



Young Voices of the Pandemic

Youth Survey
COVID-19 Report
2020

MISSION
AUSTRALIA

| Youth Survey
2020



Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land, and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, the culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land and we recognise the importance of the young people who are our future leaders.

A special thanks to the young people who shared with us, via the 2020 Youth Survey, the major issues they had been facing. The words of the young people

that populate the pages of this report remind us that there are young people with their own families, friends, experiences and challenges who have lived through, and continue to live in an unprecedented time.

We would also like to acknowledge the Mission Australia staff who contributed to this report by providing helpful insights, feedback, design and support to prepare and share the words of young people to spaces where they can be heard and impactful.

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CEO Message

As we look at 2020 in the rear-view mirror, words and phrases like “unprecedented”, “social distancing”, “quarantine”, “lockdown”, “mental health” and “isolation” still ring in our ears. With 2021 in full swing and the pandemic still in play, these words continue to permeate our conversations and experiences, and will continue to shape our future and in particular, the futures of our young people.

We launched our annual *Youth Survey* in 2020 as the pandemic took hold. This provided a once in a lifetime opportunity to gather unique point-in-time reflections on the experience of living through a pandemic through an extraordinary collection of voices and perspectives directly from young people aged between 15 and 19. What they have revealed in their written responses is very telling about the challenges they faced due to COVID-19.

This is the first time Mission Australia has produced a *Youth Survey* report that takes a deep dive into the written responses provided by young people living in Australia about the nature and experience of their biggest personal issues.

The findings make clear the breadth and depth of the toll that COVID-19 has had on young people living in Australia. Major disruptions to education, increased isolation from peers, family and community, and

mental health concerns understandably featured heavily within young people’s responses.

Our report highlights that among the young people who reported COVID-19 was the biggest issue they had been facing, young Victorians were more likely to be concerned about their education, isolation and mental health than peers from other States and Territories. This is not unexpected, given these young people endured Australia’s longest lockdown in 2020 and extended school closures. Additionally, four in 10 respondents who said COVID-19 affected their education were 17 years-old, indicating those in their senior years of school were severely impacted by the pandemic. Young people affected by COVID-19 described disruptions to their everyday lives as making them feel worried and stressed and without access to their usual supports.

The experiences and lessons of COVID-19 remain omnipresent for young people across Australia. Of course, we don’t yet know what the long-term impacts of the pandemic will be for young people. We are very concerned that the impact of this virus will continue to have flow-on effects on young people’s lives and their futures. To best support our young people and mitigate any negative consequences they may face due to the pandemic, we must begin by listening to them and ensure that the right supports and systems are in place.



CEO Message (CONT)

In 2020 in particular, there were extensive interruptions to young people's education, pushing many into the uncertain world of remote learning. We're not out of the woods yet. These findings reinforce that many young people in Australia completing their final years of school during COVID-19 restrictions may need extra support to achieve their goals.

Despite various levels of government investing in mental health, there are still large gaps in the mental health system that have been laid bare by COVID-19 – particularly for those who are vulnerable or marginalised.

From the get-go, governments, services and organisations should prioritise engaging young people to design solutions that will best support them at this crucial time in their lives, backed with relevant and current evidence.

In their responses to our *Youth Survey*, young people have come up with a range of solutions they would like to see implemented, including:

- **Support for young people to understand when and how to help themselves when feeling overwhelmed and stressed with study, when feeling isolated and when experiencing poor mental wellbeing.**
- **Extra support for young people in schools to support their wellbeing and in completing final**

years of school during COVID-19 restrictions to make sure they can achieve their educational goals.

- **Mental health prevention and early intervention supports delivered in flexible formats to address wellbeing issues that may arise during isolation periods.**
- **More services and resources to support the mental wellbeing of young people, including through schools and outreach programs.**

We must do all we can to ensure young people's voices contained in this report are heard, so we can stand alongside them and call for the responses and services they need.

While absorbing the content of this report, take note of the outstanding examples of strength and flexibility verbalised by young people as they faced 2020's challenges.

As a 17-year-old young woman so eloquently put it, **"I just need more support and reassurance that I won't be put at a loss because of COVID."**

These young people have voiced their concerns loud and clear. In the forever changed post-pandemic world it is up to all of us to take heed, ensure the wellbeing of all young people in Australia, and to make sure they have ample opportunities to access education and support services when they need them.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'James Toomey'.

James Toomey
CEO, Mission Australia

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Executive summary

Every year, Mission Australia asks young people aged 15-19 living in Australia about their opinions, experiences and concerns in the *Youth Survey*. In 2020 there were 25,800 respondents to the *Youth Survey*. Of the 39 questions asked one was *'In the past year, what is the biggest issue that you have been dealing with? What do you think needs to be done about it?'*. In 2020, 18,486 young people provided a written response to this question, highlighting a range of key concerns including COVID-19, which was one of the top three personal concerns for young respondents in 2020.

Amongst respondents who cited COVID-19 as the biggest personal concern they had been dealing with in the past year, many wrote that impacts on their education, being and feeling isolated and mental health were the domains in their life most affected. In this report we provide an analysis of the qualitative responses of those who described the nature and experience of COVID-19 on their education, sense of isolation and mental health. Key findings are outlined below.





Key findings

This paper presents Mission Australia's first foray into analysis of the qualitative data that is routinely collected in the *Youth Survey*.

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Amongst those reporting COVID-19 personal concerns in relation to education, isolation and mental health:

- A large proportion were female (58.7% compared with 34.5% of males).
- The largest proportion resided in Victoria (38.2%).
- The largest proportion were 17 years old (35.9%).

The analysis of responses where COVID-19 was a top personal concern in relation to education, isolation and mental health showed some key differences amongst respondents:

- 41.1% of those who reported COVID-19 and education was their top personal concern were 17 years old.
- Slightly more than one third (34.4%) of respondents who reported COVID-19 and education was their top personal concern were living in Victoria.
- A large proportion of respondents who reported personal concerns in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on being and feeling isolated were living in Victoria (43.9%).

- The largest gender difference existed for those who reported mental health in relation to COVID-19 was a top personal concern, with over two thirds of those reporting mental health concerns due to COVID-19 identifying as female (68.9% of females compared with 23.9% of males).

- One third (33.6%) of those who reported mental health in relation to COVID-19 was a top personal concern self-reported psychological distress, which is higher than the self-reported psychological distress of those citing personal concerns in relation to COVID-19 and education or isolation (17.5% and 11.8% respectively).

Young people in Victoria in their final year or years of school were the most likely to report COVID-19 related personal concerns and these were most often related to education and isolation. This is likely due to restrictions in response to COVID-19 and the impact of these restrictions on young people in their final years of school.

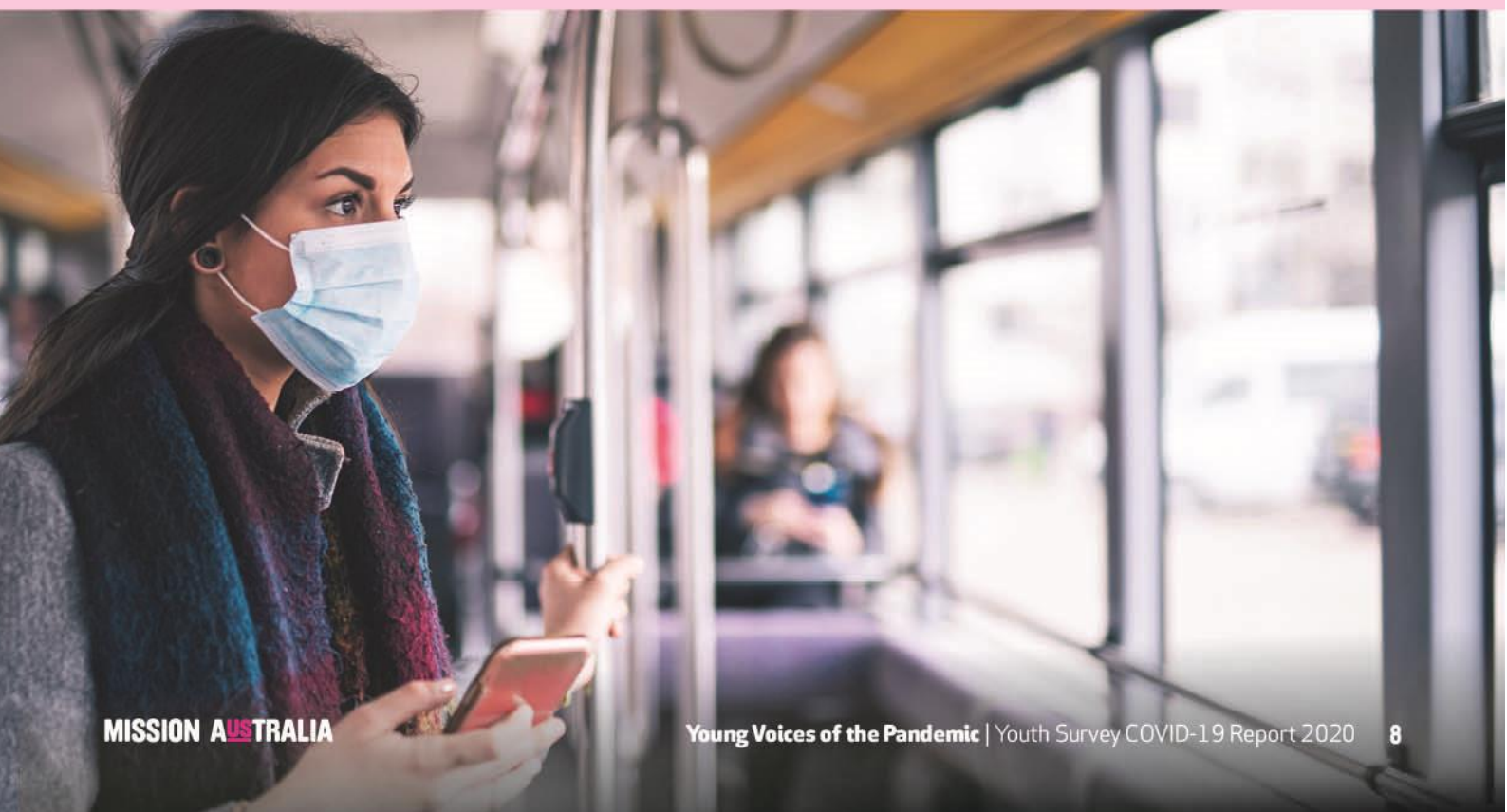
For young people affected by COVID-19, changes to schooling often led to disruption and feelings of worry and stress. In these contexts, mental wellbeing declined and usual supports, particularly amongst young people residing in Victoria, were not accessible in usual formats because of restrictions on interpersonal interactions.

Implications

The analysis of the open-text responses showed a number of solutions proposed by young respondents themselves. Young people proposed solutions to challenges they were experiencing in relation to their education, experiences of isolation and mental health as well as suggesting means through which they could get the support they needed.

These solutions included:

- **Supporting young people to help themselves** when feeling overwhelmed and stressed with study, when feeling isolated and when experiencing poor mental wellbeing. Young people need resources that help them identify when they might be in need and to seek out or be offered formal and informal supports in these circumstances.
- **Schools are an important site for wellbeing and study supports and resources.** This may come in the form of greater wellbeing (both targeted and universal) resources in schools that use both passive and assertive outreach, schools/service partnerships, as well as teacher and school support of teacher/student and student/student connection. In particular, young people doing final years of school during COVID-19 restrictions might require extra **support to achieve educational goals**, such as improved communication in online environments, a reduction in pressure and workloads and support and understanding around accessing tertiary education and post-school employment or further training.
- **Government and service provision of mental health wellbeing supports.** An increase is needed in the availability of services to support the mental wellbeing of young people. Governments and services should engage in **mental health preventative and early intervention** delivered in flexible formats to address wellbeing issues that may arise during isolation periods where young people are studying remotely and are less connected with their support networks than they would be under normal circumstances.



Report Overview

This report seeks to amplify young people's voices using their own words to provide insights into how the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on young people living in Australia.

This report is of particular importance for:

- Education providers—to give insight into the impact of school closures and online and remote learning on young people's wellbeing and performance.
- Federal and State Governments—to learn more about the impact of COVID-19 on young people's lives and consider ways in which they can support and assist young people to manage sporadic lockdowns and the attendant isolation.
- Community services—to better support young people managing unprecedented changes to their everyday lives and the resultant development or intensification of poor mental health.
- The business sector—for insight and support to young people entering the job market from the COVID-19 context in which they may have experienced significant disruption to their education.

This report draws on data collected in the *2020 Youth Survey*, which was open between April and August 2020. Building on the initial analysis of top personal concerns reported on in the [*Youth Survey Report 2020*](#) (Tiller et al., 2020) this report provides a description of the nature and experience of COVID-19 for young people aged between 15-19 living in Australia.

We use young people's own words to describe their experiences during the pandemic in relation to their education, feelings of isolation and mental health, and the solutions they propose to address their concerns.

Approach

This report provides a textual analysis of the free-text responses to the question '*In the past year, what is the biggest issue that you have been dealing with? What do you think needs to be done about it?*'. Descriptive data about the sample is included in this report.

The *Youth Survey* has ethics approval from State and Territory Education Departments and Catholic Education Offices. Respondents are recruited through schools, Mission Australia services, local government organisations and networks, Federal, State and Territory Departments, youth organisations and peak bodies. Please see [*Youth Survey Report 2020*](#) (Tiller et al., 2020) for further detail regarding the conduct of the *Youth Survey* in 2020.

Literature Review

COVID-19 is a disease caused by the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 that was declared a global pandemic in March 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO 2020). The first confirmed cases of COVID-19 were recorded in Australia on the 25th of January 2020. More than 12 months on, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect the lives of young people living in Australia.

The health impacts of COVID-19 on young people appear to be limited compared to those in older age groups (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). However, young people have experienced significant social and educational disruption, as well as loneliness, poor mental health and unemployment compared with those in older age groups (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021). While the long-term impacts of the pandemic on young people are still emerging and not yet well understood, there are a number of studies that have explored the impact and experience of the COVID-19 pandemic for young people in the areas of education, isolation and mental health both in Australia and internationally.

Education has been disrupted in Australia owing to restrictions to suppress the spread of COVID-19. Those attending secondary and tertiary educational institutions have had holiday periods extended, assessments and timelines altered, and, perhaps most significantly, completed periods of remote learning (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021).

A UNICEF Australia national survey that was completed by young people aged 13-17 reported that half of those surveyed were worried about their education being disrupted or being held back because of changes to schooling (Marlay et al., 2020).

Authors of an international study that surveyed over 30,000 university students across six continents including Oceania found that, due to the COVID-19-related lockdowns and transition to online learning, students struggled with their education (Aristovnik et al., 2020). The authors report that, while students from Oceania generally fared better than those from continents encompassing developing economies (such as Africa, Asia and South America), they still reported a lack of confidence in the use specific software and programs used in online teaching. Students from Oceania also reported an increase in their workload with the change to online study, as well as self-reporting higher levels of anxiety compared with students living on other continents (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

Researchers reporting on a survey delivered to over 700 Australian university students between May and July of 2020 found that the move to online learning due to COVID-19 made it more difficult for respondents to engage with other students and teachers and engage effectively in learning (Dodd et al., 2021).

Disruptions to schooling brought about by responses to the COVID-19 pandemic may have more serious impacts for those experiencing vulnerabilities, including those living with disability (Page et al., 2020) and those experiencing financial difficulties (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Dodd et al., 2021). It has been noted, particularly for those experiencing vulnerabilities, that remote learning could delay educational achievement and lead to disengagement from the education system (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2021; Smith Family, 2021).

Social distancing has been a key approach underpinning measures to suppress the spread of COVID-19. Social distancing has, at different times, reduced the ability of young people to attend schools, universities and gather in numbers either at home or in public places. Being isolated from family and

friends was reported as a concern for around half of the young people surveyed by UNICEF Australia (Marlay et al., 2020).

Isolation and loneliness has been linked to poor mental health amongst young people. A systematic review undertaken to explore potential consequences of government measures to contain COVID-19 (including quarantine, school closures, social distancing etc.) on children and adolescents explored the relationship between loneliness (loneliness being conceptualised as an unintended consequence of efforts to contain the disease) on the development of mental health problems (Loades et al., 2020). The authors found that there was an association between loneliness and the development of mental health problems and that longer periods of loneliness were a predictor for future mental health problems (Loades et al., 2020). In one study that explored the impact of isolation and quarantine in previous pandemics on children and young people it was reported that they were much more likely than young people not in isolation or quarantine to require mental health support and experience post-traumatic stress (see also Brooks et al., 2020; Magson et al., 2021).

Magson et al. (2021) report on the results of a study undertaken in New South Wales that assessed the wellbeing of adolescents (n=248; aged 13-16 years) on a range of mental wellbeing measures as well as COVID-19-specific questions about worry and disruption to everyday life. Magson et al. (2021) found that adolescents experienced significant increases in depressive symptoms and anxiety as well as a decrease in life satisfaction since the start of the pandemic and that those who reported COVID-19 distress experienced more pronounced increases to depression and anxiety. The authors additionally found that worry about COVID-19, online learning difficulties and family conflict were risks for the development of mental health problems (Magson et al., 2021).

A survey that assessed the psychological and lifestyle impact of the pandemic on Australian adolescents (aged 12-18 years) found that three quarters of respondents reported a decline in their mental health since the onset of the pandemic (Li et al., 2021). Respondents additionally reported negative impacts on learning, friendships and family relationships and higher levels of disrupted sleep, psychological distress and anxiety (Li et al., 2021). Reported negative effects on mental health were more pronounced amongst those with a pre-existing diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety (Li et al., 2021).

A review of international studies undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic reported that the pandemic had a negative impact on adolescent mental health. Young people with no pre-existing mental health conditions experienced higher rates of stress, depression and anxiety due to the pandemic (Jones et al., 2021).

It has also been reported that those with pre-existing vulnerabilities (eating disorders, LGBTQ, maltreated), experienced a worsening of mental health symptoms, including PTSD, disordered eating, anxiety and OCD (Jones et al., 2021). It has also been reported that females report declining mental health and increases in anxiety and depression symptoms due to the COVID-19 pandemic at a higher rate than males (Dodd et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Magson et al., 2021).

A number of protective factors have been reported for adolescent mental health during the pandemic. These include: social support and feeling socially connected, positive coping skills, home quarantining, adhering to stay at home orders and parent-child discussions (Li et al., 2021; Magson et al., 2021).

Methods

Qualitative methods were used to develop a better understanding of the nature and experience of COVID-19 for young people. The data that was analysed for this report is drawn from responses to the optional, free-text question in the *2020 Youth Survey*: *'In the past year, what is the biggest issue that you have been dealing with? What do you think needs to be done about it?'*

Sampling

In 2020, 25,800 young people responded to the *Youth Survey*. Of this total sample, 18,486 provided a response to the free-text question cited above. Amongst those who provided a written response, 1,650 stated that COVID-19 (either on its own or in relation to COVID-19's impact on other facets of their lives) had been the biggest personal concern they had been dealing with.

Responses citing COVID-19 as a top personal concern were derived from the larger sample using a comprehensive keyword search in SPSS to identify any responses mentioning COVID-19 and other associated terms such as 'lockdown/s', 'remote learning', 'pandemic' etc. Once identified, the sample was exported to Excel where an initial analysis was carried out to classify the data into categories outlined in Table 1. Categories were determined inductively by reading responses, test coding and refining categories. Data was then returned to SPSS for further descriptive analysis and imported into NVIVO for textual analysis. Responses could be categorised in one or more categories, depending on the content of the response.

Most respondents cited concerns that were categorised as general, education, isolation and mental health related. A review of the literature indicated that education, isolation and mental health were issues of concern for young people in the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, the sample of those providing a response in the free-text field that identified COVID-19 as the biggest personal issue were further sampled to create a subsample consisting of those who identified COVID-19 in relation to education, isolation and/or mental health (n=953).

Analysis

Descriptive analysis of closed, or fixed-format questions was undertaken to explore similarities and differences between young people who self-reported that COVID-19 in relation to education, isolation and/or mental health was an issue that they had been dealing with in the past year, compared with those who reported non-COVID-19 personal issues. The results of this analysis are reported in the Findings section of this paper.

For the qualitative textual analysis, data was considered in the categories of education, isolation and mental health and then coded inductively within those categories. Responses could be allocated to one or more category, depending on the content of the response. Similarly, responses could be coded to more than one code within categories. Only the part of the response that related to the category under consideration was coded. For example, one response might describe how lockdown had caused a respondent to struggle with their mental health and that online study had caused them to fall behind in their work. In this scenario, the first part of the response would be categorised to COVID Mental Health, and the content related to COVID-19 and mental wellbeing would be coded within that category, and the second part of the response would be classified to the COVID Education category, and the content related to education coded within that category.

Table 1: Categories

Category	Number of responses	Description
COVID General	545	When there is only mention of 'COVID' and no other information
COVID Education*	543	When COVID is discussed in relation to education
COVID Isolation*	346	When COVID is discussed in relation to quarantine, lockdown, isolation or feeling isolated
COVID Mental Health*	289	When COVID is discussed in relation to mental health
COVID Financial	110	When COVID is discussed in relation to financial issues
COVID Physical Health	38	When COVID is discussed in relation to physical health
COVID Discrimination	19	When COVID is discussed in relation to discrimination
COVID Family Matters	17	When COVID is discussed in relation to family issues

*Indicates that these are the categories of responses that are included in the top personal issues related to COVID-19 and education, isolation and/or mental health.

Note: The total number of unique respondents in the education, isolation and mental health categories is 953. The numbers listed in Table 1 above do not equal 953 because a number of responses were categorised to more than one category.

Limitations

The data only includes responses from those who chose to talk about COVID-19 in response to the open-text question *"In the past year, what is the biggest issue that you have been dealing with? What do you think needs to be done about it?"* This does not mean that COVID-19 was not a concern for other respondents to the *Youth Survey*, just that they did not write about it.

The length and complexity of responses varied because of the self-report nature of the data. Many responses were lengthy, while there were other responses that were very brief.

The *Youth Survey* is available in English, which may be a barrier for those who speak English as a second language.

Key Findings

Findings are organised into two sections. Section one describes the demographic features of the sample analysed in this paper (those reporting COVID-19 personal concerns in relation to education, isolation and/or mental health) and compares this sample to the larger sample of those who reported personal concerns that were not COVID-19 related. Section two describes free-text respondent reports of the nature and experience of COVID-19 in relation to education, isolation and/or mental health.

The data that informs this report is derived from the *2020 Youth Survey*. Further detail about the composition of the *Youth Survey* sample can be found in Appendix A.

Section One: Demographic Features of Young People reporting personal concerns

Sample characteristics

Table 2: Sample characteristics of *Youth Survey 2020* participants who provided an answer to the biggest personal concerns question (n=18,486)

	Other personal concerns (not COVID-19)	Personal concerns citing COVID-19	Personal concerns citing COVID-19 and education, isolation and/or mental health ('the subsample')
Sample size	16,836	1,650	953
Attributes	%	%	%
Females	59.6	56.6	58.7
Males	37.9	41.8	34.5
Something else	1.6	0.9	0.5
15 year olds	25.7	22.7	23.5
16 year olds	34.8	29.1	27.0
17 year olds	29.2	35.6	35.9
18 year olds	8.8	10.9	11.3
19 year olds	1.5	1.8	1.8
Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander	4.0	2.5	2.1
Non-Indigenous	96.0	97.5	97.9
Disability	7.0	4.7	4.0
No disability	93.0	95.3	96.0
Psychological distress	29.9	17.0	19.0
No psychological distress	70.1	83.0	81.0
Born outside Australia	14.8	11.6	11.0
Born in Australia	85.2	88.4	89.0
ACT	4.6	5.5	4.9
NSW	25.8	25.8	28.1
NT	1.6	0.5	0.4
QLD	20.6	13.9	12.8
SA	11.4	8.8	7.3
TAS	2.8	2.8	2.5
VIC	21.3	35.6	38.2
WA	12.0	7.1	5.7

Percentages may not add up to 100% due to missing data (where respondents in the samples have not answered questions).

The demographic features of those in the subsample reporting personal concerns related to the impact of COVID-19 on their education, isolation and/or mental health were similar to the larger sample of those young people reporting personal concerns that were not COVID-19 related.

Overall, females were more likely than males to report on personal concerns. This included reports on non-COVID-19 concerns (59.6% of females compared with 37.9% of males) and on concerns in relation to the impact COVID-19 had on education, isolation and mental health (58.7% of females compared with 34.5% of males). Some of this proportional difference can be explained by the overall sample composition, where more female respondents completed the *2020 Youth Survey* than males (56.2% vs. 41.2%).

A larger proportion of 17-year-old respondents reported being concerned about the impacts of COVID-19 on their education, isolation and/or mental health compared with other age groups. Amongst young people reporting non-COVID-19 related personal concerns, the largest proportion of respondents were 16 years old.

More respondents from Victoria reported personal concerns in relation to education, isolation and mental health due to COVID-19 than those living in other states and territories. Amongst young people reporting non-COVID-19 related personal concerns, the largest proportion of respondents resided in New South Wales.

There was a slightly lower proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people reporting personal concerns related to the impact of COVID-19 on their education, isolation and/or mental health compared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people reporting personal concerns that were not COVID-19 related (2.1% compared with 4.0%).

There was a slightly lower proportion of young people living with disability who reported personal concerns related to the impact of COVID-19 on their education, isolation and/or mental health compared with young people living with disability reporting personal concerns that were not COVID-19 related (4.0% compared with 7.0%). Similarly, there was a lower proportion of young people born outside of Australia reporting personal concerns related to the impact of COVID-19 on their education, isolation and/or mental health compared with young people born outside of Australia reporting personal concerns that were not COVID-19 related (11.0% compared with 14.8%).

There was a lower proportion of respondents who reported the impact of COVID-19 on their education, isolation and/or mental health who also reported psychological distress (on the Kessler 6 scale) compared with those reporting non-COVID-19 personal concerns (19.0% compared with 29.9%).

Section Two: The Nature and Experience of COVID-19 for Young People

This section provides a description of the nature and experience of COVID-19 in relation to education, isolation and mental health, including solutions proposed by young people.

Education

Amongst respondents who reported COVID-19 as their biggest personal concern, 543 young people (57.0% of the subsample) wrote about how COVID-19 had affected their education. Amongst these young people:

- A higher proportion of respondents in Victoria (34.4%) compared with those from other states reported COVID-19 had an impact on their education.
- Four in 10 (41.1%) respondents were 17 years old, indicating those who were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their education were likely to be in their senior year, or senior years of school.
- A higher proportion of females than males reported being concerned with the impact of COVID-19 on their education (60.0% compared with 33.0%)¹.

Analysis of free-text responses showed that young people struggled with a range of issues in relation to their educational experiences in the COVID-19 context.

Struggles with online and remote learning

Learning away from schools and at home was described as a key cause of disruption to schooling in 2020 by respondents. Young people (n=139) described online and remote learning brought about by responses to COVID-19 as their biggest personal concern over the past year. Over half of the respondents who reported that online and remote learning was a challenge were living in Victoria.

Respondents described finding it difficult to adapt to studying at home and often struggled to focus and manage their time:

“Probably managing my time to be able to get my work done. The coronavirus has had a huge impact on that too, as studying from home and being stuck in the house is not easy or fun. Managing my time and enabling myself to get enough physical activity would be really helpful.”

(F, 15, VIC)

“My biggest issue was online schooling. I feel as if not having physical contact and being withheld from a learning environment has affected my studying and learning capability.” (M, 18, VIC)

Managing competing priorities and motivation

A number of respondents (n=30) described how COVID-19 created or intensified their experiences of managing competing priorities:

“Personally, the biggest issue would be dealing with mental health and balancing study with keeping a healthy attitude towards things. I believe to cope with this issue, people need to understand that we need to have time to let our body rest. Even though we may

¹ See Appendix B

be under pressure with COVID-19, it's important to be healthy and take time off to relieve stress."

(M, 17, WA)

Maintaining motivation during online and remote study was a challenge for many young people (n=42):

"It has been pretty hard to stay motivated in schoolwork and life in general during the pandemic and quarantine. I would say that this is the biggest issue, as it has a ripple effect on other parts of my life. For example, a lack of motivation may lead to me not completing many tasks, and this in turn leads to feelings of worthlessness and a sense of 'what's the point'. It can also build up and then suddenly there is this giant backlog of things that need to be done within a really short period of time to meet deadlines which can be super stressful."

(M, 17, VIC)

Workloads and timelines

Young people described the senior years' workload (n=27) as difficult to keep up with during online learning:

Young people described an increasing workload during online learning, with some speculating that teachers and schools assumed that they had more time because they were at home. Altered workloads and timelines left respondents feeling stressed and worried:

"I feel as if teachers don't know the limit to set students work since they aren't in the classroom and teaching live. Some teachers set mountain loads of work and it becomes more stressful doing this during lockdown since it requires independent study and research."

(M, 15, VIC)

"When we came back from quarantine, the teachers said they had been working tirelessly, and that they were trying their best to maintain our mental health. They then decided to go ahead with the postponed assessment tasks from term 1, which lasted all the [way] up until our trials, which they decided to squish into two weeks at the end of term. There was no time to study and so many kids were suffering from financial and familial stress, and teachers didn't care."

(F, 18, NSW)

Lack of communication and assistance

A small number of young people (n=17) spoke about not having enough communication or assistance to support effective online learning:

"The biggest issue that would have occurred within the past year would be coping with the fact that most of year 12 was ruined due to COVID-19, having the stress built up with everything being delayed put me in a space where, I didn't know what to do first and how to do it due to not being able to come to school to speak face to face with teachers and I am a visual learner, online learning did not help me at all."

(F, 17, SA)

"We are being asked too much to continue the same curriculum and the same workload that previous students have had without online learning and a pandemic to deal with. We are expected to be functioning as normal but we are not in a normal world/school environment."
(F, 17, NSW)

"In the past year, my biggest issue has been dealing with year 12 HSC and coronavirus. It has been a big struggle to learn information over zoom calls and online learning...I have tried to ask teachers for help but they are always too busy."

(F, 17, NSW)

Some described not having access to resources to support effective engagement with online learning:

"...I have had problems accessing my remote learning as I don't have Wi-Fi and can't afford it. I sent off an email about 2/3 weeks ago and still haven't heard any updates on the situation. How am I supposed to have a proper education without the ability to access my resources."

(F, 17, VIC)

Falling behind, getting poor grades and failing

Some of the most frequently reported impacts and consequences in relation to study during COVID-19 included feeling stressed and worried about falling behind in studies, achieving poorer than expected grades or failing and worry about an uncertain future.

Respondents (n=110) felt stressed and worried about the lack of certainty that COVID-19 had imposed on their educational expectations and experiences:

"COVID and the unpredictability of school now (online or face to face, will final exams go ahead, will I get into uni, will I get a muck up day or a formal) which has all significantly affected my mental health when added on top of the usual stresses of year 12."

(F, 17, NSW)

"I think just the stress of a global pandemic in my final year of school not knowing what is going to happen next."

(F, 17, NT)

Many young people (n=83) reported falling behind on work and performing more poorly:

"The whole COVID thing stuffed around with my work a bit so now I'm behind in 2 subjects quite a bit and it's going to be really painful to catch up. It shouldn't be so hard. How is one stupid assignment going to help me with my life."

(F, 17, SA)

"The biggest issue I have been dealing this year is my stress, mostly with getting back from online learning and I feel like I have been falling back a bit with my grades and I'm scared to fail."

(F, 15, NSW)

Worry about final year examinations and final grades was of particular concern for those in their last year of school (n=68), who described feeling stressed about their grades and worried about their futures, including whether they would get the grade they needed to get into university:

"My studying and grades, I'm in year 12 and as an academic student with great past results I'm ambitious so crap grades really tipped me off and it sucks because it was because of the coronavirus and my mental health. I'm trying to pick myself up."

(F, 17, VIC)

"Nothing too big. Yr. 12 is stressful, trying to get a high ATAR for uni. COVID 19 definitely makes it harder, I have missed out on nearly 6 weeks of school so far. I really

lack the motivation that I need for that ATAR and will have to do my back up degree not the one I really wanted."

(F, 18, NSW)

Some young people wrote about their concerns regarding assessment:

"My biggest issue this year has been what has come from COVID-19, mainly from a year 12 student perspective. It's been hard not knowing when SACs that you've been studying for weeks for are being moved to and if there will even be an opportunity to complete the SAC in a way that feels is worth it (i.e. doing SACs at home is difficult as there are cons, needing to do validation tasks to validate the score, feels like you're doing the SAC twice for one mark). Also the unknown of exams and ATAR in general, just feels a bit defeating."

(F, 18, VIC)

Concern about future consequences of COVID-19

A large number of young people (n=90) described feeling worried about the consequences of COVID-19 on their future ambitions and plans:

"I constantly stress about if my scores are going to be enough because the assessments have been altered. Given the option to choose pass/fail, I don't know how it'll be perceived by graduate programs, because I got a good score but I chose pass because I felt the score didn't reflect my potential as [it was] compromised by COVID."

(M, 19, VIC)

"The biggest issue that I have been dealing with is what is going to happen with my HSC and ATAR. I really want to go to uni but I am worried that with coronavirus I will be unable to perform well. I am worried about how all my exams are going to be and whether I will get the ATAR that I am hoping for."

(F, 17, NSW)

One young person described the stress and worry of the impact of COVID-19 related changes on their future when they said:

"I just need more support and reassurance that I won't be put at a loss because of COVID."

(F, 17, NSW)

Positive impacts

A small number of respondents (n=8) described COVID-19 as either having no impact, or a positive impact on them. Some wrote that they enjoyed being at home during quarantine and lockdown periods:

"COVID 19 has not been a problem, I actually enjoyed spending time at home in quarantine with my family."

(F, 17, NSW)

Even though many young people described struggling to adapt to online and remote learning and changed routines, learning environments and engagement with teachers, there were some who felt they had adapted and managed to keep up with the work:

"We can't go to school because of the COVID restrictions and makes doing work at home hard. The first time we had to stay at home to do work it was hard to focus, but the second time around I just try to get all my work done and fully focus on finishing the day." (M, 16, VIC)

"Through the COVID crisis and other distractions like friends, family and sport I have lost concentration on my studies but in this 2nd semester so far I feel more confident and comfortable in the work I have done and achieved."

(M, 16, NSW)

What solutions do young people propose to education concerns?

The Youth Survey question prompted a response about what the respondents thought should be done about the issue they were facing. A moderate number (n=102) of young people responded to this part of the question with solutions that included helping themselves, receiving support from schools and universities and access to mental health support.

Some young people suggested solutions they were in control of, such as:

"In entering year 11, I have found it stressful to stay on top of studies and complete well in all my subjects. It has been hard for me to stay focused at home and feel motivated to study. I believe I need to find new ways to deal with stress, while also trying to improve on my studies. This could be by time management, meeting with my subject teachers and also informing my parents on what is going on."
(F, 16, NSW)

Other solutions suggested by respondents included greater supports for students to learn content and catch-up on work, such as creating safe in-person lessons and improving communication between students and educators, which was described as especially challenging during remote learning periods:

"We should be able to consider the huge learning curve and the gaps in knowledge that kids may have due to this random virus outbreak. We should have facilities other than school to support and educate people that may not have access to technology and or even provide free tutoring programs to take back the lessons lost and improve further."
(M, 17, WA)

It was also proposed by a number of respondents that pressure on students could be eased by reducing the workload, lowering university entrance scores and encouraging and educating students on balancing study with friends, work and physical activity:

"I feel like we should also be given more leniency on our end of school results and more assistance through the last years of our schooling. This could be helped through, assisted university entry, and leniency to future endeavours of the students after they graduate." (F, 17, NSW)

A number of students wrote about the increased stress and uncertainty created by COVID-19 and suggested additional mental health and wellbeing supports would be valuable to students to help them manage their studies and future plans:

"Obviously the pandemic of COVID 19 has been incredibly significant in the lives of students all around the world. Unfortunately there is not much we can do in regards to the pandemic itself but now is a crucial time to invest in mental health services for schools nationwide...we...need to consider the repercussions this year will have had on people. Students are burnt out, exhausted and are insecure/unsure about their futures (which is a terrifying experience in itself), services should be put in place to aid students during and after the release of the ATAR." (F, 17, VIC)

"Students also need to be given techniques to handle stressors such as mindfulness strategies. Teenagers don't automatically know how to deal with stress. This is a skill they need to be taught. I have found education in mental wellbeing particularly lacking in my years at school. In my opinion teaching students strategies to deal with stress should be an absolute must in all schools." (F, 17, QLD)

More females than males self-reported solutions to educational concerns.

Isolation

Amongst respondents who reported COVID-19 had been an issue they were dealing with in the past year, 346 young people (36.3% of the subsample) wrote about how COVID-19 had left them physically and socially isolated. Amongst these young people:

- A higher proportion of respondents in Victoria (43.9%) compared with those from other states reported COVID-19 had left them physically and socially isolated.
- Almost a third of the respondents (32.4%) were 16 years old.
- A higher proportion of females than males reported being concerned with the impact of COVID-19 on their physical and social isolation (50.3% compared with 42.2%)².

In free-text responses, young people described being isolated from family, friends and activities in the COVID-19 context.

Feeling isolated and being separated from family and friends

Young respondents overwhelmingly wrote (n=166) that COVID-19 had affected their ability to connect and spend time with family and friends. Some respondents described feeling sad, lonely and isolated because they weren't able to see family and friends because they were confined to their homes, living away from home (such as in a boarding school arrangement) or had parents or family members stuck or living interstate or overseas:

"Having to cope with a new way of living and being restricted in a pandemic, losing connections with friends and the ability to have a social life as well as train sufficiently for a sport." (M, 17, VIC)

"In the past two terms, remote learning has taken a toll on me a little bit. Not seeing my friends everyday sucks."

(F, 16, VIC)

"Due to COVID19, I haven't been able to see friends and family and I really miss that."

(F, 17, VIC)

"Feeling isolated. With a single, working mother and not a lot of family and a small school it is easy to feel alone. Being stuck at home this year hasn't helped. Corona has made it feel like I am helpless, and that everything is dying. I, as a young person, have no control over [it]."

(F, 16, QLD)

"The effects of corona virus relating to socialising with my friends, being hearing impaired I have been finding it extremely isolating and [I feel] anxious."

(F, 17, VIC)

Conflict and relationship troubles

Some respondents (n=28) described finding it difficult to maintain relationships during lockdown arrangements that limited their ability to see family and friends in ways that they were accustomed to, such as at school, at home or in other face-to-face settings:

² See Appendix B

For a small number of young people, lockdown and similar restrictions were a catalyst for relationship troubles including conflict and relationship breakdown between themselves and their family members or friends:

"Friendship issues as a result of COVID-19."

(M, 17, SA)

Adapting to socialising via different mediums

A small number of young people (n=16) described how COVID-19 related restrictions on going out, visiting the homes of others, going to school and attending events had affected the ways in which they were accustomed to socialising with their friends and family. Many of these young people described how they adapted to restrictions and attempted to stay connected with friends and family through online platforms:

"The biggest issue in the past year would have to be the isolation from friends and family. However, using technology platforms was a great way to 'solve' this issue in a sense."

(F, 17, NSW)

"I talk to my friends over social media but that's obviously not the same. I've only been able to connect with them through games or social media, but it is better than nothing so I am grateful for it."

(M, 15, VIC)

Impact of isolation on care for family and friends

A small number of respondents (n=11) described feeling worried for the physical and emotional wellbeing of family members and friends during restrictions, including family members and friends who were described as experiencing poor mental health and those worried about contracting COVID-19. A small number of respondents also described the loss of family members and friends during restrictions and feeling as though they had been unable to help and grieve adequately:

"Well the biggest thing would definitely be the passing of my great-grandfather, although he had lived a very long life it was hard on everyone in my family as COVID made it impossible to hold an actual funeral...And the restricted travel meant I never really got a good chance to say goodbye..."
(Gender not disclosed, 16, ACT)

Events, community activities and sports

A large number of young people (n=68) wrote about COVID-19 related restrictions negatively impacting on their ability to participate in sports, community organisations or events:

"In the past year, the issue that I have been dealing with is not being able to play any sport. This is due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the health and safety issues that come with it."

(M, 15, VIC)

Young people described cancelled sport, activities and events as affecting how they could spend their time, limiting opportunities for social interaction that they would usually get and affecting goals and plans:

"It would have to be dealing with the COVID-19. I just want to go out and see friends, go out and party. But we are stuck inside literally doing nothing...I'm a musician, and that is literally been thrown out the window as not being able to play gigs or anything. Just a rubbish year."

(M, 18, VIC)

"The biggest issue that I have faced within the past year is what the corona virus has taken away from me. I have been trying out for a team for 5 years finally made it but now we cannot play."

(F, 17, SA)

"The uncertainty that comes with the virus and the many other issues that Australia is facing. For me personally, I've been stressed about whether I will be able to compete in [sport] this year as I compete at a very high level and the uncertainty and cancellations have been hard to deal with."

(F, 16, VIC)

Sport and socialising were described by some respondents as activities that helped them achieve emotional and physical wellbeing and the absence of these outlets affected their health:

"My mental health isn't good especially with COVID 19 and I can't spend my time with friends or doing sport, which helps me clear my mind."

(F, 16, VIC)

Impacts on sports, events and other community activities brought about by COVID-19 was an issue that was described more frequently by males than females.

Lockdowns, quarantines and loss of usual support mechanisms

A large number of respondents (n=82) reported that being in isolation, lockdown and quarantine and not being able to go out and feeling bored was the biggest concern they had faced in the past year:

"The issue I have been dealing with is COVID 19 restricting me going out and instead being trapped at home."

(F, 16, VIC)

"Just during quarantine, how easy it is to fall into a bored stupor."

(M, 15, VIC)

Respondents (n=66) wrote about how isolation, lockdown, quarantine and learning from home either intensified or caused them to experience poor mental wellbeing. Adapting to changed circumstances that affected studying, working, extra-curricular activities and spending time with friends and family left many young people feeling lonely, isolated, depressed and anxious:

"Mental health! With isolation and COVID-19, I've felt my mental health decline dramatically and struggled to keep mentally healthy and positive in the uni semester, which was extremely stressful. I was reluctant to reach out for help because I didn't want to admit I was not okay and felt like seeking help was 'going backwards'. Once I admitted I didn't always need to be strong or put on a brave face, I was able to convey my feelings and talk to others about how I felt."

(F, 19, WA)

"COVID has made me sad and depressed. I lack human connections and I'm stuck with my family...the lack of human interactions I overlooked but it actually made me depressed. I felt sad and didn't feel like interacting over text just because it's so meaningless."

(F, 16, NSW)

Coping with changed circumstances wrought by the pandemic was described by respondents as difficult to manage because usual coping mechanisms such as spending time out of the house and with family and friends, was not available due to restrictions to control the spread of COVID-19. The challenge of managing mental health and wellbeing in the absence of usual supports was described by a number of respondents:

"COVID-19 ruined my year, I don't know when everything will go back to normal and how long it will take and it really upsets me as I was planning to do a lot of big things this year such as travelling...graduating, attending concerts, learning about other cultures and attend[ing] university..."

(F, 17, WA)

"The biggest issue I have been dealing with is my mental health, which has been heavily affected because of the corona virus pandemic. Without physical interactions and coming to school, I have been feeling quite uneasy and depressed for the past couple of months."

(F, 16, NSW)

"The COVID lockdown prevented me from contacting friends and the loneliness combined with the stress made me quite depressed. I wasn't able to spend as much time with my family and felt disconnected."

(M, 16, ACT)

A number of respondents (n=28) wrote about how COVID-19 restrictions, including lockdowns and border closures, had a negative impact on imagined opportunities and future plans and left others feeling worried for their futures:

Lockdown and quarantine experienced as positive

There were, a small number of respondents (n=6) who reported the lockdowns and isolation periods were positive for them:

"I think my biggest problem I have been dealing with is stress and anxiety, but with the whole lockdown experience as an introverted person it has been easy for me. Being able to stay in the safety of my room all day makes my life a lot easier."

(M, 15, VIC)

"...Corona gave me a much needed break."

(F, 16, QLD)



What solutions do young people propose to isolation concerns?

A moderate number (n=32) of young people proposed solutions to quarantine and isolation arrangements. These solutions included: actions they could take to help themselves and improve their situations and feelings; supports others could provide to improve the situation; and supports systems such as schools and governments could provide.

Some young people spoke about what they could do to improve their feelings of isolation. These included spending time (in person where possible, or virtually) with family and friends, creating structures and routines to improve wellbeing, reaching out for help and support and finding time for self-care:

“At this stage I think personal action is the only course of action that can be taken; perhaps one can have a set time every week to contact their friends in a group call of some sort.” (F, 17, VIC)

Other young people spoke about how they themselves, and others in the community could, and should, respect the restrictions put in place:

“I think that everyone should cope with what needs to be done in order to stop the spread of this virus.” (F, 17, VIC)

There were also some young people who wrote about how schools and governments could provide supports to students through encouraging online interaction and counselling supports to manage feelings of isolation and loneliness, as well as governments implementing vaccines to help life return to normal:

“I think that we have to find a cure/vaccine for corona to stop the spread so we will be able to socialise more.” (Gender not specified, 16, VIC)

“I think that there should be help from counsellors for us [even though] we may not be attending school in real life and are attending virtually.” (F, 16, NSW)

More females than males self-reported solutions to isolation concerns.

Mental Health

Amongst respondents who reported COVID-19 had been a concern they were dealing with in the past year, 289 young people (30.3% of the subsample) wrote about how, COVID-19 had affected their mental health. Amongst these young people:

- A higher proportion of respondents in Victoria (38.8%) compared with those from other states reported COVID-19 had an impact on their mental health.
- The largest proportion of respondents (36.3%) were 17 years old and three in ten (29.1%) respondents were 16 years old.
- A much higher proportion of females than males reported being concerned with the impact of COVID-19 on their mental health (68.9% compared with 23.9%).
- One third (33.6%) of respondents who reported COVID-19 had an impact on their mental health self-reported probable psychological distress³.

When writing about their mental health and wellbeing, respondents described feeling stressed about different aspects of their lives and detailed how COVID-19 had either caused, or intensified feelings of stress, experiences of anxiety and/or depression and led to poor mental wellbeing:

"In the past year, the biggest issue that I have been dealing with is mental health. Mental health for me is extremely important and something that I struggle with regularly. Especially more now than ever with the global pandemic, my mental health has not been the best this year."

(F, 15, QLD)

Mental health and family circumstances

Respondents (n=58) described feeling stressed about their families, or their family situations. Stress related to: conflict that was physically inescapable due to being confined to their homes; worry about family wellbeing and financial stress; missing families and homes when living away from home; family responsibilities while at home; and worry over the wellbeing of loved ones and loss of loved ones:

"I am currently going through a lot of family conflict which I can't turn away from due to COVID-19 and being stuck in the same house as them...this is driving me to a very bad mental state, which could be dealt with by talking to people. I have not yet told anyone about my problems whether it's the family conflict, mental health or financial issues I am going through. I feel ashamed and embarrassed about them and don't want to tell anyone."

(F, 17, VIC)

I've been dealing with my mental problems, because I'm an out-going person and live in a small house with 11 people in it, and I feel like I'm trapped in the house and have nothing to do, but clean. And it's hard for me because I'm a teenager, and teenagers have the rights to be young and live their own life but I can't do that with the COVID-19 that's going on in this world right now,

(F, 16, VIC)

"In isolation the school workload with the amount of stress put on us from parents and family members to do well and look after younger siblings whilst the parents try to work or look for work whilst most jobs were closed."

³ See Appendix B

(Gender not disclosed, 16, NSW)

Limited support from family and friends

A number of respondents (n=42) described having poor mental wellbeing due to COVID-19 limiting their ability to remain engaged in social activities and keep in touch and connected with friends:

“...I couldn't talk to my best friend in person and that really messed with my mental state (usually I see them every school holidays).”

(M, 15, WA)

“I think COVID19 has dramatically influenced my mental health and sense of support by limiting my ability to see friends. There's nothing really to improve it though.”

(F, 17, NSW)

A small number (n=6) of young people described how COVID-19 had intensified their feeling of stress as they tried to balance various aspects of their lives such as studying with sport commitments and spending time with family and friends:

“My biggest issue that I have been dealing with is my mental health through year 12. The global pandemic has made me extremely stressed with managing my grades, social life and work life. I also have very low self-esteem, which makes it hard to focus on other things.”

(F, 17, SA)

A small number (n=4) of young people reported they had support from their friends (and families), which helped them to manage the stress they felt due to COVID-19:

“I'm lucky enough to have pretty good support from friends that is definitely making it easier.”

(M, 17, VIC)

As highlighted earlier, education and studying was a stressor for a large number (n=111) of young respondents:

“My biggest issue that I have dealt with in the past year in the uncertainty and stress involved in the presence of a pandemic, especially during my year 12. The stresses of not knowing what is going to happen in the future and losing motivation to handle and endure through the schooling term placed an extra burden on my mental health.”

(F, 17, VIC)

Lack of motivation

A small number of respondents (n=21) referred to COVID-19 negatively impacting on their motivation:

Feeling stressed about uncertainty

Respondents (n=84) described overall feelings of stress brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Feelings of stress were described by some as being caused by unexpected and unprecedented changes to their lives. Feelings of stress had impacts on other areas of young people's lives, including school and work:

“The biggest issue I have been dealing with this year is having a lack of motivation for life. I think because of the pandemic and not being able to do the things I usually would, I have been feeling like I have nothing to look forward to.” (F, 17, QLD)

"I've been more stressed than I would usually be. Stressed about school work and the pandemic that is going on in the world currently. This has caused me to fall behind in a couple of subjects."

(F, 15, SA)

"The biggest issue I have been dealing with is stress. Not knowing when COVID-19 will end whilst still trying to do well at school is overwhelming."

(M, 16, SA)

A smaller number of respondents (n=20) described being stressed due to the uncertainty caused by COVID-19 and what that might mean for their futures:

There were also a small number of respondents (n=11) who felt stressed about work and incomes, and also about contracting COVID-19:

"Money, with corona virus I haven't had a job all year and I'm very low on money. With only 5 months left of school before going into the real world it is stressing me out as I don't have enough money to live. I didn't get job keeper and I couldn't get any Centrelink payments...Over the past 6 months my anxiety has built up pretty bad especially with the stress of school and not having any money."

(F, 17, QLD)

"The biggest issue I have been dealing with is having to adjust to living under restrictions, put in place due to COVID, and coping with stress that originates from worrying about an uncertain future as well as deciding what I want to do with my future. I think in order to deal with these issues I would like to have more support from my school and maybe try to find a way that I can relax/ start a routine in order to decrease my stress." (F, 16, NSW)

"I also feel stressed about physically going to class as there is a chance I could contract the virus and infect my family and friends."

(F, 18, WA)

Serious mental health concerns

There were a number of responses (n=49) in which young people reported serious mental health concerns, such as self-reports of depression and/or anxiety, family violence, as well as a small number of disclosures of thoughts and attempts of self-harm, such as AOD abuse, self-harm and suicide.

"My biggest issue this year was my struggle with depression. Whilst I've had depression most of my life, the quarantine, isolation and cancelling of events, alongside a ton of stress from my final year of school, has not been too kind on my mental state."

(M, 17, WA)

"Quarantine was very difficult for me. I started to abuse alcohol and then had a big fight with my family when they found out."

(F, 16, NSW)

"The biggest issue I've been dealing with is my mental health. My family home life hasn't been the best and it was getting harder to feel loved, supported and safe when going through the COVID 'holiday'/quarantine. I was contemplating suicide and I thought no one wanted me around."

(F, 15, QLD)

"Trying to find reasons not to pull the plug during COVID19 TBH."

(F, 17, NSW)

Accessing professional help

A small number of respondents (n=11) reported they experienced difficulty accessing professional mental health support during COVID-19 restrictions:

"During the pandemic, my brother tried to commit suicide. The pandemic has restricted people being able to seek mental help in person, only on zoom or online call services. Opening yourself up and being completely vulnerable like that on a video call is a ridiculous expectation to have."

(F, 16, VIC)

What solutions do young people propose for mental health concerns?

A moderate number (n=64) of young people described solutions to tackling poor mental health brought about by COVID-19. Solutions proposed by respondents described supports from networks and structures that surrounded them, including family and friends, government, schools and professional mental health assistance.

A number of young people wrote about the need for government support and assistance to help them manage the issues causing them stress and poor mental health. Suggestions regarding government support included financial support for study fees, support finding work, income support payments, support for small businesses and greater mental health awareness and support. For example:

"There needs to be greater means of accessing mental health education that takes into account the state of mentally ill individuals in situations like a pandemic. Having a program that sends reminders for meals, showers, etc. And provides support in a variety of ways through a means like a phone app would improve living dramatically." (F, 16, NSW)

A number of respondents reported that support for mental health could be offered through schools. Respondents suggested having more counsellors in schools and proactive counselling support to help counter poor mental health amongst school-aged people:

"I believe that there needs to be more counsellors, as there are only two and because of recent events with COVID-19 they have had no time to reach out to a lot of students (including myself). I believe that the best way to overcome this is for schools to hire more counsellors, even if they are just part-time, especially when something such as COVID-19 has affected so many people." (Non-binary gender, 17, VIC)

Accessing mental health supports from any available avenue was also described by respondents as a means to helping manage poor mental health during COVID:

"I guess making therapy/counselling more open and decreasing the stigma around it would be good." (F, 16, NSW)

Some respondents identified they needed to help themselves by talking with their friends and family, accessing mental health support, or doing exercise, eating well and taking time to relax.

"I need to return to my youth worker and ask about some coping mechanisms for my ADHD symptoms since I don't have any knowledge on how to help weaken my ADHD symptoms. I also need to focus on bettering my physical health through my eating habits and exercise as I am continuously sick." (Non-binary gender, 18, SA)

"I need to start meditating and construct a routine that will help me cope." (M, 16, QLD)

"I believe that absorbing more of what I like from home such as art, plants and music will help me cope." (F, 17, VIC)

More females than males self-reported solutions to mental health concerns.



Discussion

The responses that inform this report were written at a historically significant time. The months April to August 2020—when data was collected—saw the emergence of a pandemic in Australia that had swift and unprecedented consequences for the way that young people connect, access services and dream about and prepare for their futures.

When identifying COVID-19 as a top personal concern, respondents described how COVID-19 had impacted on the below areas of their lives:

- Education
- Isolation
- Mental health

While respondents who reported COVID-19 was a top personal concern in relation to education, isolation and mental health were demographically similar to those reporting non-COVID-19 related top personal concerns, there were some key differences as outlined below.

Young people in Victoria in their final year or years of school were the most likely to report COVID-19-related personal concerns and these were most often related to isolation and education. This is likely due to restrictions in response to COVID-19 and the impact of these restrictions on young people in their final years of school.

In 2020, Victorians experienced the largest outbreak of COVID-19 in Australia at the time and had the longest lockdown of any Australian state with the lockdowns affecting schooling arrangements. Changes to online and remote schooling along with delayed and altered assessments was of greatest concern to those in their final year of school because future plans and ambitions often depend on final assessment results. Studies conducted elsewhere with other students similarly report that the COVID-19 pandemic has left students feeling overwhelmed and concerned about their futures (Aristovnik et al., 2020). Other studies have found that the pandemic has had a negative impact on students' mental and emotional wellbeing and that students experiencing vulnerabilities are at a greater risk of losing connection with school (Dodd et al., 2021; Page et al., 2020).

Young Victorians were also experiencing the longest isolation periods because of stay-at-home orders and lockdowns in the state. It is important to note that friends were the top source of support for *Youth Survey* respondents in 2020 (83.5% of 2020 *Youth Survey* respondents reported they would go to a friend for help with important issues, followed closely by parents/guardians (71.7%) and families (55.3%)) (Tiller et al., 2020). It is therefore reasonable to expect that restrictions placed on these relationships would likely have negative impacts for young people. This is especially important in the context of evidence that has shown that periods of isolation are associated with poor mental health (including stress, depression and anxiety) amongst young people and that social connection is protective for mental health and wellbeing (Brooks et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020; Magson et al., 2021).

Young people who described **education** concerns told how COVID-19 had altered the medium in which they usually learnt from face-to-face lessons conducted on campus to learning at home via digital platforms. Many reported that the move to online and remote learning necessitated by stay-at-home orders and school closures was difficult, and they struggled to manage competing priorities and maintain motivation. For some young people, managing the study load in changed

circumstances and adapting to altered assessment timelines was stressful and many said they needed better communication and more help. Respondents described the consequences of COVID-19 for education as falling behind, getting poor grades and failing, as well as concerns over implications for their futures.

Those who reported **isolation** described how changes to being able to socialise and travel brought about by COVID-19 led to them being separated from family and friends and not being able to participate in events, community activities and sports, which left them feeling isolated and lonely. While some reported being able to adapt to using online mediums or other mechanisms available to them, others reported the onset of relationship trouble and conflict and importantly, the loss of the usual support mechanisms that they could either offer to family and friends or receive from family and friends.

Young people who reported **mental health** concerns described how COVID-19 either created or intensified their feelings of stress and poor mental health because of feeling isolated, disconnected and worried about their futures, incomes, jobs and their own personal wellbeing and that of their families (e.g. contracting COVID-19). Many described experiencing a lack of motivation and having limited support, either because they were isolated from their usual support mechanisms or couldn't access professional help. Some young people described serious mental health concerns, such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), suicidal thoughts and/or actions and self-harm.

Young people who reported mental health as a top personal concern predominantly experienced poor wellbeing as stress in relation to their futures, work/income, studies and connection with family and friends. Close to seven in ten (68.9%) respondents who reported that COVID-19 had an impact on their mental health were female. Studies undertaken during COVID-19 have shown that females report poorer mental health, including increased anxiety and depression, compared with their male counterparts (Dodd et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021; Magson et al., 2021). Attention to adolescent mental health is particularly important because of developmental vulnerabilities to poor mental health and the potential for lifelong impact.

There were also **intersections between education, isolation and mental health**, which is to say that there were some people who reported in more than one area. Importantly, changes to education impacted on mental health because of increased stress brought about by changes to study contexts. Experiences of poor mental health were intensified because of COVID-19 worries and fears and stay at home orders and lockdowns that prevented young people from accessing support in their usual ways. Changes to online and remote schooling also impacted on feelings of isolation because school was described as a place where respondents could catch up with their friends.

The findings of this report, when considered alongside existing studies on similar topics, demonstrate that the impact of COVID-19 on education, being physically and socially isolated and mental health are inter-connected and most keenly felt amongst those who have experienced the greatest disruptions to their lives in efforts to contain virus outbreaks. While not present in the data that informs this report, it is worthwhile querying how those experiencing vulnerabilities and marginalisation have fared in the contexts of COVID-19, as evidence suggests those with additional needs are at increased risk of experiencing poorer mental health and disconnecting from supports and school (Jones et al., 2021; Page et al., 2020).

It is, as yet unknown what the long-term impacts will be for young people affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The virus and the efforts to contain it are continuing to have impacts around Australia more than 12 months since the first lockdown. Recently, most of Australia's States and Territories were in some form of lockdown due to an outbreak of a variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. While this report shows that young people living in Victoria were affected by COVID-19 and related restrictions in early 2020 to a greater extent than young people living elsewhere in Australia, ongoing virus outbreaks and lockdowns may have similar impacts for other young people living under lockdown and quarantine arrangements.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Profile of *Youth Survey 2020* respondents

In 2020 the *Youth Survey* sample included:

- 56.2% respondents were female, 41.2% were male, 1.6% were gender diverse and 1.1% preferred not to say.
- 1,129 (4.4%) respondents identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
- 3,823 (15.0%) respondents stated they were born overseas and 5,061 (19.9%) young people reported speaking a language other than English at home.
- Four in 10 (39.9%) respondents stated that one or both of their parents were born overseas.
- 1,658 (6.6%) respondents identified as living with disability.
- 17,761 respondents were living in major cities and a total of 7,064 respondents were living in regional areas.

Appendix B: Demographic features of respondents in the Education, Isolation and Mental Health categories

Items	Education (n=543) %	Isolation (n=346) %	Mental Health (n=289) %
Gender			
Female	60.0	50.3	68.9
Male	33.0	42.2	23.9
Something else	<1	<1	<1%
Prefer not to say	<1	<1	1.0
Age			
14	<1	<1	<1
15	20.6	29.8	21.1
16	21.5	32.4	29.1
17	41.1	28.0	36.3
18	14.9	6.6	10.7
19	1.5	2.6	2.4
State			
ACT	4.6	4.9	4.8
NSW	29.5	23.7	31.8
NT	<1	<1	1.0
QLD	13.8	12.1	11.8
SA	7.2	8.4	5.2
TAS	2.8	3.2	2.1
VIC	34.4	43.9	38.8
WA	7.4	3.8	4.5
Country of Birth			
Born Australia	86.0	90.2	90.0
Born outside Australia	13.3	8.7	9.7
Disability			
No disability	96.7	93.1	95.5
Has disability	3.3	5.2	4.5
Psychological Distress (K6)			
No psychological distress	79.7	85.3	66.4
Psychological distress	17.5	11.8	33.6
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander			
Non-Indigenous	98.5	97.4	97.6
Indigenous	1.5	2.3	2.4

Percentages may not add up to 100% due to missing data (where respondents in the samples have not answered questions).



**We stand together
with Australians in
need, until they can
stand for themselves**

Contact us

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If you are a young person and need someone to talk with, you can
contact Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 (24/7) kidshelpline.com.au