COVID-19 Insights

Key issues and recommendations from CMY's work with young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria.

July 2020

1. Background

Over the previous months of the COVID-19 pandemic in Victoria, the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) has been working alongside young people from refugee and migrant communities and their families to respond to their diverse and ever-changing needs, share their stories and to advocate to ensure no one is left behind.

Young people from refugee and migrant communities possess a range of particular skills, strengths and qualities beneficial for negotiating adolescence and the transition to adulthood. The migration and settlement journey requires young people to be adaptive, resourceful and resilient. A refugee or migrant background also means they are likely to be globally oriented and possess intercultural and multilingual skills, an indispensable asset in a globalised world.[1]

Despite their potential, young people from refugee and migrant communities continue to face considerable inequalities and multiple and compounding challenges when it comes to full and equal participation in Australian life.[2] The COVID-19 crisis has presented some opportunities, but has also intensified many of these challenges.

The recent introduction of stage four restrictions in metropolitan Melbourne and stage three restrictions in the rest of Victoria, reminds us that we are certainly not out of the worst of this yet. Our attention is both simultaneously on how to best manage our way through the crisis, while also looking forward to recovery and rebuilding.

As such, this is a relevant time to reflect on the crisis response and to highlight areas where immediate, direct and sustained action is required to ensure all young Victorians have access to the support and advice they need to stay connected, safe and healthy - right now, and as we move into more sustained and medium-term scenarios.

This paper is informed by the wealth of knowledge and experience across our organisation and networks, including the many young people and families from refugee and migrant communities who work and engage in our programs. The following overview is not exhaustive, but rather serves as a high-level outline of some of the most pressing issues and challenges facing young people from refugee and migrant communities at the present time. The aim is to provide a starting point for informing how government and the broader Victorian community can work with young people and their communities to ensure we are connected, safe and healthy.

The emergence of COVID-19, and our responses to it, have resulted in economic and social disruptions the likes of which our world has rarely seen. Young people are going to be disproportionately impacted by this crisis, especially in the longer term. We need to act now to provide young people with greater certainty and hope for the future.

2. Key response principles

CMY recommends the following principles be adopted to both COVID-19 responses and recovery. We need:

a. **Young people and migrant and refugee communities at the front and centre in Victoria's recovery response.** This includes:

- **Young people and migrant and refugee communities informing and leading on solutions and resourced to do this work**. The newly established CALD Communities Taskforce must have youth representation – as well as young people, migrant and refugee community and stakeholder representation in taskforces and community reference groups established to inform Victorian recovery and rebuilding efforts.

- **An intergenerational compact that ensures the future and wellbeing of young people** is at the core of Government and policy responses.

b. **Proactive and targeted approaches for migrant and refugee communities,** built on **respectful partnerships** between youth, migrant and refugee communities and the broader service system. The only way to make sure no one is left behind is to work together.

c. Better evidence and accountability through systematic data collection and reporting.

3. Key Issues

3.1 Public health information and lack of a Multicultural Engagement Strategy

Health education, public health promotion, and reliable, evidence-based information has been critical in combatting the spread and effects of COVID-19, however not all groups in Victoria have been able to access information with the same speed and accuracy. Victoria's multicultural communities needed timely, culturally appropriate, targeted communication about the health, social and legal implications of COVID-19. This was a significant gap in the early stages of the pandemic, and continues to be problematic. Around one in four (23%) of the young people we surveyed[3] said they are helping family, friends and community members understand information about COVID-19 'most of the time' or 'often'.

Young people have also told us that they needed targeted, simple, youth-friendly information – not just about the COVID-19 virus, but also in relation to the rapidly-evolving laws and policies relating to social distancing and staying at home.

Almost half (48%) of young people (12-24 year olds) in Victoria were either born overseas, or have a parent born overseas.[4] More than one in four (27%) of young people in Victoria speak a Language Other Than English (LOTE) at home.[5] Government consultation with peak multicultural and youth bodies in the earliest stages of the pandemic response would have more effectively tailored messaging and communication to the needs and contexts of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, their families and communities – using a range of communication tools to reach different population groups. Not doing so has increased confusion and anxiety, and led to the sharing of misinformation about physical distancing, hygiene measures and health risks.

This was particularly true for individuals/communities with no or low English, those with limited networks and access to technology, and for emerging communities more newly arrived in Australia.

The sudden, 'hard lockdown' of the high-rise public housing estates in Melbourne highlighted that community engagement, respectful partnerships and timely access to accurate information in relevant languages from trusted sources must be a core part of our pandemic response. The strong presence of police, without a robust community engagement and multilingual communication strategy, left many feeling unjustly targeted or discriminated against.

It also shone a spotlight on the strong assets and social capital that exists within communities – particularly demonstrated by young people mobilising, coordinating, organising food relief support, and disseminating information. Within 24 hours, residents of the high rises had translated information related to the government lockdown into 10 different written languages, and five oral languages, and had distributed it via text message and social media.[6]

We recognise the recent announcement of funding to provide expanded health messaging to multicultural communities, including vital health advice in language through translated resources and expanded access to interpreter services. The inclusion of additional funding direct to multicultural organisations is a particularly welcome measure that will enable

communities to directly support public health messaging. However, it remains important that we learn from our experiences of recent months, and that government and organisations forge strong, respectful partnerships with communities and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to inform all future work. This means recognising their expertise, respecting them as equal partners, and resourcing the critical work that they undertake.

3.2 Digital inclusion

Affordable, accessible digital technology and data, and the ability to engage effectively online, are critical to full and equal participation in the modern digital world. The rapid shift of essential services online during COVID-19 left many members of our community disconnected and without access to the supports and advice they need to remain safe, healthy and connected.

CMY welcome the Victorian Government's commitment to meet the digital technology and data needs of students. These are important measures that will certainly bridge the gap for many. However, for a large number of students and families these measures have not be swift enough, nor will they be sufficient enough on their own, to address the barriers to full and equal participation in a digital world.

As we look beyond the initial crisis response to the likelihood of periods of sustained physical distancing with many services and supports remaining online in some form or another, it is critical that we take steps to address digital inclusion.

Many of the 350-plus young Victorians we surveyed[7] said they experienced challenges accessing what they needed to participate in education remotely or online during March-April 2020:

- **46%** faced difficulties accessing the internet.

- **30%** faced difficulties accessing a device/computer.

- **79%** faced difficulties accessing the support they needed from their teachers or educator.

- **67%** faced difficulties accessing the support they needed from their parents or family.

Reports of significant barriers to digital participation for many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds during the crisis include:

- Lack of affordability of digital technology and data in the home to support regular and reliable connection and digital participation, including for young people not enrolled in state government schools and their families. For example, we have heard of many families where there are not enough devices to meet the educational needs of all children, and others where young people do not have access to reliable, affordable data.

- Poor digital literacy, including among key supporters in the home such as parents and carers, limiting digital and technical support available and placing young people at greater risk online. Many young people are being relied on to support parents and siblings to navigate online technologies.

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- Lack of accessible, reliable information and support in digital world – there have been significant concerns about the accessibility of online resources and services for refugee and migrant community members ranging from the need for more translated information to digital literacy issues. An over-reliance on digital platforms to deliver messaging and as a focal point for services and supports presumes digital access and literacy, this assumption has led to many communities not understanding changes to rules and advice, and feeling disempowered and disconnected.

3.3 Racism and social cohesion

Racism is hugely damaging – negatively impacting upon health, wellbeing and the full and equal participation of many Victorians, while also impacting negatively upon the social and economic health of our entire community.[8] The rise in incidents of discrimination and racism prompted by the emergence of COVID-19 is a reminder of the fragile foundations on which our social cohesion rests.

We know that anything from economic shocks, to geopolitics and boats ferrying people in search of safety, are sufficient to trigger the swift exhumation of deep-seated racial prejudice in Australia. We know this because incidents of physical violence and abuse against Asian Australians, the scapegoating of migrant communities by certain elements of the media, and online bullying and misinformation campaigns against marginalised young people, did not just suddenly emerge in March 2020, when COVID-19 began to spread across Australia. Rather, what has happened since the onset of this crisis is an escalation in the frequency and nature of incidents, the intensification of a pre-existing problem.

This has been affirmed by recent popular support for the Black Lives Matter movement here in Victoria. While the movement in Australia has focused attention on Aboriginal deaths in custody, amplifying calls for justice from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, it has also raised the profile and voices of young Australians from a range of diverse backgrounds who have shown solidarity with Aboriginal Australians while bringing attention to their own experiences of racism, discrimination, marginalisation and exclusion. The result has been a sharpening of attention to the experiences of racism in our communities, shining a light on the urgent need for unrepresentative and discriminatory structures and systems to be informed by lived experiences, and for partnerships with young people and communities.

- Prior to the pandemic we were unfortunately already seeing an upward trend in reporting of racism[9], and reports suggest that this has only increased, particularly for Chinese Australians and Australians of Asian appearance.[10]

- Over 85% of the more than 350 young Victorians we surveyed in June 2020 said that since the emergence of COVID-19 they "have witnessed people say rude or mean things about another person's racial, ethnic or cultural group online or in the media"[11].

- Reports of young people from refugee or migrant backgrounds (particularly in rural/regional areas) fearful about returning to school due to fears around encountering COVID-19 related racism are of particular concern.

- Many young people with lived experiences of racism are raising their voices – see Mohamed, Akeer, Meyne). Now more than ever we need to be listening to what they are saying about how these experiences are impacting upon their lives and what they want to see change.

- Alongside unprecedented examples of communities coming together and supporting each other both online and offline, we are concerned to see reports of decreasing levels of trust in our community.[12] There is an opportunity here to capitalise on the feelings of increased interdependence people are feeling right now and draw together our community to strengthen social cohesion, but we also need to understand and engage those who are feeling greater levels of exclusion or distrust.

3.4 Mental health

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds experience significant barriers to accessing mental health support, and are underrepresented in mental health services.[13] This is despite the fact that particular groups, such as young people from refugee backgrounds, experience heightened vulnerability to mental ill-health.[14]

Despite welcomed additional funding from the Victorian and Federal Governments to support the mental health and wellbeing of Australians at this time, CMY remains concerned that many young people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds are missing out on the mental health support they need to remain safe, healthy and connected during COVID-19 and beyond.

We need to ensure there are proactive, targeted and culturally relevant approaches to supporting young people and their families' mental health, particularly at a time like this. We must also harness the strength of intra-community support channels that exist in many collectivist cultures, including peer leaders and community leaders, to promote mental health and wellbeing, and create a bridge between community and existing supports.

- COVID-19 is having a significant impact on young people and families' mental health, as a result of school closures, social isolation, cancellation of social and recreational activities, job loss, financial pressure and family conflict.

- In the two weeks leading into June 2020, the young Victorians we surveyed said the emergence of COVID-19 and related changes had impacted upon their worries and emotions: 85% felt worried (more than one in five 'very' or 'extremely' worried), 77% felt sad/depressed/unhappy, 49% felt nervous/anxious, and 75% felt lonely.[15]

- Although CMY is aware that many young people are struggling, they are not necessarily engaging with traditional mental health services or phone help lines, unless they held a pre-existing and trusting relationship with a mental health professional.

- Where young people hold an existing relationship with a mental health professional through a mental health care plan, some have been unable to afford to see their psychologist due to COVID-19 related financial pressures, even though they identify the need for support.

- The rapid shift to predominately digital and remote means of mental health support risks leaving some young people or family members behind, particularly those who may be reluctant to use a mental health service, have low levels of digital literacy or access, or language barriers. Trust is critical for many young people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds; something that can be difficult to establish online.

- Bicultural workers and community leaders have been on the frontline of supporting young people and families experiencing deterioration of their mental health at this time – apparent in CMY's work with Pasifika and South Sudanese communities.

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- We are hearing reports that international students are falling through the gaps of mental health support. Schools in particular are identifying concern for the mental health of international secondary students, who may be reluctant to use their insurance or be unaware of their support options. International secondary school students are often living with Australian families in homestay situations, and are reporting feeling like a burden in a context where their host family may also be struggling. These young people are vulnerable to isolation and have limited support networks at this stressful time.

- The impact and threat of racism due to COVID-19, compounded by international attention on racial injustice due to the Black Lives Matter protests is also impacting on many young people's mental health and wellbeing. Mental health phone lines and supports may not always be adequately trained around understanding the impact of racism on mental health, and how to support people through these experiences.

3.5 Employment

Young people are the hardest hit by job losses and will continue to suffer the impact of long-term economic downturn as a result of COVID-19.[16] [17] Refugees and migrants will also experience these effects disproportionately.[18] [19] The intersection of being both young, and from a migrant or refugee background, creates a double disadvantage in this labour market crisis, and requires a long-term, targeted response. Long before the onset of the pandemic, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds faced barriers to employment and were vulnerable to economic exclusion.[20]

CMY strongly welcomes the Victorian Government's commitment so far to creating jobs. We urge the government to build upon these efforts, and to ensure that those most marginalised in the job market – particularly young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds – are specifically targeted and supported to access employment options at this time.

Our consultation and work with young people and communities tell us:

- More than one third (38%) of the young people surveyed from our employment program who were in employment before the COVID-19 crisis have lost their jobs. A further one third (33%) of those who had employment prior to COVID-19 have seen a reduction in the hours offered to them by employers. [21]

- Significant numbers of young people we work with (almost 30% of those surveyed) are withdrawing from the labour market due to a lack of job opportunities, increased caring responsibilities in the home, and/or fear of health impacts for both themselves or vulnerable family members.

- Some young people and their families are ineligible for income support or other assistance, placing them under significant financial and psychological stress.

- Young people are experiencing a significant knock to their confidence, motivation and employment aspirations.

- Some young people have also reported a lack of knowledge about labour market trends and COVID-19 impacts, affecting their confidence to make decisions about education/training and job seeking.

- Young people still in employment have concerns about their physical health, safety and rights at work – particularly as they are likely to occupy jobs that require on-site or face to face interaction. We are hearing reports from young people around being underpaid, not provided with adequate hand sanitiser and Personal Protective Equipment, yet feeling unable to advocate themselves for fear of losing work in a scarce and competitive job market.

3.6 Education

School closures and the shift to remote or online learning for most education offerings has brought a number of opportunities and challenges for young Victorians. Of most concern is the potential for a widening of educational inequality.

Emerging evidence suggests that the negative impacts of school shutdowns in response to COVID-19 in Victoria, and across Australia, may be disproportionately borne by disadvantaged students.[22] Many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds already face multiple, intersecting barriers to educational achievement and we are concerned about the cumulative effect of barriers (new and existing) in the remote/flexible learning context.

Young Victorians are worried about their future in the wake of the unprecedented social and economic changes wrought by the emergence of COVID-19. Of those we surveyed, 28% report feeling 'very' or 'extremely' negative about their education future. Issues exacerbating learning challenges for young people from refugee and migrant communities and their families include:

- Loss of access to educational supports (such as homework clubs and Multicultural Educational Aids), or barriers to accessing these if they have shifted online.

- Pressures at home, including increased financial stress, significant overcrowding and housing stress, less support at home for learning and young peoples' increased caring roles (including for younger siblings).

- Digital challenges, such as poor internet access and not enough technological devices to get online, lower levels of digital literacy, including among parents/family and the closure of spaces and places where many young people access digital technology and the internet at low or no cost, such as libraries, homework clubs and community centres/hubs.

- Inconsistent responses/management of need. COVID-19 responses from schools have been quite different, resulting in different outcomes for students across the state. Inconsistent responses and poor needs identification for refugee and migrant background students across schools is likely the result of many schools and education institutions lacking important information about their own student population. This is despite the recognised barriers and particular needs of this student cohort and that Victoria's young people are highly culturally diverse.

- Family/community engagement: Many schools recognising a need to strengthen relationships with families and communities.

- Disengagement: we have significant concerns about early reports of the numbers of students connected to our programs who have already disengaged from education and acknowledge that there is likely to be an ongoing need to monitor and support students who may have already been partially disengaged for whom this period of school closures has impacted. A key concern is not only how to support those already at risk of disengagement, but how to support those who have experienced learning loss and/ or who may have disengaged during the period of remote/flexible learning through no fault of their own (e.g. digital gaps, care responsibilities, etc.) to maintain engagement and motivation.

- Reengagement with education and the process of 'catching up' are also likely to be more challenging for disadvantaged students – with research suggesting learning loss and delays in cognitive gain and achievement are "more difficult to recover for some cohorts of students, and for others may result in them being lost to the education system."[23]

- Concerns about racism and discrimination, particularly for students returning to face-to-face learning.

3.7 Housing

Having a safe place to call home is critical to being able to stay healthy and connected during COVID-19. Young people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to homelessness, although this is often 'hidden', in the form of overcrowding or couch surfing. The barriers young people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds face to accessing housing (such as a lack of affordable and appropriate housing, discrimination in the rental market and lack of market knowledge or financial barriers)[24] have been heightened at this time, placing their health, safety and wellbeing at risk. Failure to address inadequate and transient housing also threatens the health of the broader community.

CMY strongly welcomes the Victorian Government's investment in addressing homelessness at this time. Despite these measures CMY is concerned that young people and families from migrant and refugee backgrounds who experience secondary forms of homelessness – such as couch surfing or overcrowding – are slipping through the cracks.

- Families living in overcrowded housing and transient young people have been significant challenges among some refugee and migrant communities during the crisis, impacting on young people's ability to learn or work from home, adhere to social distancing requirements, and protect their own health and wellbeing. We know that the current COVID-19 hotspots in Melbourne area are also housing crisis hotspots – with high levels of housing affordability stress, overcrowding and homelessness.[25]

- Young people and families have raised strong concerns about their capacity to pay rent and utilities, placing significant pressure on households. Many families are unclear about what support they may be eligible for and where to seek assistance, and face barriers to negotiating rent relief directly with their landlords or agents. We have had some young people report that they have been unsuccessful in negotiating rent relief during the crisis, resulting in high levels of stress and pressure to find work.[26] It is now evident that less than 10% of households in Australia who have lost income during COVID-19 have had a suitable rent reduction.[27]

- The approaching reduction in rates of JobSeeker, end of JobKeeper and the moratorium on evictions, combined with rising levels of employment is of great concern to many families and young people. There will be many who are unable to meet the costs of housing and utilities, and at risk of homelessness as a result. Many of these families and young people were already experiencing significant amounts of housing stress and were barely meeting their basic needs prior to the pandemic.

- Young people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds tend to underutilise mainstream housing/homelessness services. As a result, it is likely the injection of funding to these services, without necessary additional, targeted support and referrals, may have failed to reach many of those in need at this time of crisis.[28]

- The requirement to stay at home is exacerbating the potential for family violence and placing some vulnerable members of our community at increased risk. We are concerned that many family violence services are not equipped or confident to work with young people from refugee and migrant communities, particularly in this very unique and challenging environment. The lack of youth emergency accommodation that is gender and culturally appropriate places young women from refugee and migrant backgrounds at real risk. When a mixed-gender refuge, or a rooming house with a high proportion of older men are the only options on offer, many young women default to remaining in unsafe living environments, given the options available also feel unsafe.

3.8 Basic / material needs

There is an ongoing need for coordinated, emergency food relief and financial assistance to meet the basic needs of families and young people from refugee and migrant communities, particularly temporary visa holders and international students who are currently without an income as a result of the pandemic.

- 71% of the young people we surveyed said that the emergence of COVID-19 had resulted in financial problems for them or their family.[29]

- There has been a widespread reduction in household income, with many young people and those in their households worried about making ends meet. Two out of three (68%) of the young people CMY surveyed in our employment program told us their household income has been reduced.[30]

- Many refugee and migrant communities have experienced challenges accessing income support and other financial assistance during this time primarily due to access issues, such as language barriers, and understanding eligibility.

- CMY have experienced an increase in demand for support for material assistance since the onset of the crisis. In addition to existing client families identifying an urgent need for assistance with food and other basic necessities, CMY are being contacted by new families and young people requesting this assistance.

- A number of foodbanks and other emergency relief providers are currently closed or have reduced capacity, while the need for contactless delivery/pick up and an inability to meet demand has placed strain on others.

- Young people and families have raised concerns about their capacity to pay essential utilities, including phone and internet, as a result of the loss of income. This is placing significant pressure on households, especially as the use and cost of essential utilities in the home has increased with more people studying and working from home.

- Keeping track of what assistance and support is available has been a significant challenge throughout this crisis, with refugee and migrant communities facing significant barriers to accessible and timely information.

4. Recommendations

We need immediate action in the following key areas to ensure all young Victorians are safe, healthy and connected now and as we move through this period of uncertainty.

Recommendation 1 – Establish a CALD Community Taskforce

Ensure the newly established CALD Communities Taskforce includes young people who are empowered in this role to inform Victorian recovery and rebuilding efforts.

Recommendation 2 – Communication and information

Ensure that all public health information and support available is guided by a proactive multicultural communication strategy, developed in close partnership with refugee and migrant communities, including young people. The Government needs mechanisms to check in with different communities around information needs, and the best channels to ensure everyone has access to up to date, accurate and trusted information.

Recommendation 3 – Digital inclusion

Address the digital divide, starting with affordability and access to data and devices for those in most need, through the development of and investment in a Victorian Digital Inclusion Strategy and support for a National Digital Inclusion Roadmap.[31]

Recommendation 4 – Racism and social cohesion

Build on the Victorian Government's Anti-Racism Action Plan to develop a long-term, whole of government anti-racism strategy with a commitment to working with young people as the generation leading on social cohesion.

Recommendation 5 - Mental Health

Invest and develop in proactive, targeted, co-designed and partnership approaches to supporting young people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds' mental health at this time.

Recommendation 6 - Employment

Implement a Multicultural Youth Employment Strategy, as part of a broader Youth Jobs Guarantee.[32]

Recommendation 7 - Education

Ensure no student is left behind - focus on the needs of vulnerable students and make sure they have additional support to make up for time lost.

Recommendation 8 - Housing

We need:

- an immediate housing strategy that proactively works to prevent young people and families from becoming homeless in the COVID-19 context, including a special payment to support young people escaping family violence to ensure they can secure appropriate housing; and

- a long-term, significant investment in social and affordable housing options for young people and families, including culturally appropriate emergency and supported youth housing, with gender-specific options.

Recommendation 9 - Material / basic needs

Continue to ensure we support temporary migrants and all Victorians with no safety net, to ensure no one is left behind and everyone has what they need to stay healthy, safe and connected.

Endnotes

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