



A COVID-19 Recovery Plan for Young People



Youth Affairs
Council Victoria

Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) is the peak body and leading advocate for young people aged 12–25 and the youth sector in Victoria.

Our vision is that the rights of young people in Victoria are respected, and they are active, visible and valued in their communities.

The recommendations in this report were developed in collaboration with more than 100 young people, youth workers, economists, peak bodies, researchers and other experts. YACVic is thankful for the support and expertise of everyone who contributed to this work.



YACVic respectfully acknowledges the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of this continent. We pay our respects to the ancestors and Elders past and present of all Aboriginal nations in Victoria.

Contents

The Recovery for Young People	4
Employment	8
Mental Health	14
Access and Inclusion	18
Housing	24
Youth Voice and Participation	28
A Strong Youth Sector	30
Citations	34

The Recovery for Young People

Young people in Victoria have been disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and are experiencing worse outcomes than young people in all other areas of Australia.¹

Young people are facing rising unemployment, declining mental health and unprecedented interruptions to their education and lives. At the same time, critical supports on which young people rely have been torn away. The worst of the pandemic is not yet over. The next step in this crisis will occur in the coming months when income support payments are cut, leaving tens of thousands of young people without adequate financial support.² The crisis is ongoing and without action a generation of young people will be lost. Victoria urgently needs a COVID-19 Recovery Plan for Young People to address the impacts of this pandemic and to give young people hope for their future.

The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected everyone's lives, but young people have been disproportionately impacted. This generation was already facing the prospect of being the first to be worse off than their parents and the pandemic is revealing and

exacerbating the scale of this generational inequality.^{3,4} The economic consequences of the current pandemic are life changing for young people. In August, the unemployment rate was 16.2 per cent for young people while for the general population it was 7.1 per cent.⁵ This is partly because young people comprise more than half of the employees in the industries which have been devastated by the pandemic, including hospitality, retail, tourism and the arts.² Young people are more than twice as likely to have lost work when compared to other age groups and were also more likely to be casually employed and therefore ineligible for the JobKeeper program.^{6,7} Past recessions also show that young people are more likely to experience the long-term effects of unemployment when compared to older people.⁶

The disproportionate impact of the pandemic is not limited to employment. The disruption to education has had a major impact on young people that has not been experienced by other age groups. This is dramatically affecting young people's social development and mental wellbeing. Young people are also experiencing much higher levels of depression, anxiety and stress than all other age groups.⁸ This is expected to result in an increase of at least 12.4 per cent

in suicide deaths of young people.⁹ At the same time, young people do not feel that their issues and needs have been considered during the pandemic.¹ The collective recovery from the pandemic must specifically address the disproportionate impact on all aspects of young people's lives.

The Lifetime Impact

The pandemic will result in economic scarring that will affect this generation of young people for their entire lives.¹⁰ They will experience worse employment prospects for a significant period of time and those who do find work will still experience less job security, fewer hours and lower wages.^{11, 12, 13, 14} The economic crisis is expected to last for the best part of a decade and the youth unemployment rate will continue to increase over the coming years.^{15, 16} This is consistent with past experiences of recessions for young people. The youth underutilisation rate peaked two years after the beginning of the 1990–93 recession and did not recover for 16 years.¹⁷ Youth unemployment and underutilisation has still not recovered from the economic fallout of the Global Financial Crisis.¹⁷

Economic scarring will negatively impact young people's health and wellbeing until

their retirement.¹⁸ Young people who entered the workforce during previous recessions experienced higher suicide rates and significantly worse wellbeing for decades after the initial impact of the recession.^{9, 13, 19} A Recovery Plan for Young People is needed to prevent the long-term consequences of the pandemic.

A Plan for the Entire Community

A Recovery Plan for Young People will benefit the whole community. In Victoria there are 491,900 working young people and their continued employment and wellbeing is vital to the economic recovery. There is a direct link between gross domestic product and youth unemployment.²⁰ A failure to address youth unemployment will result in a significant drop in productivity and will have a chronic impact on the economic future of Victoria. The whole community will also experience the long-term cost of failing to support young people's mental health. The cost of mental ill-health is borne by those with lived experience as well as their families, employers, insurers and taxpayers.²¹ The economic cost of mental ill-health is \$14.2 billion each year in Victoria.²² This cost will increase without a plan that addresses the inevitable rise in mental ill-health for young people.

The Recovery Priorities for Victoria

The significant and long-term impacts of the pandemic for young people are not inevitable. The Victorian Government has the power to create policies that will protect this generation of young people from a lifetime of economic scarring, lost opportunity and reduced wellbeing.^{2, 23, 24} The business sector, economists and leading experts have identified that government policies to directly support young people are urgently needed.

Youth Affairs Council Victoria (YACVic) has worked with young people, youth experts, the business sector, economists, researchers and other experts to create a COVID-19 Recovery Plan for Young people with six priorities. A collective commitment from everyone to act on this plan will be critical to avoid losing a generation to this crisis. The specific recommendations in each priority area can prevent the worst effects of the pandemic. These priorities and recommendations have been endorsed by community and business organisations who are committed to supporting young people and protecting our shared future.

Employment

A Youth Employment Strategy that provides meaningful and secure work for all young people.

Mental Health

Access to free, appropriate and evidence-based mental health supports and care for all young people.

Access and Inclusion

Equitable access to inclusive information, services, education, technology and transport for all young people.

Housing

Affordable, safe and secure housing for all young people.

Youth Voice and Participation

A voice for young people at the centre of designing and leading the COVID-19 recovery.

A Strong Youth Sector

A strong youth sector to help young people navigate the COVID-19 recovery.



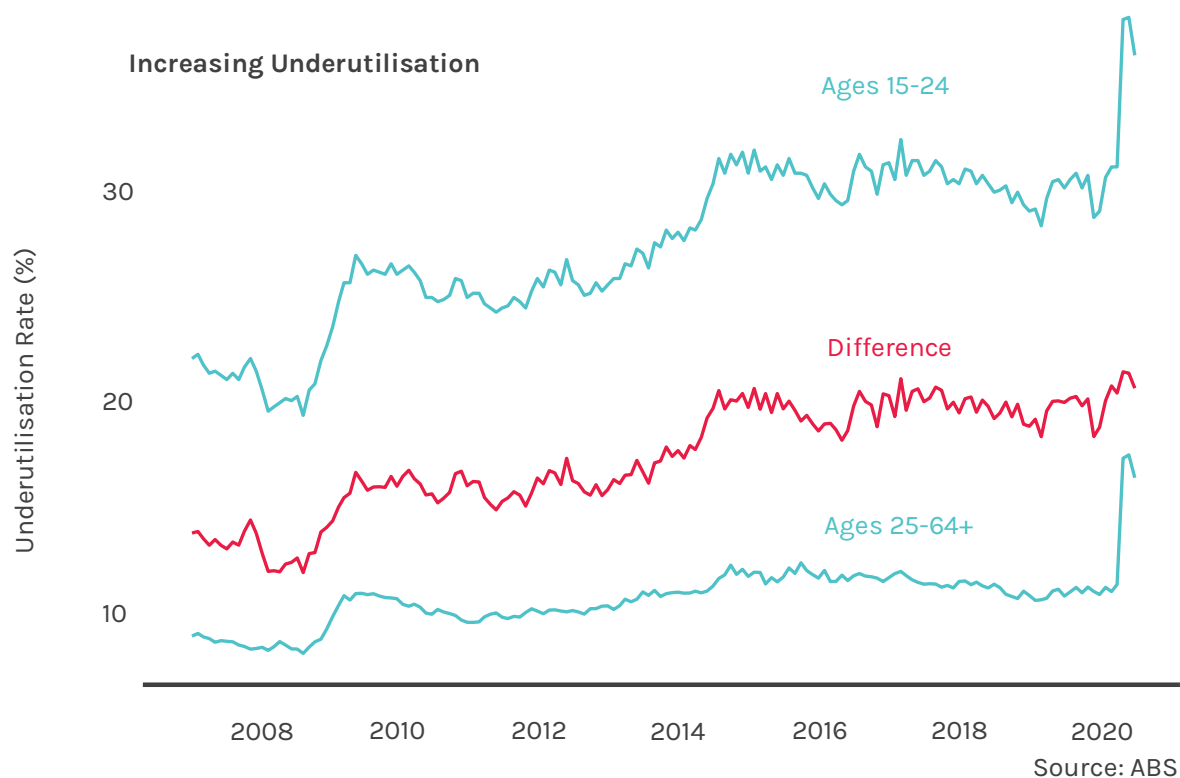
Employment

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an economic and employment crisis for young people in Victoria.

There are more than 104,700 young people who have left the workforce since January 2020.⁵ This means there are now thousands of young people who are struggling to make rent, afford food and survive. This crisis is placing a disproportionate burden on young people which they will carry for years into the future. A key response to the economic crisis will be a Youth Employment Strategy for Victoria.

The Economic Crisis

Victoria's youth unemployment rate was at 16.2 per cent in August. This is 7.3 percentage points higher than the same time last year and more than double the rate for the general population.⁵ There are now 79,600 young people who are unemployed and an even greater number who are no longer in the labour market.⁵ This is happening at the same time that there is only one job available for every 13 people on JobSeeker of Youth Allowance.²⁵ It is clear that the current economic crisis is disproportionately hurting young people.



The Underutilisation Crisis

The economic crisis for young people is not limited to unemployment. The underutilisation rate for young people in Australia – which includes those who are employed but want more work – was at 33.6 per cent in August.¹⁷ This means that there are thousands of young people who don't have enough work. This crisis is exacerbating disparities that have been growing since the Global Financial Crisis. The difference between the underutilisation rate of young people and the general population has been growing and reached a peak of 16 percentage points in May.¹⁷

A Decade of Unemployment

The economic crisis for young people will last for at least the next decade and youth unemployment will remain high for years.^{15, 16} Underutilisation among young people did not recover for 16 years after the 1990–93 recession and it has still not recovered since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis.^{16, 17}

The average country in the European Union required eight years for youth unemployment to recover after the Global Financial Crisis and the average country in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) required ten years.²⁶ These experiences indicate that it is highly likely to take over a decade for young people's economic situation to recover. There is a real possibility that the damage done to young people's economic participation will become permanent without significant intervention.

'Since the pandemic, my work has dried up except for a couple of students I tutor online, and right now I am solely reliant on Youth Allowance. Most young people occupy casual, precarious roles and I know that for my friends and I this has been a time wrought with uncertainty.'

Melis

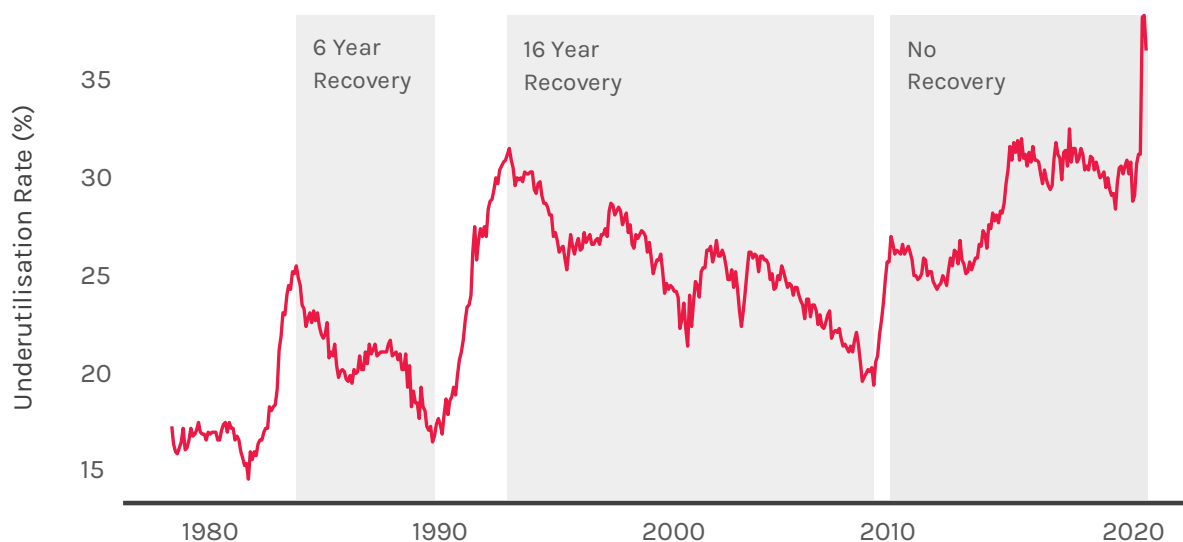
Economic Scarring for a Generation

Young people will carry the burden of the economic crisis and unemployment for their entire lives. The crisis risks leading to economic scarring for an entire generation of young people who will face worse employment prospects, lower wages and impaired wellbeing.^{2, 18, 19} This will be the biggest generational economic scarring event ever experienced in Australia.¹⁹ The youth participation rate – which measures the percentage of young people that are part of the labour force – has dropped further during this crisis than any recent economic downturn.⁵ Immediate action is needed to prevent the long term effects of the economic crisis for young people.

The Economic Disparity

The economic crisis will disproportionately impact particular cohorts of young people. Young women are more likely to have been affected by unemployment and underemployment than young men and are substantially more likely to have completely left the labour force.¹⁷ Young people on low incomes and those previously in casual work have also been disproportionately affected. They are more likely to have lost their job during the pandemic and many are ineligible for income support.⁷ The economic recovery must provide greater support for young people who have been disproportionately impacted.

Delayed Recovery for Young People



Source: ABS



A Youth Employment Strategy

A coordinated and comprehensive Youth Employment Strategy will be essential to avoid a decades-long economic crisis for young people in Victoria. The entire community needs to recognise and respond to the magnitude of the economic crisis and commit to creating jobs and supporting the industries that have been most affected. This approach requires the support of the Federal Government to raise the rate of income support and provide funding for job creation across Australia. The Victorian Government should urgently implement economic policies to prevent permanent damage to the ongoing economic wellbeing of young people. This requires job creation, support for those in work and better employment education programs.

Recommendation: A Youth Employment Strategy that provides meaningful and secure work for all young people.

Create a Youth Employment Strategy

1. Create a Whole-of-Government Youth Employment Plan for Victoria.
2. Establish a Victorian Youth Employment Commissioner who will be responsible for developing, implementing, monitoring and evaluating youth-focussed employment policies, and embedding youth participation in policy responses.
 - a. Augment the role of the 31 Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) to act as local branches of the Youth Employment Commissioner.

Create Jobs for Young People

3. Commit to a Youth Jobs Guarantee with industry, government and community to ensure that all young people have access to meaningful and secure work.
 - a. Create an incentive program for businesses and community organisations to directly employ young people and provide opportunities in their local areas.
 - b. Create paid entry-level and school-leaver traineeships across local government and incentivise industry and community organisations to do the same.
 - c. Develop a local government graduate program and expand the state government graduate program and Youth Employment Scheme.

- d. Create a Young People for Victoria program that identifies and supports projects that will achieve public good, delivered by teams of young people in paid roles.
- e. Support community services organisations to create meaningful roles for young people with lived experience, including as peer workers.
- 4. Provide localised pro-youth economic stimulus to regions and industries most impacted by the pandemic, especially in the arts, hospitality, tourism, community, university and childcare sectors.
- 5. Prioritise youth-led businesses and youth-focussed social enterprises for government contracts.

Support Young People into Jobs

- 6. Improve and establish youth-specific active labour market policies.
 - a. Dedicate resources to directly connecting young people who are at-risk of disengaging from education with local employers.
 - b. Review and improve current employment services in Victoria, with a focus on outcomes related to sustained employment rather than job placement.
 - c. Create an online labour market information portal and resources that give young people and their parents, schools and communities additional information about employment.
 - d. Create targeted strategies for young people who face additional barriers to employment.

Provide Relevant Training

- 7. Create a holistic school-level and place-based employment education program for all year levels, delivered in class or on online, featuring:
 - a. Workers' rights, financial literacy, income support, business skills and appropriate workplace conduct.
 - b. Opportunities for work experience, mentorship and connection to local businesses and role models.
 - c. Entrepreneurship, social enterprise and self-employment initiatives.
 - d. Exploration of less common employment and higher education pathways.
 - e. Accessible, flexible, responsive and culturally relevant information and supports for young people from marginalised backgrounds.

Mental Health

The COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically affected the mental health of young people in Victoria.

This is exacerbating an ongoing problem for young people, who were already experiencing a long-term increase in psychological distress before the pandemic.²⁷ The economic crisis, changes to education and social isolation have created an emergency and young people are at significant risk of mental ill-health without urgent support.

The Mental Health Emergency

The stress and uncertainty of the pandemic have challenged young people's mental health and wellbeing. Social isolation, disruptions to education, unemployment, financial insecurity and uncertainty about the future have contributed to feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, and anxiety.^{28, 29} Emerging public health data demonstrates the devastating impact of the pandemic on the mental health of young people in Victoria. There has been a 33 per cent rise in young people presenting to hospital with self-harm injuries and modelling suggests there is likely to be an increase of at least 12.4 per cent in suicide deaths of young people.^{9, 30}

This demonstrates the importance of acknowledging the pandemic as not simply an economic crisis, but an ongoing mental health emergency for young people.

Increased Ongoing Demand

The mental health impact of the pandemic is likely to continue even after the immediate public health emergency ends.³¹ Young people who are affected by the economic crisis will experience negative impacts on their mental health and wellbeing until their retirement.¹⁸ Young people will also take time to recover from the many other negative experiences and sacrifices they have made during the pandemic. Experience from previous recessions shows that young people will experience higher suicide rates and mental ill-health for decades.^{9, 13, 19} This means that the increased demand for mental health services will continue into the future.

The increased availability of telehealth and online mental health services has benefited young people in Victoria. However, ongoing and expanded mental health support is critical to ensure that young people are not left without adequate services as the mental health emergency continues long after the pandemic.



Mental Health Support for Young People

The ongoing mental health emergency for young people can be mitigated by ensuring young people have access to free, appropriate and evidence-based mental health supports and care. This will reduce the scale of the emergency, reduce mental ill-health and save hundreds of lives.⁹ This requires action to increase the capacity of the mental health system, provide access to local and digital services and to increase the capacity of education, employment and family support.

Recommendation: Access to free, appropriate and evidence-based mental health supports and care for all young people.

Implement the Recommendations from the Royal Commission

1. Urgently implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System urgently to respond to the increased incidence of youth mental ill-health.

Increase Service Capacity

2. Increase funding to youth mental health services to deliver outreach to young people who are not seeking help or who are experiencing barriers to remaining engaged with services.
3. Build the youth mental health peer workforce.
 - a. Continue free access to the Certificate IV in peer work.
 - b. Provide dedicated funding for peer workers in youth mental health services, as well as training and support for peer workers, clinicians and service managers.
4. Contribute funding to youth mental health services across the state to build their capacity to respond to urgent and serious mental health issues and to link with other services.
5. Invest in community organisations which provide prevention and early intervention programs and referrals to clinical services.

Support Digital and Online Youth Mental Health Services

6. Ensure youth mental health services have the ongoing expertise, capacity and infrastructure to deliver telehealth and online services to young people.
7. Provide funding for ongoing delivery of the Orygen Digital Moderated Online Social Therapy (MOST) platform in youth mental health services.

Education and Employment Supports

8. Ensure schools have access to information and resources to identify and respond effectively to mental health presentations and to strengthen partnerships with youth mental health services in the community.
9. Fund and integrate education and employment supports within youth mental health services to prevent young people dealing with mental ill-health from being further disadvantaged in education and employment.
10. Continue to prioritise implementation of the Mental Health Practitioners in Schools initiative.

Provide Support for Families

11. Increase the number of family focused workers and family peer support workers in youth mental health services who can provide direct support, resources, lived experience perspectives and family counselling.
12. Develop and deliver supports specifically for siblings of young people who are engaged with youth mental health services.

Access and Inclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and excluded many young people from education, work and the community.

This is preventing young people from accessing the support they need and increasing disadvantage in Victoria.³² Young people are genuinely concerned about being excluded and their ability to access support during the recovery. Every young person deserves to access services, education and work opportunities, no matter who they are or where they come from. There must be action to ensure that no one is left behind during the recovery from the pandemic.

Disadvantage and Exclusion

The rapid changes to education and services have excluded a significant number of young people. The digital gap means that many young people have been unable to access online classes and support. One in four households in rural areas and one in five households in regional areas have no internet access.³³ This experience is shared by 10 per cent of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds who do not have access to a laptop or computer.³⁴ Young people living in crowded homes and with limited family support have been further

disadvantaged during the extended period of online learning.

This inequality has extended to work. Many young people from marginalised backgrounds have been disproportionately affected by the economic crisis. More than two in three young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds have reported a decrease in their household income and a disproportionate number have lost their jobs.³⁴ Disabled young people have reported disruptions to their work and have reported they are experiencing more disadvantage than non-disabled young people.^{28, 34} It is clear that the changes during the pandemic are excluding particular young people and preventing them from accessing education, work and services.

This disadvantage has occurred at the same time that racism and discrimination has heightened during the pandemic.^{35, 36} There have been reports of young people experiencing racist attacks throughout the pandemic and an increase in discrimination complaints.³⁷ This racism is exacerbating the impact of the pandemic for many young people in Victoria.

Education During the Pandemic

The changes to education have dramatically increased inequality in Victoria. An analysis of the transition to online learning found that 59 per cent of young people are now behind in their education.¹ This is happening at the same time as a significant number of young people have become disengaged from education as a result of online learning.³⁸ This affected some students more than others, as many lacked the necessary support at home to attend classes.³⁸ This means that many young people who are already facing marginalisation are experiencing even greater disadvantage than some of their peers. There is a need to better support young people and guarantee an inclusive and accessible education system.

‘The issues I have with in-person classrooms and accessing learning have just been completely exacerbated and ignored during the pandemic. I have also had a significant deterioration of my mental health and access of services being limited.’

Issy

Inclusion for All Young People

The recovery from COVID-19 must prioritise equality by recognising and responding to the diversity of young people in Victoria. Ensuring that services, education and employment are fully accessible and inclusive is what it will take to ensure that no one is left behind in the recovery.

Recommendation: Equitable access to inclusive information, services, education, technology and transport for all young people.

Provide Specific Communications for Young People

1. Provide customised and culturally appropriate information specifically for young people, in the most appropriate formats and languages, and through the most appropriate channels.

Make All Services Inclusive and Accessible

2. Ensure all services that support young people are inclusive, accessible and available without cost.
 - a. Provide free and accessible health and community services for young people, that are place-based, culturally appropriate and available in multiple languages.
 - b. Implement a comprehensive program of proactive outreach services to young people who are unable or unlikely to access services and support.
3. Create an open resource with best practice examples of inclusive and accessible youth service delivery, for use by community service providers, schools and others who engage with young people.

Address Increased Racism

4. Address existing and increasing racism – both individual and structural – by building on the Victorian Government’s Anti-Racism Action Plan and committing to working with young people to lead social cohesion.

End the Digital Gap

5. End the digital gap by ensuring that all young people have access to affordable and reliable devices and internet, to support online education, access to services and social connection.

Make Education Inclusive and Accessible

6. Support primary, secondary and tertiary students to be fully engaged in education.
 - a. Increase investment in youth workers and programs in schools to support non-stigmatised engagement and re-engagement.
 - b. Invest in additional staff to support online learning during lockdown and to help young people catch up once in-person learning resumes.
 - c. Implement additional education models to support young people to remain engaged in school and allow students to continue remote and flexible learning throughout and beyond the recovery.
 - d. Increase flexibility of coursework and study requirements, to promote accessibility and inclusion and recognise increased stress and home responsibilities faced by many young people.
 - e. Support the mental wellbeing of students by funding additional welfare coordinators and mental health workers and delivering mental health first aid training to teachers and support staff.
 - f. Ensure disabled young people are supported through coursework adjustments, additional support and management of the NDIS interface.
 - g. Develop and implement support responses for young people impacted by increased care responsibilities, and to support families and carers to navigate home-based learning.
7. Support student voice and agency in all schools and invest in related professional development for teachers and school leadership.

Make Employment Inclusive and Accessible

8. Implement job creation programs with a specific focus on providing young people from marginalised backgrounds with opportunities to gain meaningful employment and school-based work experience.
9. Ensure active labour market policies are culturally appropriate and accessible.
10. Build the social capital, social connectedness and networks of marginalised young people and their families and carers.
11. Ensure that all young people have access to free and readily available public transport to access interviews and employment.



Housing

The COVID-19 pandemic will significantly increase the number of young people experiencing homelessness in Victoria.

There was a youth homelessness crisis before the pandemic with more than 6,000 young people homeless on any given night in Victoria.³⁹ Young people were nearly twice as likely to be experiencing homelessness than any other age group and many young people were paying more than they could afford for basic necessities.⁴⁰ The pandemic has increased youth unemployment and nearly tripled the number of young people experiencing housing stress.⁴¹ This means that thousands more young people in Victoria are likely to experience homelessness over the next ten years as a direct result of the pandemic. There needs to be a coordinated response to end the youth homelessness crisis in Victoria.

The Impact of Homelessness

Young people without access to safe and affordable housing will experience poor health outcomes, declining mental health, stagnating career prospects, disconnection from education and increased exposure to violence.⁴² The interventions that are currently supporting young people to avoid rental eviction and access temporary hotel accommodation during the pandemic are positive.⁴³ However, when these end there will be a serious and direct threat to thousands of young people's housing security and wellbeing.⁴⁴

This is made worse by the expected reduction in income support for young people which will force tens of thousands of young people into poverty and place them at serious risk of homelessness.² If the economic crisis persists as expected there will be a generation of young people who will be unable to afford safe and secure housing for decades to come.



A Plan for Safe and Affordable Housing

The Victorian Government must commit to ensuring that all young people have access to affordable, safe and secure housing. This requires a comprehensive plan to make renting affordable, build social housing and provide better housing support for all young people.⁴⁵ This is urgently needed to support young people experiencing homelessness and thousands more who will be left without a safe and affordable home because of the pandemic.

Recommendation: Affordable, safe and secure housing for all young people.

Make Renting Fair and Affordable

1. Extend and strengthen Rent Fair reforms.
 - a. End 'no grounds' evictions.
 - b. Enforce minimum property standards.
 - c. Prevent discrimination against young renters on the basis of age and background.
2. Create policies to prevent unaffordable rental prices in the private rental market.
 - a. Increase the Vacant Residential Land Tax and extend it to rural and regional areas.

Build Social Housing

3. Build social housing and make it work for young people.
 - a. Create at least 6,000 new social housing properties per year for the next ten years.
 - b. Co-design with young people a new model of social housing that addresses the needs and preferences of young people experiencing homelessness.
 - c. Invest in rural and regional properties so young people don't have to travel away from their support networks to access housing.

Protect and Support Young People

4. Extend and strengthen the COVID-19 eviction moratorium.
5. Co-ordinate a state-wide early intervention strategy to support young people before they are forced into homelessness, which also addresses the increase in risk factors due to the pandemic.
6. Create a flexible service system that responds to different levels of need and diversity for young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.
 - a. Expand the capacity of existing services and widen eligibility criteria.
 - b. Increase funding to programs that deliver targeted, intensive and long-term supports.
 - c. Establish protocols to transition young people seamlessly from youth to adult homelessness services.
 - d. Increase investment in proven models of community-based good practice in homelessness service delivery.
7. Support TAFEs and universities to include affordable housing in proactive support provided to incoming rural, regional and international students.

Youth Voice and Participation

Young people have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and they must have a say in the decisions that will fundamentally change their lives.

However young people have so far been largely left out of the decision-making process and are not included as equally important stakeholders in the response to the pandemic. This is detrimental to the wellbeing and optimism of young people and prevents the best outcomes for Victoria. Young people must be included and represented in plans for the recovery from the pandemic.

Young People Have Not Been Heard

Young people do not feel that their issues and needs have been considered during the pandemic.¹ Many have reported that they have been excluded from discussions and 41 per cent of young people do not feel like they are an equal stakeholder in the response to the pandemic. Three quarters of young people have reported that decisions about education have been made with more importance placed on the impact on parents

and carers rather than young people.¹ This is impacting the ability of young people to be heard and 65 per cent report that they do not have a clear way to contribute to the discussion about the pandemic.¹ There are currently no meaningful platforms or strategies to include and support young people in designing the recovery from the pandemic.

Participation Leads to the Best Outcomes

The inclusion of young people and their lived experience, perspectives and ideas leads to better outcomes for everyone.⁴⁶ This is particularly important for young people from marginalised backgrounds, who are experts in their own lives, their challenges and their hopes for the future. Youth participation is meaningfully involving young people in designing the solutions to the issues they face.⁴⁷ When young people are genuinely included in decision making roles they can positively influence the directions of policies and identify how issues can be resolved. This ultimately results in better policies.⁴⁶

Youth Leadership in the Recovery

The development of a successful recovery requires the genuine participation and inclusion of young people. Young people have the most important lived experience to contribute to decisions made about them and their participation is a fundamental human right.⁴⁸ Decisions made today will fundamentally change the lives and futures of all young people and there must be a commitment to supporting and embedding youth participation in the recovery for Victoria.

Recommendation: Young people are at the centre of designing and leading the COVID-19 recovery.

Embed Youth Participation in the Recovery

1. Commit to placing young people at the centre of the recovery, championing fairness, diversity and equity.
2. Embed youth participation in design, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of all aspects of the recovery in the government, community and industry response, at both the state and local level.
 - a. Invest in training, preparation and support for young people to participate effectively in relevant recovery working groups and governance structures and compensate them appropriately for their time and expertise.
 - b. Commit to involving young people in designing, delivering and governing state and local governments' recovery plans.
3. Provide funding for youth-led recovery initiatives and showcase them to demonstrate the positive role of young people in disaster recovery.

Ensure Good Practice in Youth Participation

4. Invest in training of organisations and local government teams in effective and ethical youth engagement and participation
5. Support the youth sector to identify, pilot, monitor, evaluate and share proven and innovative youth participation models.
6. Ensure youth participation is diverse by recognising and removing the various barriers to participation.

A Strong Youth Sector

The youth sector will be vital for the recovery of young people in Victoria.

The youth sector is experiencing increased demand while significant new barriers make it more challenging to work with and provide support to young people. The youth sector must be funded to ensure that young people have the support they need to navigate the recovery.

Increased Demand for the Youth Sector

Youth services have experienced a dramatic increase in demand for their services during the pandemic and this increase is expected to continue for at least the next ten years.⁴⁹ In the early stages of the pandemic 89 per cent of statewide youth services reported an increase in demand.⁴⁹ At the same time the sector is facing major challenges. More than 26 per cent of organisations have reported that youth workers at their place of work had been stood down or had hours reduced since the beginning of the pandemic in Victoria.⁴⁹ A significant number of organisations reported that further job losses were

expected without additional support and funding. If investment in the youth sector does not increase, young people will be denied support because services will be unable to meet demand. This will prolong the recovery and will represent a missed opportunity for early intervention. There is an urgent need to support the youth sector during the recovery.

The Importance of Youth Work

Youth workers will be a vital support for tens of thousands of young people for the next decade. The youth sector builds young people's connections to culture and community, increases employment opportunities, supports education and improves life outcomes for young people.^{50, 51} Early intervention programmes led by youth workers also provide significant cost savings in justice, mental health, education and social services.⁵⁰ The work of the youth sector will be even more important for young people during the recovery, including many young people who have never accessed youth services.



Supporting the Youth Sector

The youth sector must be supported to help young people navigate the COVID-19 recovery. Additional resources will enable the sector to meet increasing demand and continue to provide services. This requires a commitment to greater investment, expanding services and programmes, workforce development, sector connection and collaboration.

Recommendation: A strong youth sector to help young people navigate the recovery.

Expand Service Delivery

1. Invest in more generalist youth workers and specialist youth workers so that every young person in Victoria has access to participation and support in their local area.
 - a. Include investment in proactive outreach youth services in rural and regional areas.
2. Increase investment in proven prevention and early intervention youth services.
 - a. Increase the capacity of the School Focused Youth Services program.
 - b. Expand the Embedded Youth Outreach Program to all areas in Victoria.
 - c. Increase the capacity of the Navigator program to meet greater demand.
 - d. Reform and expand the Freeza program to include social connection activities to address isolation impacts.
 - e. Commit to ongoing funding for Engage! to ensure rural and regional young people have access to generalist youth work support.
 - f. Support all schools to strengthen partnerships with community-based youth services.
 - g. Raise awareness among young people about available services and how to access them.

Develop the Youth Sector Workforce

3. Create and fund scholarship and incentive programs to:
 - a. Attract, train and support prospective youth workers from diverse communities and backgrounds.
 - b. Encourage and support existing youth workers to upgrade their qualifications to bachelor level.
4. Invest in community-based organisations that work with and support young people, especially those that are operated and staffed by people with lived experience and peer workers.
5. Invest in regular training for youth workers to work with marginalised young people who will be most affected by the pandemic.
6. Provide funding to enable the Youth Work Association to undertake workforce planning, promote professional development, and facilitate evaluation.

Citations

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