



NSW Young People and the Youth Sector's Experience of COVID-19



**Summary of Findings by Youth Action
August 2021**

Acknowledgment of Country

Youth Action acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and understands that sovereignty was never ceded. Our office is located upon the land of the Gadigal people and we recognise their traditional and ongoing Custodianship and pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.



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About Youth Action

Youth Action is the peak body representing young people and the services that support them in NSW. We advocate for positive change on issues affecting these groups. Our vision is for a society where all NSW young people are supported, engaged, valued, and their rights are realised.

Principles that underpin our work:

- **We give a particular focus to regional young people, First Nations young people, those doing it tough, those with disability, LGBTIQ+, and young people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including migrants and refugees.**
- **We use a rights-based lens to focus on programs, policy and advocacy that achieve meaningful outcomes, embed strengths-based approaches and are informed by data and evidence.**
- **We are an ally to self-determination of First Nations communities and are led by the expertise of young people and the Sector to be a trusted partner and collaborator.**

Introduction

Youth Action undertook this work to better understand the evolving impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon young people and the youth sector as a result of the NSW outbreak in July 2021. The results highlight firstly, young people and the youth sector are eager to support government efforts to manage the pandemic through compliance and vaccination. And secondly, they are facing new and increased challenges which require targeted supports to limit both present and long-term impacts.

Youth Action adopts a strengths-based approach to working with young people that centres young people as experts in their own lives and recognises their right to participate in decisions that impact their lives. We believe that for policy decisions to achieve meaningful outcomes for young people, it needs to be informed by this lived expertise.

Methodology

To inform this work, Youth Action distributed a survey to young people and the youth sector in NSW in July 2021, asking questions about their recent experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. The survey contained a mix of multiple choice and open-ended questions.

The survey received 104 responses, including 63 young people and 57 individuals who work with young people. Some respondents were both young people and worked with young people. 79% of respondents were from metropolitan areas (within Greater Sydney) and 21% were from rural or regional areas (outside Greater Sydney).

Executive Summary

Young people and the youth sector told us that they have a strong understanding of the NSW Public Health Orders and COVID-19 restrictions put in place, rating their understanding as four out of five. Young people stated that they primarily get their COVID-19 information from the internet, social media and from friends or family. For the youth sector, information sources were primarily the internet, television, work and social media.

73% of young people and 90% of the youth sector said they share information about COVID-19 with their friends and family. While both groups are actively sharing information with the people in their lives, they would appreciate further information, especially surrounding vaccination, restrictions and what to do if you have been to an exposure site. It is important that this information is accessible, targeted for diverse communities and in an easy to understand, sharable format. Young people have expressed a desire to receive more information about vaccines to assist them in making an informed decision about vaccinations.

Young people placed importance on social support. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon mental health remains an ongoing concern. Other significant issues which arose included the impact of COVID-19 upon employment and the associated financial difficulties, the challenges with online learning, and the need for safe, stable housing.

The youth sector echoed many of the same concerns of young people about health, wellbeing and financial stability. They identified the impacts of COVID-19 on service delivery, particularly the suspension of face-to-face services which has presented new challenges in relation to supporting young people. Simultaneously, youth workers are finding it tough to deal with the impact of COVID-19 upon their personal lives, such as managing demands due to lockdown restrictions, home-schooling and caring duties, while at the same time supporting young people.

Key Themes:

What Young People Told Us

Young people are eager to be involved in community-driven solutions to address the impact of COVID-19 on themselves and their peers.

- Young people would like to have their voices and their lived experiences incorporated into policy-making processes.
- Young people want to be recognised and supported in the role they can play in keeping their peers, families, and communities safe.

Young people would like more access to mental health information and support.

- Young people want to have access to information to be able to look after their own mental health and the mental health of their peers and families.
- They are concerned by waitlists for mental health services.

Young people feel positive about vaccination and would like more information about when they can access COVID-19 vaccines.

- Young people feel positive that vaccination has been extended to all Australians aged 12 and older.
- They would like to assist with the co-design of COVID-19 vaccination messaging to ensure it is engaging and accessible to their peers. to ensure it is engaging and accessible to their peer groups.

Young people appreciate COVID-19 information that is easy to understand and in a shareable format.

- It is important that this information is accessible for diverse communities.
- Information on platforms used by young people is the most helpful.

Maintaining social connections has helped young people through COVID-19 pandemic.

- Many appreciate exercising with a friend and online ways of staying connected, while some are feeling fatigued from digital engagement.
- Young people say the loss of opportunities for in person connections has been very difficult.

Young people have had varied experiences with online learning.

- Some young people have struggled with online learning and are worried about falling behind. They feel they would benefit from additional study support.
- Other young people have appreciated the flexibility provided by online learning and worry this will be lost with the return to face-to-face learning.

COVID-19 has impacted young people's employment and financial situations.

- Many young people lost jobs or had their hours reduced when NSW went into lockdown. They found access to income support more difficult than at the start of the pandemic.
- Some young people are concerned about the impact on their future employment opportunities as a result of the pandemic either due to interrupted education or jobs no longer existing.

COVID-19 has highlighted the need for safe and stable housing for young people at risk of homelessness and has made living at home more challenging for some.

- The need for long-term, independent housing.
- Some young people reported being in unsafe or unsupportive housing situations during lockdown but have been unable to access services to assist them.
- Young people will benefit from tailored support to deal with their housing situation.

Key Themes:

What the Youth Sector Told Us

The youth sector is concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on young people's health, wellbeing and financial situations.

- Youth workers identified the same concerns raised by young people.
- Youth workers also identified concerns about the capacity of service to meet the increase demand resulting from these impacts.

Youth workers and services play a crucial role in information provision to young people, especially young people who do not access information through mainstream channels.

- Access to NSW Health COVID-19 has been important to the youth sector to share with the young people they work with.
- Staff stressed the need for accessibility of this information for all members of the community.

Youth service delivery has been impacted by COVID-19 which has presented new challenges.

- Service delivery has shifted to online delivery in response to the stay-at-home orders.
- Some young people have engaged well with workers and programs online while workers found a proportion of young people are remaining difficult to engage.

Youth workers spoke about the difficulty juggling increased demands in their personal lives due to the impacts of COVID-19 while also supporting young people.

- Some described feeling overwhelmed and burnt out.
- People described maintaining the boundary between their personal and professional lives can be difficult whilst working from home.

Detailed Findings:

What Young People Told Us

Ongoing Impact of COVID-19 Upon Mental Health

It was clear that young people who responded were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 upon mental health and the ability of themselves, their friends and their families to access mental health support. One young person mentioned the need for “support with our mental health especially those who are not working and are in a home which affects their mental health”. Another young person stated, “I know for a fact I’m not the only one... the suicide rate has gone up a lot since COVID-19 started and we need better mental health support especially during these times even if it’s on the phone with a counsellor.” Long wait times to access mental health services is a significant issue.

Young people said they would like further support that is “accessible via internet, phone calls or Zoom appointments” and that this support was necessary to “help deal with the growing changes”. They also said they were concerned about their privacy, for instance one young person said they “don’t know how it works with Medicare, especially since I don’t want to have to ask my caregiver if I can access help”.

Access to COVID-19 Vaccinations

Young people regularly expressed positivity and eagerness regarding access to COVID-19 vaccines. They wanted to “get vaccinated” and asked for further “support with vaccinations”. Some young people asked for “better vaccine information” as they believed people are “confused about details for the rollout or supply or risk or access”.

In some circumstances, young people were concerned about their access to COVID-19 vaccination and other medical services due to their families. One young person who had “family members who do not believe in vaccines” said this made it “more difficult to access medical services without [their] parent’s knowledge”.

Clear and Accessible COVID-19 Information from Trusted Sources

Many young people mentioned getting COVID-19 information from the “daily updates from government health professionals” and the NSW Premier, as well as through social media, friends and family. Young people appreciated “clear and shareable infographics” which they could use on social media. Some young people said they needed space from the level of COVID-19 information in the media and social media, for example by “not watching the news” to avoid an overload of information.

Several young people expressed frustration and concern about the messaging they were receiving through the media. For instance, one young person said that they “feel targeted and blamed by news outlets for something out of [their] control... media sends mixed messages regarding restrictions. Another young person said that while they understand the need for restrictions, it seemed that “certain areas of Greater Sydney [were] being targeted... causing frustration in the Fairfield community from hypocrisy and stigma behind Western Sydney Suburbs”.

Young people felt that improved access to COVID-19 information would support them during this time. For instance, “more accurate information spread throughout the community”, consistent messaging and clearer guidelines on ‘essential’ and the need for “culturally relevant liaisons to work between youth and police”. Another young person wrote they would like ““someone to explain to us exactly what is happening without politicising the information... [I] just want the most scientifically correct information and not the opinion of others”.

Maintaining Social Connection

Support and engagement with friends, family and other supports is important to young people. Some young people felt that the internet and social media was “allowing [them] to stay connected without needing to be near each other”. Multiple young people mentioned the importance of being able to get outside to “exercise with a friend”. However, others noted “there is certainly a fatigue there now as we are past a year from the beginning of the pandemic”. Young people who found the social isolation more difficult said they “miss social interactions with [their] friends” and wish they were “able to have people over”.

Young people suggested things such as “supplies for activities to undertake at home” and “activities to help get us offline especially with lots of online meetings and school” could be helpful strategies to deal with the impact of loss of connection and digital fatigue. Young people who live alone said they appreciated being able to see another friend was important. One young person spoke of having a “friend who comes over and checks on me and gives me company while I've been staying inside alone”. Others said they were grateful for “the adults who are reaching out to me and making sure I am okay”.

Experiences of Online Learning

Young people described varied experiences with online learning. Many were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on their education. For instance, one young person mentioned the need for “certainty regarding my HSC, particularly major work performances and employment opportunities after the lockdowns”. Other young people wanted additional support, for instance “more support with schoolwork”. Young people shared mixed feelings about online learning. For some, they said that they were “hating everything being online” or that “online school is harder because I get easily distracted”. On the other hand, some young people liked the flexibility to “go at your own pace and there are no people talking as distractions”.

Employment and Income Support

Many young people discussed the need for financial support as a result of COVID-19, in particular when there had been an impact on their employment. One young person said there needed to be more “financial support... [as] many people are out of jobs and are finding it hard to survive”. For young people who were having difficulty in accessing government payments, this left them to “have almost no money”. Other young people said they had “lost [their] job” or that more support was needed for “people who rely on small family businesses to make ends meet or [for] casual employment”.

Multiple young people were concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on future opportunities - for instance “COVID-19 has stalled my career multiple times leaving me feeling helpless.” Another young person felt stressed they were “missing out on... graduation or a job”. They felt that in the future there will need to be greater “assistance in regaining lost opportunity”.

Housing

Young people discussed the impact of COVID-19 on their housing situations and homelessness. For one young person, it was important that support was put in place to provide “a place for [their] homeless friends to live”. Another young person said that COVID-19 gave them “the opportunity to stay in a refuge longer and got the chance to move on to semi and independent housing instead of continuing to be homeless and move through refuges”.

For some young people who were living with their family, other challenges emerged. Young people said “tension at home can become overwhelming” or that it was difficult when their family believed “false information about COVID-19”. Another discussed how “as a young queer person stuck in an abusive household, this is awful” and that the impact of COVID-19 includes “vulnerable and/or marginalised people being separated from communities and support networks”.

Detailed Findings:

What the Youth Sector Told Us

Concern Regarding the Overall Impact of COVID-19 upon Young People

Youth workers also expressed concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on young people's health, wellbeing and financial situations. Mental health support and financial support were priority concerns for the youth sector. This was considered necessary "to help young people get through lockdowns and online learning" at a time of significant "anxiety, depression and general mental health [challenges]". People who work with young people believe that further financial support is required to support young people during COVID-19. For instance, "income support for casual workers". Other key issues of concern included housing, education, employment, further information around COVID-19, access to technology and assistance to find support, generally around their wellbeing.

One youth worker stated, "people are constantly in survival mode trying to get through one day at a time, keeping themselves and their family safe... this is a burden that many young people face being carers, providers and breadwinners for their family". Other issues identified were the need for further "support with education", as well as addressing digital exclusion due to "most kids we work with [not having] a home internet connection".

Youth Workers Roles in Provision of COVID-19 Information

Many youth workers said that they appreciate the COVID-19 "info from NSW health", that this was "up to date information" and the "good communication about effected areas and when to get tested". They identified the role their play in passing on information to the young people they work with, especially those who are not accessing news or mainstream channels.

Some youth workers believe further work was needed to spread this information to all members of the community, in particular “people from lower socioeconomic and lower educational backgrounds” who may not “have the necessary supports to understand and follow COVID-19 information, especially if they have trauma relating policing and if they do not speak English as their primary language”. It was important for youth workers that this information is “culturally diverse” so individuals could “share via social media”.

Youth workers mentioned the importance of offering vaccination to young people and providing them with information to make an informed decision. “Young people are suffering from the burden of COVID-19... they are the age group that are impacted by the restrictions; however, they can't get the vaccines... if we want to stop the spread of the virus then let's vaccinate the young”.

Challenges for Youth Service Delivery

COVID-19 has presented new challenges for the youth sector, particularly in the way youth services are delivered and how young people can be supported. Staff in the youth sector shared some positive reflections from their work since COVID-19, for instance that online meetings have “increased the amount of collaboration/communication in the workplace”. Staff said they appreciated the “understanding of their employer”, the ability to utilise “online communities [and] peer support” and their teams as “we work together to try and do positive, helpful programs”.

Challenges have emerged with online delivery of youth services throughout COVID-19 and youth workers said they are finding it difficult “to remain connected to young people” who have disengaged from online platforms. They also stressed the importance of being able to deliver “extra resources for our young people” and “timely information about restrictions”. Another youth worker stated “there are many services that have closed down and services that are still working are being stretched quite thin”.

One youth worker stated they were “unable to do particular aspects of work as a youth peer support worker”, with another mentioning how “the uncertainty of how long our lockdown is going to last and when things will look normal again is a very stressful part of my work... I worry a lot about those around me who are feeling much more lonely, isolated and financially unstable”.

Blurring Between Personal and Professional Lives

The youth sector is not only concerned about the impact of COVID-19 on the young people that they are working with but also how this is impacting on their wellbeing as people who support young people. This is resulting in an increased blurring of work and home life. Some found it “hard to stay motivated when so much of our job is face-to-face”. Additional pressures, such as “working from home”, “having children” and “managing home-schooling” were regularly mentioned. Others expressed frustration about the speed of “making available vaccines to all Australians” and one youth worker addressed concerns amongst their staff about whether they would be “forced to get vaccinated”.

Several youth workers expressed being grateful for their occupation at this time. One positively reflected on being “deemed an essential worker who has not only been able to work right through COVID-19 restrictions, but also continue to financially support my family and professionally support the young people I work with”. Another said they were glad to be “able to work and help those around me”

The need for social connection was highlighted as many explained that they felt isolated or lacked social supports. One responded suggested that “remaining connected with others” was important while another said “social interaction” was a key area of support. “Flexible working and setting up [their] day a bit differently”, “support from family and friends” and taking time to “chill or go for a walk” were mentioned as helpful strategies during this period.

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