

# Impact of COVID-19 on children and young people

## Safety

### Overview

From April to July 2020, the Commission for Children and Young People conducted consultations to develop a point-in-time snapshot of the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people. We heard from 644 children and young people and 172 staff from 70 organisations providing a range of services

and supports to children and young people to understand the impact of the pandemic.

This snapshot is about safety. It aims to share what we heard and inform improvements to how services respond to children and young people during and after COVID-19.

### Changes impacting safety during COVID-19

On 16 March 2020, the Victorian Government declared a State of Emergency to prevent the spread of COVID-19. So far, during the pandemic, different levels of restrictions have been put in place that inhibit people's movement. This has included state-wide measures, such as the 30 March 'stay at home' restrictions, and area-specific measures, including the 7 July 'stay at home' restrictions for Melbourne and Mitchell Shire. More recently, the Victorian Government introduced Stage 4 restrictions in Melbourne on 2 August, and re-introduced Stage 3 restrictions in regional and rural Victoria on 5 August.

The restrictions to contain the pandemic have meant children and young people have been less visible to people outside their immediate household, including schools and other services, extended family and their wider communities. Restrictions to stop the spread of COVID-19 also changed the way services to children and young people are provided. Many services, including Child Protection, child and family services, health and other support services dramatically reduced or stopped face-to-face contact and changed to remote service delivery.

The Victorian Government's COVID-19 response has included support to keep children and families safe. This includes \$77.5 million funding for staff, resources and services aimed at vulnerable children and families announced on 23 April 2020. This funding included \$46 million to family services to implement a new intensive family preservation and reunification response and flexible funding for family services. It also included \$15 million for residential care services to support mobile response teams, extra contingency units and additional cleaning. The funding also comprised \$11 million for financial support for carers and \$4 million to support young people currently in care and due to turn 18 years old before the end of the year to remain in care or support transition to independence. An additional \$36.9 million funding was sourced to address demand in the children and families system and approximately \$20 million for family violence initiatives announced in August.

This snapshot describes what the Commission heard during and after the first period of stage 3 restrictions between April and July.

# Our consultations

## Who we heard from

**644**  
children and young people

**417**  
aged under 18

**176\***  
aged 18 or over

*\*51 respondents did not specify.*

**42\***  
identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander

*\*71 respondents did not specify.*

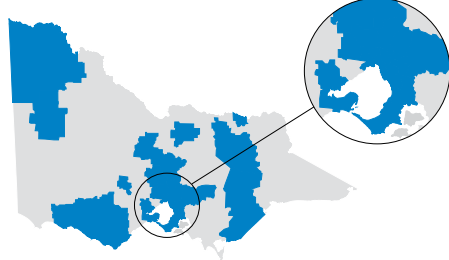
**122\***  
speak a language other than English

*\*64 respondents did not specify.*

**87\***  
have lived experience of disability

*\*89 respondents did not specify.*

### Located in:



- metropolitan Melbourne and regional & rural Victoria
- In local government areas indicated in blue.

### Housing situation:

- family home
- living independently
- informal arrangement (e.g. with friends)
- supported accommodation
- residential care
- foster care

**172**

### staff

from over **70 organisations** working with **children and young people**

### Organisations included:

- Aboriginal services
- Multicultural and refugee youth services
- Child Protection
- Disability services
- Family services
- Family violence services
- Youth Justice
- Maternal and Child Health
- Mental health services
- Youth services
- Education & training
- Housing and homelessness

## How we heard from them

**63** individual phone and online consultations with children and young people

**36** online group consultations involving **286** children and young people

**295** online survey responses from children and young people

**172** phone and online consultations with staff

## When we heard from them

April 2020 to July 2020

### What they spoke about

- Family, friends and community
- Safety
- Education and training
- Income and employment
- Housing
- Mental health
- Justice system
- Health
- Information and having a say

The Commission's Youth Advisory Group (4 young people) guided the Commission in designing, implementing and evaluating the consultation program.

# Summary

Children and young people's feelings about safety often related to their health and the need to keep themselves and their families safe from infection. Some children and young people also spoke about conflict, tension or violence within the family during lockdown and the fact their usual safety strategies were not available. For some young people living outside the family home, especially those in transitional or unstable housing, the lockdown made life more unsafe.

People working to support children and young people through the lockdown period raised children's safety from harm as a significant concern, largely due to there being fewer 'eyes on kids' because home visits and face-to-face contact were broadly suspended. For many service providers working with vulnerable families and children, the risk of harm at home and the absence of in-person support often felt more urgent than the risk of COVID-19.

## Keeping safe from infection

### What we heard

**"I have felt pretty safe, carry hand sanitizer around with me all the time. I try to be considerate of other people, particularly where it may be more dangerous for them."**

*(High school student, aged 15, regional, foster care)*

**"I have always felt safe as a young person with good health. I was only worried for my grandparents and other older family members such as family who have had cancer and mum who works at the hospital, as I knew they wouldn't recover as well as I would if they were to contract coronavirus."**

*(High school student, aged 15, regional)*

**"The [shopping centre] is two kilometres away from us where COVID has happened and people still go there. It's like people don't realise COVID is happening. Like I need to go to Kmart to get a drying rack but I'm too scared to go. Like I could get sick ... and I could kill someone and that's on me."**

*(University student, aged 18, metro, supported accommodation)*

**"The madness of it all, the punch ons over toilet paper and that, I didn't feel unsafe, I am very tall so I'm not worried about my safety but watching people lose their shit over toilet paper was scary."**

*(Young person working full time, aged 22, metro)*

### What children and young people said about keeping safe from infection

Many children and young people spoke of feeling safe in their homes but were concerned about the spread of the virus and its long-term consequences. Many expressed concern about other people not following the rules, especially when leaving home to go to school or use public transport. A major concern was making others sick, particularly older or at-risk relatives.



A large proportion of children and young people reported that despite concerns and challenges, they felt safe during the COVID-19 lockdown period because they were in safe accommodation and had the supports they needed. This included some children and young people living in supported accommodation and residential care.



Most children and young people expressed a fear of contracting COVID-19, particularly those with underlying health conditions, but many said they were more worried about the threat of COVID-19 to vulnerable family members, especially those they lived with and grandparents.



Many children and young people were worried about making sure that they maintained physical distancing in public, including on public transport, while shopping and at school.



Many children and young people also expressed concern that others were not taking the rules seriously enough and were worried that the easing of restrictions may cause people to forget what they needed to do to reduce the risk of infection.



A smaller number of children and young people, particularly young people with disability or with caring responsibilities, were anxious about shortages of food and the sense of panic in the community at different times.

# Information about COVID-19

## What we heard

**“[Information is] very confusing because someone says something and someone says another thing and I have to put it all together.”**

*(Primary school student, aged 10, regional)*

**“... I check with the health department, most of it is simple English so it's easy enough to read. But it lacks details and key points....”**

*(University student, aged 21, regional)*

**“I think there could have been more on social media, even if it's a sponsored post on Facebook or whatever. Most of what I've seen is on the news or paper but not many young people read the papers... it's accessible to adults, but if you are looking at early teens they won't get the information from the same sources.”**

*(Young person, aged over 18, regional)*

**“What's important now is that we don't slip into complacency. The government needs to continue to give people information about what's happening. A lot of people have fatigue about COVID, so the messaging going forward is really important.”**

*(High school student, aged 17, metro)*

**“I'd love if it was more clear... at least if there was some place where there was concrete rules it would have made it a lot better. Like I would still have hated it but would have at least understood it.”**

*(High School student, aged 17, rural)*

**“The most important thing is about information, info about everything.... If there's any kind of information about the futures for young people [that] will help.”**

*(High school graduate, aged over 18, regional)*

## What children and young people said about information on COVID-19

While many children and young people had been provided with useful resources about keeping safe from infection, others found information confusing and not always provided in ways that were accessible to them.



Some children and young people reported being able to access good information about how to protect themselves, often via social media. Young people also pointed out that social media is their preferred source of information over newspapers or television.



Many children and young people also stressed the importance of government and agencies doing more to provide them with access to relevant child- and youth-friendly information about how to stay safe, lockdown rules and their future post-COVID-19. A large number of children and young people were concerned about the lack of availability of accurate information, and about the lack of information clearly targeted towards their age group.

# The impact on personal safety

## What we heard

**“At the start, members of my family were also experiencing high levels of anxiety, so there was a fair bit of conflict in the home. We have done family therapy so had insight. But what about the people that don’t have that. If we don’t have a place of safety and we feel trapped, that can be really toxic.”**

*(University student, regional)*

**“Safety is totally an issue, people with issues with family. It’s much trickier now they’ve been at home in places where family violence is occurring and alcohol around – not bad enough to leave, but where before they could go to a friend’s house as a safe space, now with COVID they couldn’t go out and there’s been lots of tension affecting mental health.”**

*(VICAL student, aged 17, metro)*

**“I’m worried about the rates of domestic abuse going up. I know a lot of queer kids are getting outed while at home with homophobic parents. It’s been scary for me, moderating our chats and making sure we are as safe as possible.... I chose not to continue therapy over COVID, some friends have continued via telehealth and they have parents listening in, they feel anxious about it, it is pretty scary.”**

*(High school student, aged 17, regional)*

**“There was a bad spot with a family member that got violent for a long period of time.”**

*(High school student, aged 17)*

**“I had an IVO hearing scheduled [against a violent partner] – waited in line for half an hour to be told it has been pushed back. There is an interim order in place but even though I have another court date, I think it will be adjourned. I contacted the Orange Door for a referral. There is normally a two week wait for FV matters – I was told this had been pushed out to eight weeks. I have been waiting three months – I’m still on the waitlist at [service].”**

*(VICAL/VET student, aged 21, metro)*

**“It’s different for everyone, there’s not much room since we live in small houses, we get sick of each other very quickly. There’s lot of yelling, a lot of arguments.”**

*(High school student, aged 16, metro)*

## What children and young people said about personal safety

While many of the children and young people we spoke with reported that the COVID-19 restrictions had provided a chance to reconnect with their families, for some children and young people this period increased their exposure to family violence, abuse or conflict. Restrictions meant families were forced to remain at home, often under heightened stress. Many of the usual strategies young people used to manage risk, such as getting out of the house, going to school or going to stay with friends or extended family, were not available.



Many young people talked about additional pressure on families resulting from COVID-19 restrictions.



Some young people talked about increased levels of conflict in the home and feeling confined and insufficiently supported. Others described friends or peers living in violent or abusive situations.



Most children and young people reported feeling safe in the online environments they were using because of the lockdown, including remote education, telehealth and social media.



A few children, particularly primary school-aged children, said they were worried about being vulnerable to bullying and hacking while they were online.



## The impact on personal safety continued

### What services working with children and young people said about risks to personal safety

Overwhelmingly, service providers cited limited face-to-face contact as the key barrier to making sure children and young people were safe. They said that in-person service contact is essential to monitor vulnerable children and young people and comprehensively assess their safety. Many expressed concern about harm to children and young people being missed due to limited contact and the inability to speak privately with children and young people or family members.



Many people working with vulnerable children and their families said they were worried about the decision at the beginning of the first lockdown period to limit face-to-face visits and services to a small proportion of cases. They said this limited the ability to properly identify and assess risk, and that babies and infants were especially at risk.



Service providers said school closures and pauses to other activities, such as team sports or religious services, increased the risk of missing signs of abuse and family violence. They were concerned that with fewer children attending activities, other adults like teachers and coaches were less able to identify problems or receive disclosures from children and young people.



Service providers said that children and young people may not have access to the usual informal coping and risk management strategies to manage their own safety. Many may not be able to, or feel comfortable making disclosures on the phone, particularly if they lacked privacy at home.



Some services were confused about how risks to families were being managed and expressed concern about Child Protection's guidance about remote service delivery. Some organisations said they felt that the focus on remote service delivery inappropriately shifted risk to community-based organisations to manage.

### What services working with children and young people did to help reduce risk to safety

The Commission heard a range of strategies that organisations used to adapt to a changed service environment, to keep themselves and the children and young people they worked with safe. Service providers shared several examples of innovation and creativity to find new ways of checking in on families.



Most services switched to phone-based service delivery and some took steps to provide phones and phone credit to vulnerable children and young people to enable them to stay in touch. Some workers increased their contact with families or the frequency of care team meetings. Some services, including some schools, asked children and young people to turn video cameras on during interactions to enable a better assessment of safety and wellbeing.



Some services reported receiving additional training about COVID-19 to improve their ability to support children and young people during this difficult time. Some also developed a range of resources for children, young people and carers on COVID-19.



Some service providers reported being provided with special training during the lockdown period, including suicide prevention, mental health, harm minimisation, and cyber safety and security.



Creative and proactive engagement with children and young people was sometimes used to overcome barriers to delivering regular face-to-face service delivery. This included dropping off care packages or food and using this as an opportunity to sight children and young people in the home and talk to parents from a safe distance.



Some services reported improved collaboration and goodwill across sectors, including homelessness and mental health sectors, with money invested to support rapid partnerships and joined-up service delivery.

# Experiences of children and young people in supported accommodation, residential care and the youth justice system

For children and young people living in unstable accommodation, lockdown presented very significant challenges. While some children and young people reported being well supported by services and support workers, others found that crowded or unstable housing situations became more challenging and less safe as a result of the stay-at-home requirements.

## What we heard

***“The case workers [in supported accommodation] have a whole process, when every visitor comes in they have to take their temperature. We have to ask the visitor 5 questions about COVID. And we have the front door always locked.”***

*(TAFE student, aged 19, supported accommodation, metro)*

***“My support workers ... are fantastic, I can't speak highly enough of them, they ring me regularly and we have team meetings. They reach out to me regularly.”***

*(TAFE student, aged 18, metro)*

***“I didn't feel safe at one point because we had a young person here who was showing all the symptoms quite severely. .... He went to the hospital and had a mask and that but he didn't get tested because he didn't meet the criteria at that stage. So he came back here and he was still hanging around and stuff and he wasn't told to go to his room. People were too passive. I was uncomfortable and I actually convinced him to go to the doctor [not] staff.”***

*(TAFE student, aged 23, in supported accommodation, metro)*

***“Just before COVID happened I had to run away from family violence that included me taking nothing but a backpack and 300 dollars. Everything was fine I went to a crisis accommodation ... and they started to help me. Then COVID hit. It was a 6 week program... and because I had finished my six week stay, and because of COVID I had to move to a motel and I had to share with junkies as that was the only thing they offered me. I had to call around to friends during lockdown and beg for accommodation... Then they started treating me like a slave and I had to pay board and it was awful. And all the crisis accommodation was so far away, so there was no option for me but to stay homeless and suffer.”***

*(University student, aged 18, metro in supported accommodation)*

# Experiences of children and young people in supported accommodation, residential care and the youth justice system continued

## What services did to support children and young people in residential care and the youth justice system

Children and young people in residential care or engaged in the youth justice system are often some of the most vulnerable in the community and often have complex and intersecting support needs.



Some residential care providers tried strategies to support stay-at-home orders such as improving recreational activities, for example purchasing trampolines for units.



Some services reported increases in young people going missing from residential care units either because isolating in a residential care unit felt 'untenable' or because they missed family and friends. Some services reported greater challenges in locating young people who had left residential care units due to reductions in outreach services. Others reported increased risks of sexual exploitation associated with young people going missing from care.



Some service providers expressed concern about the potential for increased offending due to non-compliance with restrictions. They discussed that non-compliance could be due to a lack of understanding or because it was not safe for young people to stay at home. They also talked about the potential over-policing of marginalised young people.



Youth Justice continued face-to-face contact with young people on orders in the community, with physical distancing, where considered necessary and with certain approvals. In some areas, staff supervision and check-ins to discuss contact with young people increased, as did their involvement in care team meetings.

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