the importance of addressing both homelessness and economic recovery at this time, we recommend the implementation of the Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program (SHARP) proposal as a matter of priority. SHARP is a joint proposal designed by

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<sup>3</sup> Mission Australia, Ageing and Homelessness: Solutions to a growing problem, 2017, accessible at: <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/position-statements/ageing-and-homelessness-solutions-to-a-growing-problem>

<sup>4</sup> KPMG, Social Housing Initiative Review, 2012, accessible at: [http://www.nwhn.net.au/admin/file/content101/c6/social\\_housing\\_initiative\\_review.pdf](http://www.nwhn.net.au/admin/file/content101/c6/social_housing_initiative_review.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> KPMG, Social Housing Initiative Review, 2012, accessible at: [http://www.nwhn.net.au/admin/file/content101/c6/social\\_housing\\_initiative\\_review.pdf](http://www.nwhn.net.au/admin/file/content101/c6/social_housing_initiative_review.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> KPMG, Social Housing Initiative Review, 2012, accessible at: [http://www.nwhn.net.au/admin/file/content101/c6/social\\_housing\\_initiative\\_review.pdf](http://www.nwhn.net.au/admin/file/content101/c6/social_housing_initiative_review.pdf)

community and housing sector organisations.<sup>7</sup> It aims to build 30,000 social housing units over a four-year period, plus accelerate the maintenance and renovation of existing social housing stock. As well as the benefits of increasing social housing available to low income households, the construction process will provide much-needed jobs and economic stimulus Australia-wide following the COVID-19 shutdown of a range of industries.<sup>8</sup> On average over the four-year period, the SHARP would support between 15,500 and 18,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) jobs.<sup>9</sup>

- Over the longer-term, a national plan and ongoing subsidy is required to deliver the identified shortfall of 500,000 social and affordable homes in order to end homelessness in Australia. The Federal Government needs to lead the development of a coherent National Housing Strategy that includes:
  - New capital investment to generate 300,000 new social and Aboriginal housing properties
  - A new tax incentive or direct subsidy to leverage super fund and other private sector investment in 200,000 low cost rental properties for low and middle-income earners.
- The Federal Government needs to identify a suite of innovative approaches to increasing social and affordable housing including harnessing private and institutional investments. The National Housing Finance and Investment Corporation (NHFIC) through the Affordable Housing Bond Aggregator and National Housing Infrastructure Facility will make a useful contribution in making concessional funding available for Community Housing Providers. However, without significant funding, this initiative is insufficient to generate the investment in social and affordable housing required to address the current critical shortfall. There is appetite from private and institutional investors including superannuation funds to invest in below-market residential property in Australia but they require the right incentives to meet the current yield gap.
- Currently the Constellation Project<sup>10</sup> is developing another proposal on a housing aggregator to enable large scale private investment in affordable housing. It proposes to pool private institutional investment into construction capital for affordable housing, which can be unlocked by future recurrent government co-investment.<sup>11</sup> These options and approaches

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<sup>7</sup> Community Housing Industry Association, Social Housing Acceleration and Renovation Program (SHARP), 2020, accessible at: <https://www.communityhousing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SHARP-Full-Report-1.pdf?x59559>

<sup>8</sup> SGS Economics and Planning, Economic Impacts of Social Housing Investment, 2020, accessible at: <https://www.communityhousing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20200197-SHARP-Final-ReportSGS.pdf?x59559>

<sup>9</sup> SGS Economics and Planning, Economic Impacts of Social Housing Investment, 2020, accessible at: <https://www.communityhousing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20200197-SHARP-Final-ReportSGS.pdf?x59559>

<sup>10</sup> The Constellation Project, accessible at: <https://www.theconstellationproject.com.au/about-the-project/>

<sup>11</sup> The Constellation Project, The Case for a Housing Aggregator, 2019, accessible at: [https://theconstellationproject.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Housing-Capital\\_Redesign\\_WEB.pdf](https://theconstellationproject.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Housing-Capital_Redesign_WEB.pdf)

can be supported by the Federal Government to increase the social and affordable housing stock across the country.

- Another job-rich proposal is to improve the energy productivity of low-income existing homes.<sup>12</sup> The COAG Energy Council has agreed to a *Trajectory for Low Energy Buildings*, a national plan that sets a trajectory towards zero energy (and carbon) ready buildings, including existing homes. There are actions that can be taken now, including energy efficiency upgrades to social housing, the homes of low-income earners, inefficient rental properties, and subsidies to low-income households for replacement of inefficient appliances.

## Income support

### Key recommendations

- While Mission Australia is not calling for a return to the initial Coronavirus Supplement rate of \$550/fortnight, we are endorsing a simplification and redesign of the income support system and increase in rates in terms that will keep people out of poverty and act as a prevention mechanism for homelessness.
- Mission Australia endorses the ACOSS proposal contained in their pre-budget submission for a permanent \$185 per week increase to the base rate of Jobseeker, plus additional supplementation to meet different household needs.
- This should be complemented by a 50% increase in Commonwealth Rent Assistance and additional supplements to meet the specific, higher costs of living with disability and single parenthood.
- Financial counselling services should be adequately resourced for an anticipated increase in need as the COVID-19 pandemic continues and as changes are made to income support payments, and should be introduced as an additional part of wraparound support packages for people accessing Emergency Relief services.
- The Government should consider its approach to mutual obligation requirements for income support recipients in the context of high unemployment levels. For example, such requirements have always been unsuitable for participants of the ParentsNext work readiness program, and the current unemployment situation makes it even more pressing to remove or suspend those requirements from parents of young children.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Economic-Stimulus-Healthy-Affordable-Homes-NLEPP-June-2020-Final-18062020.pdf>

## Issues to be addressed

### Increased income support payment levels

- Mission Australia welcomed the Federal Government's COVID-19 response packages that substantially increased JobSeeker and other income support payments, as well provided support to people to keep their jobs or an income via the JobKeeper wage subsidy.
- These responses made a tangible difference in the lives of many of the people that Mission Australia serves and millions of others living around Australia. These measures acknowledged that the old rate of \$40/day was inadequate and introduced a response that has enabled people to make significant strides towards gaining control of their finances and being able to afford food, transport, housing and other essentials that had previously been out of reach.
- For example, some our services have reported a decrease in people seeking support due to rental arrears or financial stress as people have more income from increased payments and decreased risk of eviction due to the moratorium, or have been able to decrease their risk of eviction by paying off accumulated rental arrears with the additional Jobseeker income.
- However, there are also a number of risks for people relying on income support and others on low incomes. We are concerned, for example, that the re-introduction of the liquid assets test in September will mean that those who have been able to save some money with their increased income will become ineligible for payments. We are also concerned that, at a time when some people's interaction with support services has become more limited, their financial position has actually worsened. For example, we are aware of instances where rental arrears have increased for some households, but this effect is being masked by the state-based evictions moratorium in place. Further, while traditional client cohorts have been seeking out Emergency Relief support in reduced numbers since the increases in income support payments, we anticipate that they will return if there is a fall in payment amount.
- Therefore, another important element of securing people's economic wellbeing will be the provision of financial counselling support, particularly as changes are made to income support payments in the coming months.
- As we move away from crisis responses to recovery, the Government has a unique opportunity to build on these gains and redesign the income support system to ensure that it assists people to remain out of poverty.

### Compliance measures for income support recipients

- The pause on mutual obligation requirements as part of employment programs during the COVID-19 pandemic has been welcome and has supported many of the people we serve to retain their connection to income support payments.
- Accordingly, we are concerned about the Government's re-introduction of those measures in the context of continued high unemployment. Expectations around job seeking and other

compliance activities need to be modified in these circumstances where more people are applying for fewer jobs.

## Employment

### Key recommendations

- Strengthen employment through timely economic stimulus, particularly in the form of public infrastructure investment in affordable and social housing (see: **Homelessness and affordable housing**).
- Support people unable to obtain work to meet their basic needs for as long as possible (see: **Income support**).
- Provide support to implement a workforce strategy for the care sector (aged care, disability care and child care) including training, subsidies and supports aimed at developing a future-proofed strong and sustainable sector.
- Support youth employment through a range of measures including:
  - Encourage young people to engage or re-engage in study, to prevent an experience of unemployment and increase their skills for use in a recovering labour market;
  - Expand the Transition to Work (TtW) program to cater for increasing numbers of young people seeking pre-employment support.
  - Target low-skilled and long-term unemployed young people with intensive support programs, including young jobactive Stream C participants who are ineligible to access TtW.
  - Invest in alternative education and employment support options such as Youth Foyers for young people at risk of homelessness.
  - Implement a program to connect young unemployed people into traineeships in growth industries specifically linked with an employer, modelled on the previous federally funded Australian Apprenticeships Access Program.

### Issues to be addressed

#### Rise in unemployment

- Over April and May alone, over two million people either lost their jobs or had their paid hours cut.<sup>13</sup>
- The official unemployment rate is currently 7.1% but the effective unemployment rate is 13.3%, reflecting discouraged jobseekers who have opted against searching for work while

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<sup>13</sup> ACOSS, Recovering jobs: Policies to restore employment and reduce long-term unemployment after the lockdowns, 7 July 2020, accessible at: <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/200717-Recovering-Jobs-Briefing-Paper-FINAL.pdf>

the economy is contracting so quickly.<sup>14</sup> At the time of the July Economic and Fiscal Update, unemployment was expected to peak at 9.25% in the December quarter with labour market conditions to strengthen in 2021. However, since then, the Stage 4 lockdowns in Victoria have demonstrated how quickly the economic position can change.

- Mission Australia has seen a rapid drop in placements through our specialist employment programs for people experiencing disadvantage. We anticipate that this trend will continue for the next six months, even as our caseloads increase with a rise in referrals from Centrelink, due to a massive influx of people seeking income support payments.
- With the unemployment rate expected to continue to rise in the coming months, the supply of jobs will not be able to meet the demand required for employment from people seeking work, especially low skilled and entry-level jobs. Further, the lack of confidence from employers is likely to result in a greater level of part-time and casual work, driving increased levels of under-employment.
- Certain groups of people are particularly vulnerable to prolonged unemployment, including people with a disability, people in long-term receipt of income support payments, women and young people.<sup>15</sup>

#### Young people are particularly vulnerable

- High youth unemployment rates were present even before COVID-19 and the recent events have further exacerbated the challenges young people experience when entering employment market.<sup>16</sup>
- In May 2020, the employment rate for 15-24 year olds decreased by 102,900 people and the unemployment rate for this group increased to 16.1%.<sup>17</sup>
- Young people are always disproportionately affected by economic downturns, because they are trying to make a transition from education to work when there are fewer jobs available. This can cut the probability of employment and future earnings for a decade or more.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> M Heath, Australia's effective unemployment rate 13.3%, Frydenburg says, in Bloomberg, 13 July 2020, accessible at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-13/australia-s-effective-unemployment-rate-13-3-frydenburg-says>

<sup>15</sup> ACROSS, Recovering jobs: Policies to restore employment and reduce long-term unemployment after the lockdowns, 7 July 2020, accessible at: <https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/200717-Recovering-Jobs-Briefing-Paper-FINAL.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> J Borland, The next employment challenge from coronavirus: How to help the young, in The Conversation, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/the-next-employment-challenge-from-coronavirus-how-to-help-the-young-135676>

<sup>17</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Force Commentary June 2020, accessible at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/a8e6e58c3550090eca2582ce00152250!OpenDocument#:~:text=The%20participation%20rate%20for%2015%2D24%20year%20olds%20who%20are,increased%200.4%20pts%20to%2016.4%25>.

<sup>18</sup> J Borland, The next employment challenge from coronavirus: How to help the young, in The Conversation, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/the-next-employment-challenge-from-coronavirus-how-to-help-the-young-135676>

- Disadvantaged young people are likely to be particularly adversely affected, based on modelling from the Global Financial Crisis.<sup>19</sup>
- Mission Australia is seeing greater requests for our services in youth employment programs (such as Transition to Work) and anticipate that referrals into these programs will increase as more young people come into contact with Centrelink.
- Early intervention and pre-employment programs are useful in assisting young people in the transition from education to employment. Pre-employment support programs such as Transition to Work (TtW) assist young people to transition into employment or to re-engage with education.
- There is a significant service gap for the majority of young jobactive Stream C participants who are ineligible to access TtW. These are the young people experiencing significant disadvantages who, with support, have tremendous potential to join the workforce. Further options need to be developed for this group.
- In order to provide greater certainty for young people about employment, the Government should consider reintroducing a program that connects young unemployed people into traineeships specifically linked with an employer. The Government's previous Australian Apprenticeships Access Program could serve as a model for this. This measure would provide greater certainty to young people who want to engage in apprenticeships but would struggle to find work in the context of high unemployment levels. It would need to be linked with growth industries and other job creation policies in the context of broader economic and employment settings, and could specifically align with a program of investment in affordable and social housing construction.
- Adequate resourcing needs to be directed towards age-appropriate support models such as Youth Foyers and other youth specific supported housing models. The Youth Foyer model assists young people, usually aged 16-24 years, to engage in education and employment, and gradually to reduce their dependence on social services. Youth Foyers generally have self-contained accommodation, on-site support workers, education programs, variable levels of support where a young person can progress to more independent living, onsite facilities (for example health services) and social enterprises (such as a café). Participation in education, training and employment is a condition of the accommodation. Evaluations have demonstrated Youth Foyers and supported housing models result in sustained positive outcomes for young people in educational qualifications and continued participated in education and employment after exit.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> J Borland, The next employment challenge from coronavirus: How to help the young, in The Conversation, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/the-next-employment-challenge-from-coronavirus-how-to-help-the-young-135676>

<sup>20</sup> M Coddou, J Borlagden & S Mallett (2019) Starting a future that means something to you: Outcomes from a longitudinal study of Education First Youth Foyers, accessible at: [http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/11369/1/Coddou\\_etal\\_Starting\\_a\\_future\\_Education\\_First\\_Youth\\_Foyers\\_outcomes\\_2019.pdf](http://library.bsl.org.au/jspui/bitstream/1/11369/1/Coddou_etal_Starting_a_future_Education_First_Youth_Foyers_outcomes_2019.pdf)

## Support for people experiencing family and domestic violence

### Key recommendations

- The Federal Government should continue to provide additional funding and resources to ensure domestic and family violence services are able to meet the increasing demand as a result of COVID-19 restrictions.
- Increase advertising of information in relation to domestic and family violence related services on multiple formats including TV, radio, online platforms and through community organisations.
- Provide funding certainty to community services to ensure that necessary and essential wrap-around, holistic supports to people experiencing domestic and family violence are available and accessible.

### Issues to be addressed

- Across the country, Mission Australia's service staff are interacting with greater numbers of service users reporting they are experiencing domestic and family violence. This trend is confirmed by multiple studies.
- Global and local research demonstrate the increase in demand for domestic and family violence since the beginning of the pandemic. A vast amount of research provides evidence of increasing violence during natural disasters or significant disruptions in social and physical environments.<sup>21</sup> In Australia, the onset of financial pressure and the requirements to spend extended periods of time at home as a result of COVID-19 has indeed resulted in an increase of demand for domestic and family violence related support.<sup>22</sup>
- A survey of Australian practitioners found that the pandemic has led to an increase in the frequency and severity of violence against women as 59% of respondents reported that COVID-19 has increased the frequency of violence against women and 50% reported it has increased the severity of violence against women.<sup>23</sup> Perpetrators were found to be using the COVID-19 restrictions and threat of infection to restrict women's movement, gain access to women's residences and coerce women into residing with them if they usually reside separately.<sup>24</sup>
- According to the Australian Institute of Criminology, two thirds (65.4%) of women who experienced physical or sexual violence by a current or former cohabiting partner in the

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<sup>21</sup> S Wagers, Domestic violence growing in wake of coronavirus outbreak, The Conversation, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/domestic-violence-growing-in-wake-of-coronavirus-outbreak-135598>

<sup>22</sup> Women's Safety NSW, Media Release: New Domestic Violence Survey Shows Impact of COVID-19 on the Rise, 2 April 2020, accessible at: <https://www.womenssafetyntsw.org.au/impact/article/new-domestic-violence-survey-shows-impact-of-COVID-19-on-the-rise/>

<sup>23</sup> Pfitzner, N., Fitz-Gibbon, K. and True, J. (2020). Responding to the 'shadow pandemic': practitioner views on the nature of and responses to violence against women in Victoria, Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions. Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Monash University, Victoria, Australia.

<sup>24</sup> Pfitzner, N., Fitz-Gibbon, K. and True, J. (2020). Responding to the 'shadow pandemic': practitioner views on the nature of and responses to violence against women in Victoria, Australia during the COVID-19 restrictions. Monash Gender and Family Violence Prevention Centre, Monash University, Victoria, Australia.

three months prior to May said the violence had started or escalated in that period. One in three (33.1%) said that this was the first time their partner had been violent towards them in this way.<sup>25</sup>

- The number of people experiencing domestic and family violence is likely to increase even further over the coming months as the COVID 19 related impacts including the economic downturn become more severe. We are encouraged by the Federal Government's initial commitment of funding to support people through this pandemic, however further funding and resources are needed to address the growing demand.
- Prior to the bushfires and pandemic, community services were at capacity or were unable to cope with the demand. However, with COVID-19 and the bushfires, the whole service system is even more strained. Therefore, careful planning is needed to ensure adaptation strategies are in place to support people in times of disaster and prevent people and families from experiencing domestic and family violence.
- There is a need to educate the public through a national campaign about the supports available for victim-survivors of violence, especially in the current context where domestic and family violence is increasing across the country. A campaign could also include information about the confidential and sensitive nature of service provision.

## Support for people experiencing mental health issues

### Key recommendations

- The Federal Government must commit further resources to addressing mental health issues arising as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Further funding must be specifically directed to dedicated and age-appropriate services for young people, in consultation with them about their needs.
- The Government must adequately resource and fund the mental health needs of children. The mental health of children needs to be considered in national mental health planning, and the Government should develop a comprehensive stepped model of care that continues to incorporate targeted programs such as the Family Mental Health Support Service, as well as place-based, universal early intervention programs such as Communities for Children that support children's mental health and wellbeing.
- The Federal Government must direct mental health funding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led organisations.

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<sup>25</sup> The Australian Institute of Criminology, The prevalence of domestic violence among women during the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020, accessible at: [https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/sb28\\_prevalence\\_of\\_domestic\\_violence\\_among\\_women\\_during\\_covid-19\\_pandemic.pdf](https://www.aic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/sb28_prevalence_of_domestic_violence_among_women_during_covid-19_pandemic.pdf)

## Issues to be addressed

- The Government recognised the likely impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in its funding of \$74 million for mental health supports.<sup>26</sup>
- However, data modelling and service delivery experience suggests that significantly more support will be needed for mental health services as COVID-19 and associated lockdowns, job losses and social isolation extend into longer periods of time.
- Modelling produced by Professor Hickie's Mind and Brain Centre, at the University of Sydney, suggests the COVID-19 crisis could lead to a 25% jump in the suicide rate if unemployment reaches 11%.<sup>27</sup>
- Mission Australia's services have seen an increase in people seeking support for mental health services, as have other mental health service providers. For example, Beyondblue has reported a 60% increase in contact over the same time last year.<sup>28</sup>
- Young Australians require specific age-appropriate mental health support initiatives. They are feeling anxious and depressed about the dangers of COVID-19 and its long-term effects on health systems and employment rates.<sup>29</sup> While youth mental health has been acknowledged in the Federal Government's current funding package, more resources will be required to cope with the reported influxes into services. Young people should also be engaged in the design of support measures.
- Children have specific mental health needs that are different to those of adolescents, and mental health issues in childhood can have lifelong impacts including increased risk of mental health issues in adulthood, unemployment, disengagement from education, and contact with the criminal justice system. Even before COVID-19, only one in four children with a mental health condition in Australia had accessed help.<sup>30</sup> The pandemic is creating additional stress, anxiety and insecurity for children, with Kids Helpline reporting a 28% increase in calls compared with the same time last year.<sup>31</sup> With half of all mental health problems beginning before the age of 14 years, early intervention and treatment are critical.

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<sup>26</sup> Australian Government Department of Health, Fact Sheet, Supporting the mental health of Australians through the Coronavirus pandemic, accessible at: <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/2020/03/covid-19-national-health-plan-supporting-the-mental-health-of-australians-through-the-coronavirus-pandemic.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> B Ryan, C Edmonds and S Scott, Coronavirus pandemic plan for mental health too small, suicides likely to increase, expert says, ABC News, accessible at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-15/coronavirus-pandemic-mental-health-package-reaction/12253820>

<sup>28</sup> B Ryan, C Edmonds and S Scott, Coronavirus pandemic plan for mental health too small, suicides likely to increase, expert says, ABC News, accessible at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-15/coronavirus-pandemic-mental-health-package-reaction/12253820>

<sup>29</sup> M Kang et al, Young people are anxious about coronavirus. Political leaders need to talk with them, not at them, in The Conversation, accessible at: <https://theconversation.com/young-people-are-anxious-about-coronavirus-political-leaders-need-to-talk-with-them-not-at-them-135302>

<sup>30</sup> <https://theconversation.com/3-out-of-4-kids-with-mental-health-disorders-arent-accessing-care-118597>

<sup>31</sup> C Ribeiro (2020) 'The ground's been ripped out from under them': Mental health fears for the children of the pandemic, accessible at: [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/08/the-grounds-been-ripped-from-under-them-mental-health-fears-for-the-children-of-the-pandemic?CMP=Share\\_iOSApp\\_Other](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/aug/08/the-grounds-been-ripped-from-under-them-mental-health-fears-for-the-children-of-the-pandemic?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other)

Stepped care models are important in recognising the different needs of children within the population, as well as the changing needs of individual children over time.

- Government action is also needed to address an historical under-investment in the mental health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Although the Australian Government has committed additional funding for mental health support, it has largely been directed towards mainstream agencies.<sup>32</sup> Governments must support an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-led approach to address the mental health needs of their people.

## Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs

### Key recommendations

- New funding must be allocated to support the targets and implementation of the priority reform areas in the new Closing the Gap Agreement.

### Issues to be addressed

- The Government announced the new Closing the Gap Agreement on 30 July 2020. While the new Agreement introduced 16 new targets and a set of four priority reform areas, it did so without introducing any additional funding measures or acknowledgement of historical cuts in support programs for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- As acknowledged by the introduction of the targets, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians continue to experience the failure of systems to serve their needs, with disproportionately high numbers of Aboriginal children in out-of-home care,<sup>33</sup> young people in juvenile justice,<sup>34</sup> women experiencing domestic and family violence<sup>35</sup> and people experiencing homelessness.<sup>36</sup> These and many other interconnected areas need new funding to support better outcomes.

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<sup>32</sup> Dudgeon, P., Derry, K. L. ... Wright, M. 2020, A National COVID-19 Pandemic Issues Paper on Mental Health and Wellbeing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. Transforming Indigenous Mental Health and Wellbeing Grant, The University of Western Australia Poche Centre for Indigenous Health, accessible at: <https://apo.org.au/sites/default/files/resource-files/2020-06/apo-nid306661.pdf>

<sup>33</sup> Productivity Commission, Report on Government Services 2020, 16 Child Protection Services. Figures as at 30 June 2019. Accessible at: <https://www.pc.gov.au/research/ongoing/report-on-government-services/2020/community-services/child-protection>

<sup>34</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Youth detention population in Australia 2019. Figures determined based on the reference night in 2019. Accessible at: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/youth-detention-population-in-australia-2019/contents/table-of-contents>

<sup>35</sup> Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2018. *Family, domestic and sexual violence in Australia, 2018*, Canberra: AIHW.

<sup>36</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics, Media Release: Census reveals a rise in the rate of homelessness in Australia, accessible at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/2049.0Media%20Release12016>

## **Conclusion**

The recommendations that we have made in this supplementary submission are intended to assist the Federal Government in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, in supporting measures that meet the need to improve outcomes for particularly vulnerable people while at the same time supporting the nation's economic recovery.