

CLUSTERS OF
COVID-19
IMPACT:

IDENTIFYING THE IMPACT
OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG
AUSTRALIANS IN 2021

SUMMARY BOOKLET

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands throughout Australia and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, 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.

This report was developed by Orygen in partnership with Mission Australia. The work was led by Dr Kate Fila, Senior Research Fellow, Orygen; Centre for Youth Mental Health, The University of Melbourne, alongside Senior Biostatistician Dr Caroline Gao, who led the statistical analysis supported by Emily Clarke, and from Mission Australia, Naheen Brennan and Tamara Freeburn. The expert input of other authors and contributors from Orygen and Mission Australia were instrumental in informing the work, and shaping the recommendations.

ISBN: 978-1-875357-30-7
Copyright Orygen and Mission Australia 2022

The report may be cited as:
Fila, K., Brennan, N., Freeburn, T., Clarke, E., Browne, V., Kos, A., Plummer, J., McGorry, P., Christie, R., Killackey, E., and Gao, C.X. (2022) Clusters of COVID-19 impact: Identifying the impact of COVID-19 on young Australians in 2021. Orygen: Melbourne, VIC and Mission Australia: Sydney, NSW.

A special thank you to the young people who shared with us, via the 2021 Youth Survey, their responses on current issues – especially in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic. Another special thank you to the young people who participated in workshops to provide their views on the recommended actions detailed in this report.

Finally, we extend our thanks to the Orygen and Mission Australia staff who contributed to this report by providing helpful insights, feedback, design and support.

1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For the last twenty years Mission Australia has conducted an annual *Youth Survey*, a large and important survey of young people from all around Australia aged 15 to 19 years. The survey is a valuable platform for young people to raise awareness of issues and concerns facing them.

Over the last two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has created upheaval in the lives of people globally. Young people have faced unique challenges during a really important time in their lives, including significant and ongoing increases in experiences of mental ill-health.

To understand some of the ways that the pandemic has impacted young Australians, additional questions were added to the 2021 *Youth Survey* questionnaire. Over 20,200 young Australians completed the survey in 2021, during a crucial stage of the pandemic. For many young people the survey was completed while living in lockdown, during the second year of the pandemic and at the height of the Delta wave. The experiences of these young people are reflected here, providing an overview of the areas of life most impacted by the pandemic, and what that has meant for their mental health and wellbeing.

In preparing for this report, an important partnership was formed between Mission Australia and Orygen, the national centre of excellence in youth mental health and Australia's leading youth mental health organisation. Over the past two years, Orygen and Mission Australia have been advocating for the need for greater supports for young people whose mental health, wellbeing, education, employment, finances and housing have been affected by the pandemic.

There is an urgent need to provide immediate supports to young people and their families, to upscale existing services and deliver high-quality, evidenced-based solutions that will help young people in recovering from any adverse impacts of the pandemic.

Together in this report, Orygen and Mission Australia have detailed the types of impacts experienced by young people during the pandemic, and the particular groups of young people who have faced more challenges. The report also details how the experience of different and multiple impacts relate to increases in stress, loneliness, and psychological distress, as well as decreases in feelings of control, happiness and mental health and wellbeing.

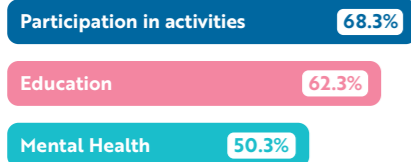
This partnership between Orygen and Mission Australia has helped to build on findings and identify potential implications for policy and practice focusing on mental health, education and employment approaches, research and housing. These are detailed in this report, highlighting the need to make concerted and continued efforts to support this generation in recovering from the disruptions and challenges faced as a consequence of the pandemic.

2.

KEY FINDINGS

Top three domains of life negatively impacted by the pandemic

Across Australia, young people reported the following three areas of life as being negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic:



Note: The 2021 *Youth Survey* included a question: Has COVID-19 had a negative impact on your... 'education, employment, family, financial security, friendships, housing, mental health, participation in activities and/or physical health?'

Impact on mental health

• **76.5%** of young people who reported their mental health and wellbeing as *poor* indicated that the pandemic had negatively impacted their *mental health*.

- For young people who reported more domains of life as having been impacted, greater severity of psychological distress was observed.
- Higher reports of personal concern about COVID-19 generally were associated with increases in psychological distress.

Young people most impacted

A negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic was reported in higher proportions in particular groups of young people, notably:

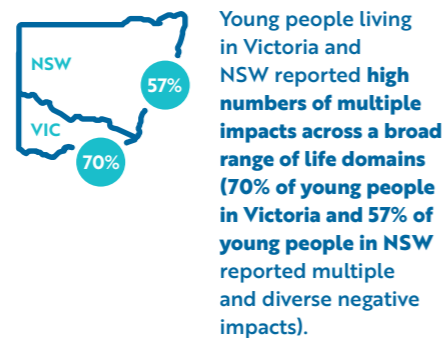


Gender diverse



x2 Were **twice as likely as males** to report a **negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their mental health**.

Location



Both groups were experiencing lockdowns during the time survey responses were being collected.

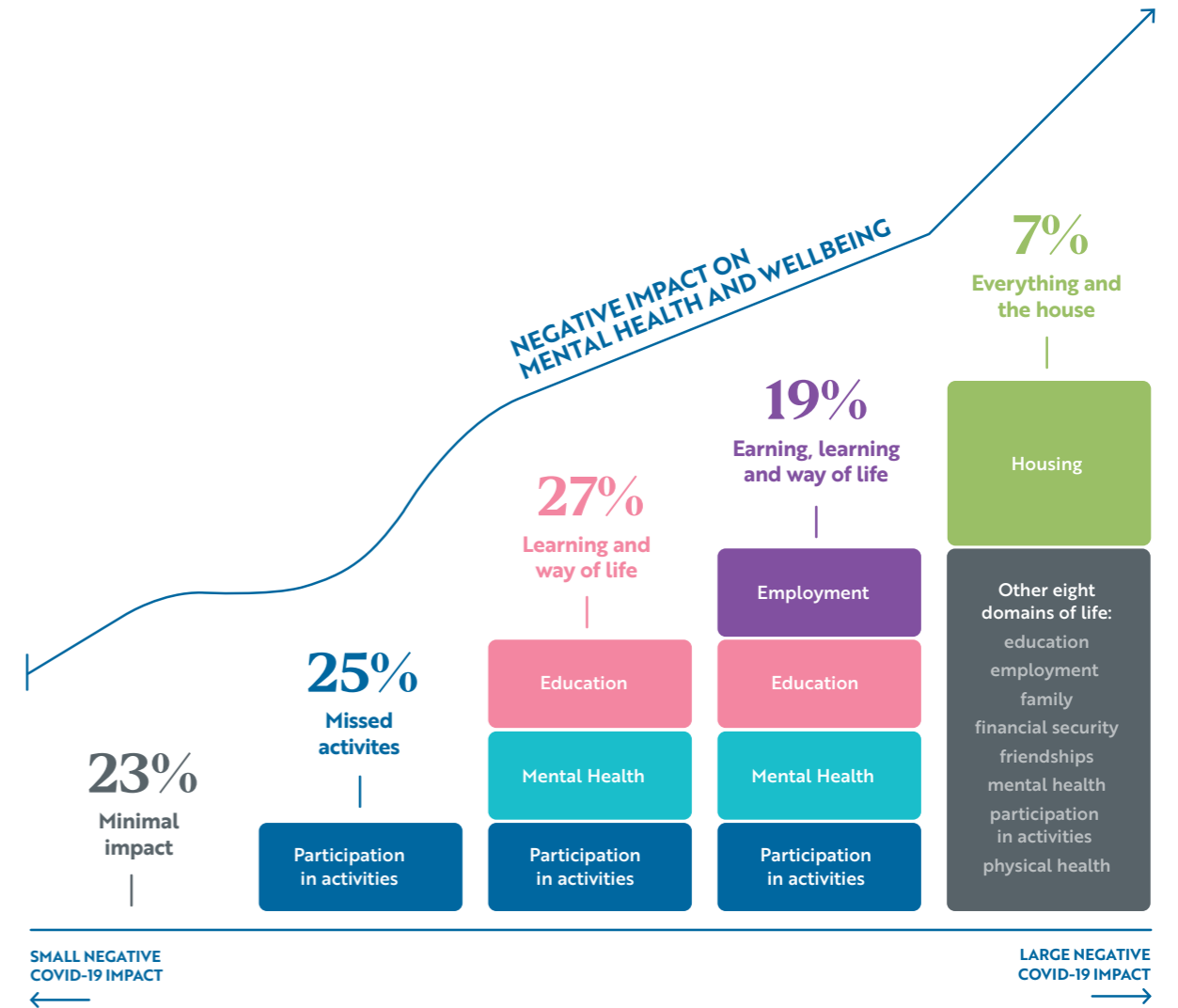
Students



Students reported **greater negative impact on mental health** when **education** was negatively impacted by COVID-19.

Clusters experiencing different negative impacts of COVID-19

The cluster analysis revealed five groups of young people who share similar negative impacts associated with the pandemic.



“ [COVID-19] gave me an excuse... to take a step back from society.
 - male, 17, non-Indigenous, NSW ”

“ I don't think COVID had a large impact on me other than restricting my activities.
 - gender diverse, 14, non-Indigenous, SA ”

“ Being in lockdown...had a negative impact on my academic and therefore emotional stability and mental health.
 - female, 18, non-Indigenous, ACT ”

“ Everyone lost their job and it becomes very stressful to pay the bills and keep everyone healthy.
 - female, 16, non-Indigenous, QLD ”

“ Housing crisis, getting a job, people were not able to go to school.
 - male, 16, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, QLD ”

Demographic characteristics of the young people by cluster group

	Minimal impact (23%, n=4,621)	Missed activities (25%, n=5,015)	Learning and way of life (27%, n=5,483)	Earning, learning and way of life (19%, n=3,740)	Everything and the house (7%, n=1,348)
Description of cluster	<i>Minimal impact on all domains of life</i>	<i>Impact primarily on participation in activities</i>	<i>Impact primarily on education, mental health and participation in activities</i>	<i>Impact primarily on employment, education, participation in activities and mental health</i>	<i>Significant impact on housing and all other domains of life</i>
Demographics Key differences relative to the national sample from the Youth Survey	Higher proportion of Indigenous young people and young people living with disability	Larger proportion of males and a lower proportion of females and gender diverse young people	Greater proportion of females and gender diverse young people and a lower proportion of males	Larger proportion of females and gender diverse young people and a lower proportion of males	Higher proportion of gender diverse young people, Indigenous young people and young people living with disability
Gender	Male = 49.5% Female = 46.4% Gender diverse = 4.1%	Male = 52.4% Female = 45.7% Gender diverse = 1.9%	Male = 31.6% Female = 64.1% Gender diverse = 4.3%	Male = 34.2% Female = 61.9% Gender diverse = 3.8%	Male = 39.0% Female = 53.2% Gender diverse = 7.9%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	5.6%	3.9%	3.6%	4.3%	11.1%
Living with disability	11.2%	5.4%	8.9%	9.1%	15.7%
Education/Employment Key differences relative to the national sample from the Youth Survey	Proportions in line with overall sample	Proportions in line with overall sample	Proportions in line with overall sample	Mostly studying, but a higher proportion of young people employed	Proportions in line with overall sample
Currently studying and/or currently employed full or part time	93.8%	96.4%	96.3%	97.5%	93.7%
Living situation Key differences relative to the national sample from the Youth Survey	Proportions in line with overall sample	Proportions in line with overall sample	Proportions in line with overall sample	Proportions in line with overall sample	A lower proportion of young people living at home and a higher proportion of young people in out-of-home care and public/social housing
Living with parents	94.4%	96.8%	96.6%	96.8%	84.9%
Living in public/social housing	5.7%	3.2%	2.9%	3.9%	11.3%
Living in out-of-home care	0.5%	0.3%	0.4%	0.4%	1.8%

Bold figures are the clusters with the highest proportions.

Mental health and wellbeing of the young people by cluster group

	Minimal impact (23%, n=4,621)	Missed activities (25%, n=5,015)	Learning and way of life (27%, n=5,483)	Earning, learning and way of life (19%, n=3,740)	Everything and the house (7%, n=1,348)
Description of cluster	<i>Minimal impact on all domains of life</i>	<i>Impact primarily on participation in activities</i>	<i>Impact primarily on education, mental health and participation in activities</i>	<i>Impact primarily on employment, education, participation in activities and mental health</i>	<i>Significant impact on housing and all other domains of life</i>
Mental health and wellbeing Key differences relative to the national sample from the Youth Survey	Despite minimal COVID-19 impact, lower mental health and wellbeing	Mental health and wellbeing is the most positive of the clusters	Mental health and wellbeing is fairly low, with higher psychological distress and more feelings of lack of control over life	Mental health and wellbeing is fairly low, with more psychological distress, lack of control over life and loneliness	Mental health and wellbeing is the lowest of the clusters, with more psychological distress, loneliness and lack of control over life
Proportion of young people who had psychological distress	23.1%	12.7%	36.1%	38.4%	47.8%
Feeling stressed (All or most of the time)	36.1%	28.8%	54.6%	56.1%	58.2%
Control over life (No or almost no control)	11.2%	5.6%	14.2%	15.3%	23.8%
Feeling lonely (All or most of the time)	21.7%	12.5%	29.9%	32.7%	40.2%

Bold figures are the clusters with the highest proportions.

3.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Recommendations for policy and practice presented here focus on addressing the key issues and priority groups as highlighted in this report. The recommendations were informed by the data, through consultation with young people, and shaped by the experience and expertise of researchers, clinicians, service providers and policy advisors from Orygen and Mission Australia.

Mental health-based approaches

- 1** Increase investment in, and access to, evidence-based youth mental health services, notably headspace and specialist youth mental health care systems, including extending the increased Better Access initiative past June 2022 and addressing the gap in services for young people with more complex and serious mental health issues.
- 2** Expand and provide increased support for the mental health workforce, including the peer workforce, to respond to the heightened demand and address issues exacerbated by the pandemic.

Education and Employment-based approaches

- 3** Introduce universal, regular, standardised screening of functional impairment and mental health in schools, alongside psychoeducation and stigma-reducing activities.
- 4** Fund the promotion and delivery of evidence-based resources that aid educators, employers, peers and families to support young people with their mental health and wellbeing.
- 5** Increase mental health support in secondary and tertiary school settings, including youth peer workers.
- 6** Develop and fund education and employment related support programs for young people whose education and/or employment was impacted by the pandemic.

Research

- 7** Fund research into the long-term impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of young Australians.
- 8** Fund research into testing the uptake, effectiveness, accessibility and user perspectives of online or hybrid approaches to delivering services and information.

Housing

- 9** Roll out universal risk screening for homelessness in all schools based on the Community of Schools and Services (COSS) model, along with an increase in wrap-around supports for students and their families who are identified as at risk of homelessness.
- 10** Permanently increase the base rate of income support payments and increase Commonwealth Rent Assistance (CRA) by 50 per cent to ensure young people and their families are kept out of poverty and avoid homelessness.
- 11** Expand the network of Youth Foyers and fund other models of integrated housing and support, to help young people obtain stable housing, achieve education and employment goals, and prepare for living independently.

Overarching considerations to summary - co-design with young people, a range of supports, addressing equitable access and evaluation of programs.



Contact Mission Australia

Phone: 08 8210 2826

Email: researchandpolicy@missionaustralia.com.au

Web: www.missionaustralia.com.au

Follow Mission Australia

Twitter: @MissionAust

Facebook: www.facebook.com/MissionAust

Instagram: @mission_aust

LinkedIn: @mission-australia

Contact Orygen

Phone: 03 9966 9100

Email: info@orygen.org.au

Web: www.orygen.org.au

Follow Orygen

Twitter: @orygen_aus

Facebook: www.facebook.com/OrygenAus

Instagram: @_orygen_

LinkedIn: @orygen-revolution

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

