

MENTAL HEALTH AND PSYCHOSOCIAL RECOVERY

December 2020



The Commissioner's monitoring and advocacy

The Commissioner for Children and Young People, Leanne McLean, is monitoring the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people in Tasmania – and advocating for their wellbeing to be central to response and recovery strategies.* This brief is one of a series of snapshots on selected topics arising from the Commissioner's monitoring activities, particularly during April – June 2020. While evidence of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people is still emerging, these briefs are intended to provide insights into the Tasmanian experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and to outline some key learnings for policy and practice across agencies and other organisations delivering services contributing to the wellbeing of Tasmanian children and young people.

"I am extremely passionate about mental health for young people. I believe that we need to find better systems for supporting young people and their families to feel connected to each other and to their communities."

~ A young person, during a consultation with the Commissioner for Children and Young People

Overview

A child or young person's life experiences and the broader environment in which they live have a significant influence on their positive development and mental wellbeing. The changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have been a new source of worry and uncertainty for many. Social distancing and other measures to respond to COVID-19 have had far-reaching effects on participation in education, home and family life, work, sport, play, and social and cultural activities. This was especially the case during Tasmania's stricter public health restrictions during April – June 2020.

Some children and young people appear to have benefitted from changes brought about by COVID-19, such as spending more time with their families, and focusing more on what is important to them. Others have demonstrated great resilience in adapting to more unwelcome

changes in their lives.^{1,2} Unfortunately, however, some children and young people, and their parents and carers, have experienced declines in their emotional wellbeing or mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic.



Early evidence in Australia and elsewhere suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has been associated with more people, including children and young people, experiencing psychological distress and mental health challenges, and, for those with a pre-existing mental health condition, worsened severity of their condition.³ This phenomenon poses a particular challenge for the Tasmanian mental health system, including perinatal, infant, child and adolescent mental health services, which have already faced longstanding challenges in responding to community need.

We need to ensure we have the range, supply and resourcing of mental health services to appropriately respond to increased demand brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, it is also important to celebrate and foster the resilience, determination and flexibility of children and young people in Tasmania during this extraordinary time. These personal characteristics provide the foundations for their psychosocial recovery and adaptation to the 'new normal'.



The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the mental health of communities

Internationally, preliminary research findings suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has had adverse mental health effects on previously healthy people and more severe effects on people with pre-existing mental health conditions.⁴

Nationally, the Australian Psychological Society reported in August 2020 that psychologists were experiencing unprecedented demand for their services.⁵ Modelling predicts that for the Australian population, significant negative mental health impacts from the COVID-19 pandemic and associated economic recession (including underemployment and unemployment) will continue well beyond 2020. The prevalence of psychological distress is estimated to peak in December 2021 for adults and in September 2021 for young people aged 15-24 years, under the best case scenario.⁶ Correspondingly, mental health-related emergency department presentations, self-harm hospitalisations and suicide deaths for those aged 15-64 years are predicted to increase over the next five years.⁶

Consistent with this emerging international and national evidence, preliminary evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the mental health of many members of the Tasmanian community. The University of Tasmania's ongoing *The Tasmania Project* survey of Tasmanian adults found that over the April — June 2020 period 35 per cent of respondents were concerned or very concerned about the impact of isolation on their own mental health; and 67 per cent of respondents were concerned about how their family was coping during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷ In a May 2020 survey conducted by the Mental Health Council of Tasmania, 60 per cent of community mental health providers in Tasmania reported an increase in service demand, arising from new referrals and existing clients needing additional support.⁸

Acknowledging concerns about anticipated growth in demand for mental health services due to COVID-19, governments have launched new mental health initiatives, including the Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan (\$48.1m) funded by the Federal Government, and “A Tasmanian Lifeline” which is a new Lifeline telephone service funded by the Tasmanian Government.



The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the emotional wellbeing and mental health of many children and young people, as well as their parents

Evidence of the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people is still emerging, but adverse effects have been observed, especially for children and young people experiencing a ‘lockdown’. In a Royal Children’s Hospital National Child Health Poll conducted during June 2020, 31 per cent of children were reported to be thriving, but 9 per cent of children were reported to be either “struggling or unable to cope with life” at the time of data collection.²

Some parents have also experienced psychological distress and mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has most likely impacted on the emotional wellbeing of their children. In the Royal Children’s Hospital National Child Health Poll, 46 per cent of parents reported the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on their mental health.²

There is also evidence of children and young people across Australia more frequently seeking help with mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Kids Helpline has reported a 12 per cent increase compared to the previous year in counselling contacts (via Webchat, phone or email) from children and young people aged 5-25 years during January – April 2020.⁹ Analysis of those contacts, conducted by Kids Helpline in collaboration with the Australian Human Rights Commission, found that the concern most commonly raised by children and young people was “mental health concerns resulting from COVID-19”, which was raised by 29 per cent of children and young people, with many of them raising the impact of COVID-19 on their pre-existing mental health conditions.⁹

In Tasmania, between March and September 2020, there were increases in the proportion of counselling contacts by children and young people in Tasmania to Kids Helpline regarding emotional wellbeing (29 per cent from 25 per cent) and mental health (24 per cent from 17 per cent) compared with the same period in 2019.^{10#}

The Commissioner has been advised that, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the mental health sector in Tasmania has experienced significantly higher levels of demand for their services from children and adolescents, some of whom are presenting with mental health conditions or symptoms with high levels of complexity and acuity.

The mental health effects of the COVID-19 pandemic may have been particularly adverse for some children and young people who experience additional life challenges. During consultations, the Commissioner has heard that some LGBTIQ+ young people in Tasmania have exhibited heightened depression, suicidality and self-harm during COVID-19.

Additionally, some young people in out-of-home care have told the Commissioner that they have experienced significant uncertainty, distress and

mental health challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially during stricter public health restrictions in Tasmania during April – June 2020. For those young people in out-of-home care receiving regular mental health support from psychologists and psychiatrists, some reported feeling very uncertain about whether and how they could maintain access to this support during the COVID-19 pandemic, given reduced face-to-face service delivery and the greater reliance on telehealth services during this period.

More favourably, the Commissioner was advised by organisations in the community sector that some children and young people in foster care and those receiving disability support services responded well to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions during April – June 2020. In some cases, these children exhibited fewer behavioural problems and appeared more relaxed, perhaps as a result of spending extra time at home and interacting with smaller groups of children and young people.

The mental health system for children and young people was stretched before the COVID-19 pandemic

Nationally, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, demand for acute mental health services for children and young people has been increasing: mental health presentations by young people under 18 years to emergency departments of Australian hospitals doubled between 2004-5 and 2016-17.¹¹ In its final report into its inquiry into mental health, released publicly November 2020, the Productivity Commission found that “Australia’s mental health system has not kept pace with our needs”.¹² In that report, the Productivity Commission made several recommendations for mental health reforms relevant to children and young people – and extending across workplaces, schools and universities, the justice system, community groups and services for healthcare,

psychosocial support, and housing.¹²

Consistent with the national situation, the mental health system for children and young people in Tasmania was already stretched before the COVID-19 pandemic. In 2017, a Tasmanian Parliamentary Inquiry heard evidence that Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) was inadequately resourced and that there were insufficient paediatric and infant mental health services in Tasmania. Workforce constraints in the Tasmanian mental health system were also mentioned, with ongoing shortages of specialist expertise, including child psychiatrists and child psychologists. Additionally, the limited inpatient mental health care available for children and young people in Tasmania was noted.¹³

The lack of timely access to appropriate mental health supports has been consistently raised with the Commissioner by children and young people, their families and those who support them in their communities around Tasmania.



It is noteworthy that the Commissioner has heard youth mental health services were already noticing an increase in anxiety amongst children and young people before the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in relation to the effect of climate change on their futures and the 2019-2020 bushfire season in Australia.

The Mental Health Council of Tasmania (MHCT) has been monitoring changes to demand for community mental health services since March 2020 as part of its COVID-19 Response and Recovery Strategy. The MHCT is currently undertaking work to understand how young people in Tasmania have been disproportionately affected by COVID-19 in order to develop recommendations for a targeted mental health response for this age group. This work has included holding a round table discussion with leaders in youth services and policy, as well as individual discussions with youth mental health service providers, and facilitated consultations with young people. A report will be published in early 2021.



It is important to acknowledge that the Tasmanian Government is implementing reforms to the

mental health system, including the Tasmanian Mental Health Reform Program and *Rethink Mental Health – A Long-Term Plan for Mental Health in Tasmania 2015–2025* (now *Rethink 2020 – A state plan for mental health in Tasmania 2020-2025*). As part of these reforms, an independent review of the model of care for Tasmania’s Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services was undertaken in 2020 which made several findings, including that “current resourcing does not match the demand for services”.¹⁴ The review report included recommendations for significant changes to the mental health system in Tasmania for children and young people.¹⁴

In the context of this review, the Tasmanian Government acknowledged that “there are longstanding issues and gaps within our Child and Adolescent Mental Health system (CAMHS)” and affirmed its commitment to “developing an integrated pathway for children, adolescents, their families and carers to navigate the mental health system”.¹⁵

In November 2020, the Tasmanian Government released its *Government Response to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services Review and Recommendations*, accepting all seven recommendations of the review and committing to three overarching actions: 1. Implementing a new organisational structure to drive and maintain meaningful change; 2. Changing existing functions (model of care); and 3. Addressing known service gaps, including a new Youth Forensic Mental Health Service, a new Children in Out of Home Care Intensive Support Team, a Youth Early Intervention Service, expansion of the Perinatal and Early Years Mental Health Service and development of day programs for those needing strategies to manage eating disorders.¹⁶ The Tasmanian Government has committed \$4 million to initiate the first phase of the large-scale transformation of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

Psychosocial recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic is important for children and young people and their communities

Psychosocial recovery involves enhancing the emotional, spiritual, cultural, psychological, social and physical wellbeing of individuals, families and communities.¹⁷ International and local experiences of recovery from previous emergencies and disasters has drawn attention to the importance of fostering the psychosocial recovery of the community, including children and young people, following a period of experiencing significant fear, uncertainty and distress. For both adults and children, experiencing psychological distress in response to a crisis or emergency is normal or understandable; it is not necessarily indicative of a new or worsening mental health condition. In this context, the goal of psychosocial recovery is to protect and enhance people's emotional wellbeing so that they can adapt and thrive after their lives have been disrupted by an emergency or crisis.¹⁷

Adopting a psychosocial recovery approach creates opportunities to acknowledge the resilience and resourcefulness of children and

young people — and encourages them to build on their strengths and capabilities as individuals and members of communities. Psychosocial recovery programs should be community designed and led but could include, for example, encouraging children and young people to: re-engage in sporting or cultural activities put on hold during the COVID-19 pandemic; care for themselves through engaging in exercise or other relaxing activities; or explore ways to increase their feelings of social connectedness after a period of quarantine, isolation, physical distancing or home learning.

Importantly, children and young people should be actively involved in designing, delivering and evaluating these recovery efforts. [The Tasmania Project's Young People's Voices Survey](#) provides an opportunity for children and young people to contribute to planning for Tasmania's future and our recovery from COVID-19. Psychosocial recovery initiatives should be targeted to adults as well – children and young people will benefit from the wellbeing of their parents, as well as other adults in their extended families, child-care centres, schools or communities.

Implications for policy and practice

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions has led to unprecedented challenges for Tasmania's children and young people – and the entire Tasmanian community – but it has also opened up possibilities for us to reflect on our usual ways of working and consider where we want to go from here to build an even better Tasmania. In doing so, it is important that we involve all members of the Tasmanian community, including children and young people, in a process of reflection, sharing ideas, identifying ways forward and enacting change.

Informed by the Commissioner's monitoring and advocacy work during the COVID-19 pandemic, two implications for policy and practice directed at strengthening the mental health of children and young people in Tasmania are proposed here as a starting point for future discussions.

- More than ever, children and young people and their families and carers in Tasmania need timely access to appropriate, effective and adequately resourced mental health services, supports and resources, including those focused on prevention and early intervention. The recently announced reforms to the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are an important step toward achieving this.

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- To enable Tasmanian children and young people to face their future with hope and confidence, we need new support and funding for evidence-based and community-led initiatives and programs to support the psychosocial recovery of children and young people, as well as the wider community. There is an opportunity to enable children and young people to actively engage in the design, delivery and evaluation of these initiatives and programs.

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If you or anyone you know needs help:

Kids Helpline	Headspace	Beyond Blue	Lifeline
1800 551 800	1800 650 890	1300 22 463	13 11 14



* In April 2020, the Commissioner released her COVID-19 monitoring framework, *Monitoring & Advocacy During COVID-19*, which is available here: <https://www.childcomm.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/CCYP-COVID-19-FRAMEWORK-APRIL-2020-WEB-1.pdf>

In relation to these figures, Kids Helpline notes in their *2020 Data Report* for Tasmania (p.2): "However, as a state with a smaller population, Tasmania is more prone to fluctuation in proportions due to individual clients contacting multiple times about a particular issue".

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