

Increasing access to bulk billed mental health services and building young people's wellbeing and social connectedness. Recommendations from the Coping with COVID-19 Study.

Background

While the whole population has been impacted the COVID-19 pandemic and related public health measures, young people have been disproportionately impacted through joblessness, reduced social connectedness, and increased anxiety about their futures. Consequently, young people are experiencing poorer mental health and increases in self harm.

While recent announcements of investment in mental health care by the Victorian and Australian Governments is welcome, young people in our study reported barriers to accessing mental health care that remain unaddressed. They also reported a need for proactive initiatives that prevent mental ill-health in the first place.

“Funding mental health services. Accessing counselling/psychology services is really expensive and difficult”

Key issues

Accessibility

Given the multiple impacts of joblessness, insecure work, interrupted studies and reduced social connectivity, young people's mental health is suffering. However, these same factors mean that young people are also finding it difficult to afford the gap payments between the Medicare subsidy and the cost that the psychologist charges. While additional funding has been committed to headspace services, these services do not meet the needs of all vulnerable young people (for example, those over 25). As a result, young people require bulk-billed mental health sessions to reduce the financial burden of supporting their mental health.

“Invest more in building communities that are connected and resilient rather than focusing all efforts on treating mental ill health arising from COVID-19 pandemic”



Photo by Ivan Samkov from Pexels

Promotion of mental wellbeing

Young people also feel that their poorer mental health is due to a lack of proactive actions to enhance social connectivity and wellbeing. To address this young people identified the need for:

- Supporting courses and programs to give young people a sense of purpose and a source of creativity and connection
- Online support groups, group activities, training, and advice to young people to stay connected and adapt to the changes
- Enabling access to physical activity (free online classes, promotion of activities)
- Clear and consistent information about COVID-19 which is interpretable and accessible for young people

Recommendation

The Burnet Institute recommends that the Australian Government and State and Territory Governments commit to increase access to bulk-billed mental health services and invest in strategies and services that support young people's wellbeing and social connectedness.

1. Clayton, R. 2020. Statistics shows increase in children presenting to hospitals after self-harming, *ABC News*, 8 August 2020, online.

About the Coping with COVID-19 Study

Coping with COVID-19 is a national study of young people aged 15-29 years old. Funded by VicHealth, this study aims to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions on social connection, loneliness, health behaviours, and the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians. This study commenced in March 2020, with 2000 young people participating in a longitudinal mixed methods study.