

Inquiry into the Accessibility and Quality of Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Australia May 2018

Introduction

YACSA is the peak body in South Australia representing the interests of young people, youth workers, organisations and networks throughout the non-government youth sector. Policy positions are independent and not aligned with any political party or movement. YACSA supports the fundamental right of all young people to participate in and contribute to all aspects of community life, particularly the decision-making processes that impact them.

YACSA is pleased to respond to the Inquiry into the Accessibility and Quality of Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Australia as we believe that a responsive and appropriate mental health system is vital in improving the health and wellbeing of many within the community, particularly young people.

The 2017 Mission Australia Youth Report cites mental health as one of the three most commonly reported barriers to the future plans of young people¹, with just under one in four young people aged 15-19 years meeting the criteria for having a probable serious mental illness². This experience of poor mental health early in life can impact on most aspects of young people's lives both now and into the future and is a significant contributor to overall health and wellbeing across the lifespan.

Unfortunately we know that accessible and appropriate mental health services are either scarce or non-existent in many rural and remote regions, leaving young people with limited options for mental health diagnosis or treatment. YACSA would like to see a greater investment at the state and federal level in dedicated early intervention programs and services in rural and remote South Australia

Key points

The following presents the key areas of the YACSA response to the Inquiry into the Accessibility and Quality of Mental Health Services in Rural and Remote Australia:

- There is a shortage of accessible and affordable mental health services in rural and remote South Australia, particularly those targeted at young people.
- Young people in rural and remote areas face a set of unique challenges that act as a barrier to seeking help for mental health issues.
- While there are mental health services accessible in some regions, the vastness of rural and remote South Australia means there are significant geographical barriers for young people to access services.
- Mental health services in rural and remote regions are inadequate and do not meet the needs of young people.

¹ Bullot A., Cave, L., Fildes, J., Hall, S. and Plummer, J. 2017, Mission Australia's 2017 Youth Survey Report, Mission Australia.

² Mission Australia/Black Dog Institute. Youth Mental Health Report: Youth Survey 2012-16. Viewed 20 April 2018, <https://www.missionaustralia.com.au/publications/research/young-people/706-five-year-mental-health-youth-report/file>

- Both federal and state governments need to focus resources on greater service provision in rural and remote South Australia to ensure that young people have access to timely, appropriate and affordable mental health services when and where they need it.

Gauging mental health needs and mental health services in rural and remote South Australia

YACSA developed two surveys to gauge the experience of rural and remote young people accessing mental health services. One survey was developed for the youth sector and youth sector networks in the six local government regions of Eyre Peninsula, Central region, Southern and Hills, Murray Mallee, South East and the Outback. The survey link was distributed to our members with services in rural and remote regions and youth sector workers, youth development officers, community development officers, council representatives and workers in community sector organisations in rural and remote regions were targeted to participate. A separate survey for young people was developed and distributed to YACSA's young members who live in the six local government regions and shared on social media. Sector and local government participants were also asked to share the survey amongst young people in their regions. The survey was designed to gather information to underpin our response to this Inquiry.

Respondents to both surveys described a shortage of appropriate and accessible mental health services across rural and remote local government regions, particularly for young people. In some regions participants described having to drive significant distances to access private and expensive mental health services, while others described the impacts of long wait times for existing government services.

The vastness of rural and remote South Australia impacts significantly on the ability of individuals to access services. Some YACSA survey respondents described services located hours away from where they live that can only be accessed by private transport. If young people don't have access to a car, petrol, money to access private transport (such as buses) or have supportive family or friends who are able to drive them to appointments then they face significant barriers in accessing mental health services.

There are some federally funded services in rural and remote areas such as Berri, Mount Gambier, Murray Bridge, Port Augusta and Whyalla, but for people living outside of these areas, travelling to and accessing these services can be challenging and waiting lists are significant. Outside of larger population areas, fly-in fly-out Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provide limited youth mental health coverage. However, survey respondents described the paucity of these services (some services only fly-in once a month) and associated lengthy waiting lists to see a psychologist or psychiatrist in some regions.

With the dearth of dedicated mental health services in rural and remote regions described by survey respondents, the burden of youth mental health, particularly in the first instance is being dealt with by GPs, ill-equipped school counsellors, social workers and school chaplains. Hospitals are bearing the brunt of treating young people with mental health issues.

A majority of respondents were broadly damning of mental health services in rural and remote regions, particularly for young people, with current service coverage not adequate to meet the needs of young people.

The state of mental health services in rural and remote South Australia

While the prevalence of mental health issues tend to be similar in both rural and urban areas³, the need for mental health services outside of urban areas is great⁴. Living in a rural or remote location presents a set of unique challenges when it comes to accessing services for mental health issues, particularly for young people⁵. Many rural and remote regions have either no or limited mental health services, while others may have services that aren't age appropriate. Infrastructure such as transport also determines whether young people are able to access a service. It is important to note that the inability to access mental health services can lead to a delay in effective diagnosis. In fact, statistics demonstrate that 54% of people with a mental illness in rural and remote areas do not seek diagnosis or treatment for mental health issues⁶.

Across the country, the numbers of psychiatrists, mental health nurses and psychologists in rural and regional areas are significantly lower when compared to urban areas. The table below illustrates the urban and regional remote mental health workforce comparison⁷.

Table 1: Prevalence of mental health professionals, by remoteness (Clinical FTE per 100,000 population), 2015.

	Major Cities	Inner Regional	Outer Regional	Remote	Very remote
Psychiatrists	13	5	4	5	2
Mental health nurses	83	74	46	53	29
Psychologists	73	46	33	25	18

Source: National Rural Health Alliance. "Mental Health in Rural and Remote Australia: Fact Sheet - December 2017", viewed 8 May 2018, <http://ruralhealth.org.au/sites/default/files/publications/nrha-mental-health-factsheet-dec-2017.pdf>

There is a significant shortage of mental health professionals and services operating in rural and remote areas in South Australia. Presently, Whyalla, Berri, and Mount Gambier each has only one psychiatrist, with towns forced to depend on fly-in fly-out support every three weeks⁸. Other mental health services may be located in other towns or other regions and may be several hours drive away⁹.

YACSA asked survey respondents to initially identify whether there were dedicated youth mental health services in their region and to identify what those services were. If there were no youth-related services in their region we asked respondents to identify whether there were general mental health services available and whether they believed that those services were appropriate for young people.

³ The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. "Mental health in rural areas", viewed, 8 May 2018, <https://www.ranzcp.org/Publications/Rural-psychiatry/Mental-health-in-rural-areas>

⁴ Willis, Belinda. "Mental health gap in rural SA must be tackled, emerging as key State Election issue." The Advertiser, February 7, 2018. <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/mental-health-gap-in-rural-sa-must-be-tackled-emerging-as-key-state-election-issue/news-story/3fa7500907c913b88e77099ebaab705a>

⁵ Commissioner for Children and Young People. "Children and young people living in regional and remote areas; Policy brief, October 2012", viewed 8 May 2018 <https://www.ccp.wa.gov.au/media/1297/policy-brief-mental-health-regional-and-remote-areas-october-2012.pdf>

⁶ Black Dog Institute, "Facts & figures about mental health", viewed 25 April 2018, https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/docs/default-source/factsheets/facts_figures.pdf?sfvrsn=10

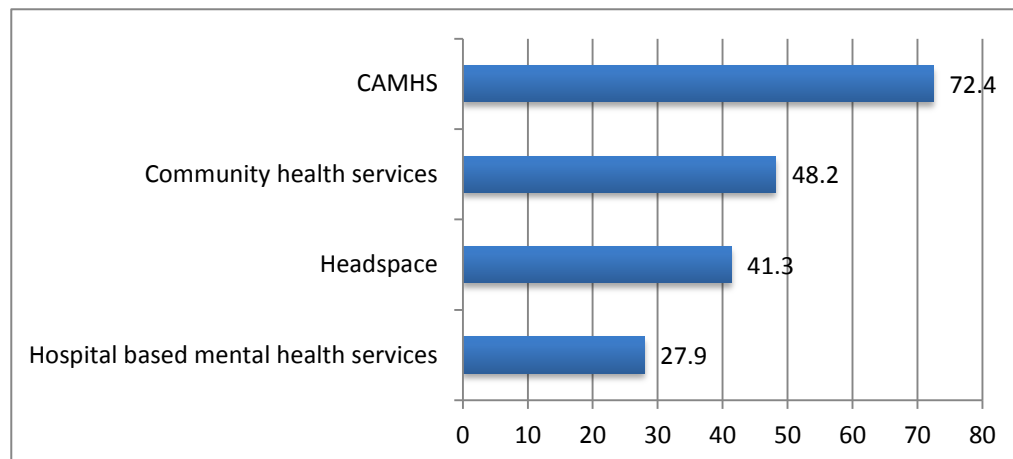
⁷ National Rural Health Alliance. "Mental Health in Rural and Remote Australia: Fact Sheet - December 2017", viewed 8 May 2018, <http://ruralhealth.org.au/sites/default/files/publications/nrha-mental-health-factsheet-dec-2017.pdf>

⁸ Willis, Belinda. "Mental health gap in rural SA must be tackled, emerging as key State Election issue." The Advertiser, February 7, 2018. <http://www.adelaidenow.com.au/news/south-australia/mental-health-gap-in-rural-sa-must-be-tackled-emerging-as-key-state-election-issue/news-story/3fa7500907c913b88e77099ebaab705a>

⁹ The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. "Mental health in rural areas", viewed, 8 May 2018, <https://www.ranzcp.org/Publications/Rural-psychiatry/Mental-health-in-rural-areas>

Just over sixty per cent of respondents reported that there was some form of youth-specific mental health service in their region and a majority (72.4%) of those services were related to CAMHS. Community health services (incorporating some form of counselling or mental health services) were reported by 48.2% of respondents and Headspace centres were reported by 41.3% of respondents (see chart 3 below).

Chart 3: Youth specific mental health services in regional and remote South Australia.



However, respondents cautioned that while there are some youth specific services available in regional and remote South Australia, those services are generally situated in the larger population centres or provided by limited CAMHS outreach or by other limited service mental health workers.

Just over half (52%) of respondents reported generalist mental health services being available in their region and most of those are targeted at adults. Only 18.6% of respondents believed the generalist services available in their regions were appropriate for young people to access.

When we asked young people whether they knew of any mental health services in their area most reported knowledge of Headspace, CAMHS, services delivered by non-government organisations and community health services and on-campus services in some high schools.

The main barriers for young people accessing mental health services

Unfortunately there is still a great deal of stigma related to mental illness in the community and this can be compounded in rural and remote towns. If there are accessible services, the closeness of small communities can impact on the willingness of individuals to seek help due to the lack of anonymity and confidentiality¹⁰ and fear of not being accepted in their communities¹¹. If there are no accessible services or services with limited coverage and/or long wait times, young people can be dissuaded from seeking help¹².

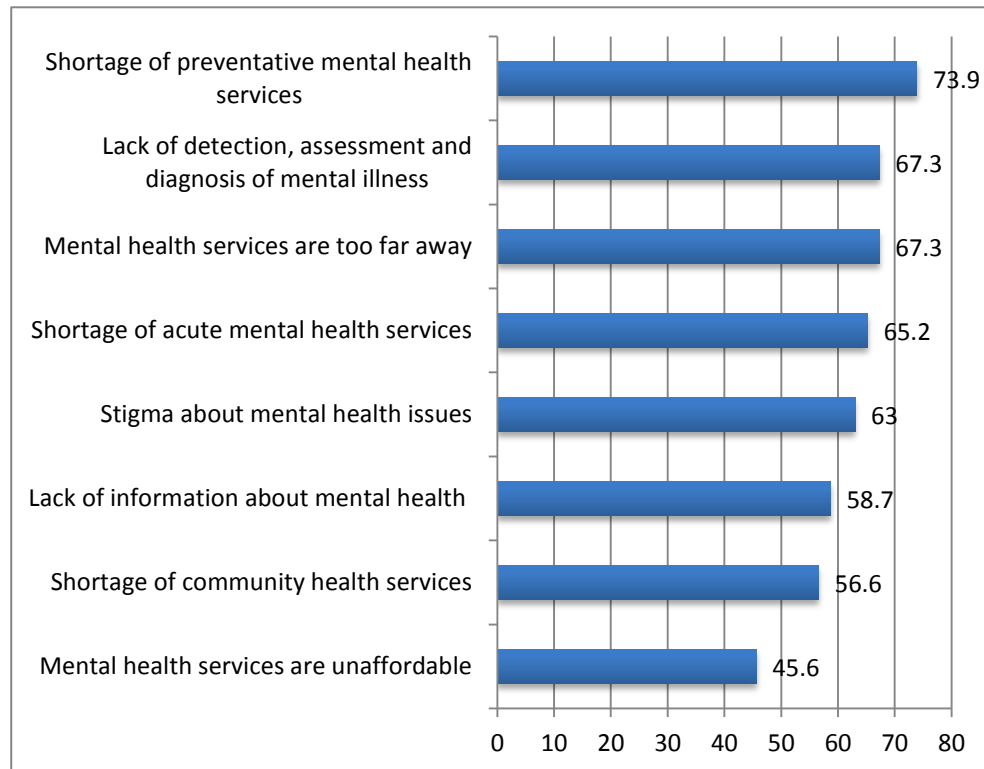
¹⁰ Boyd C, Aisbett D, Francis K, Kelly M, Newnham K, Newnham K. Issues in rural adolescent mental health in Australia. *Rural and Remote Health* 2006; 6: 501. Viewed 8 May 2018, www.rrh.org.au/journal/article/501

¹¹ The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists. "Mental health in rural areas", viewed, 8 May 2018, <https://www.ranzcp.org/Publications/Rural-psychiatry/Mental-health-in-rural-areas>

¹² Rickwood D. *Pathways of Recovery: Preventing Further Episodes of Mental Illness* (Monograph). Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. 2006.

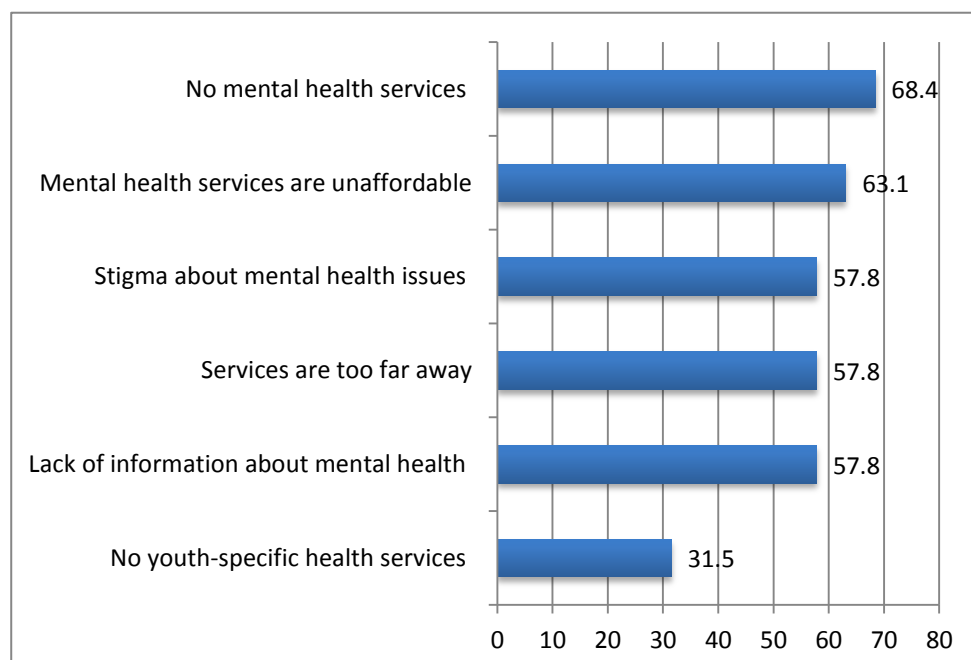
Sector survey respondents identified a range of issues that act as barriers to young people seeking help for mental health issues (see chart 1 below).

Chart 1: The main challenges for young people seeking support for mental health issues (sector).



We asked young people to identify the barriers in seeking help for mental health issues in their regions in a slightly different way, but the results didn't differ markedly from the responses offered by sector workers (chart 2 below).

Chart 2: The main challenges for young people seeking support for mental health issues (young people).



The shortage of mental health services, lack of transport options and sheer distances to access existing services coupled with the lack of detection, assessment and diagnosis of mental health issues were seen as significant barriers to better mental health for young people in rural and remote areas.

The issues of stigma, anonymity and confidentiality were also identified by a number of respondents in both surveys as a major factor influencing help seeking behaviour amongst young people.

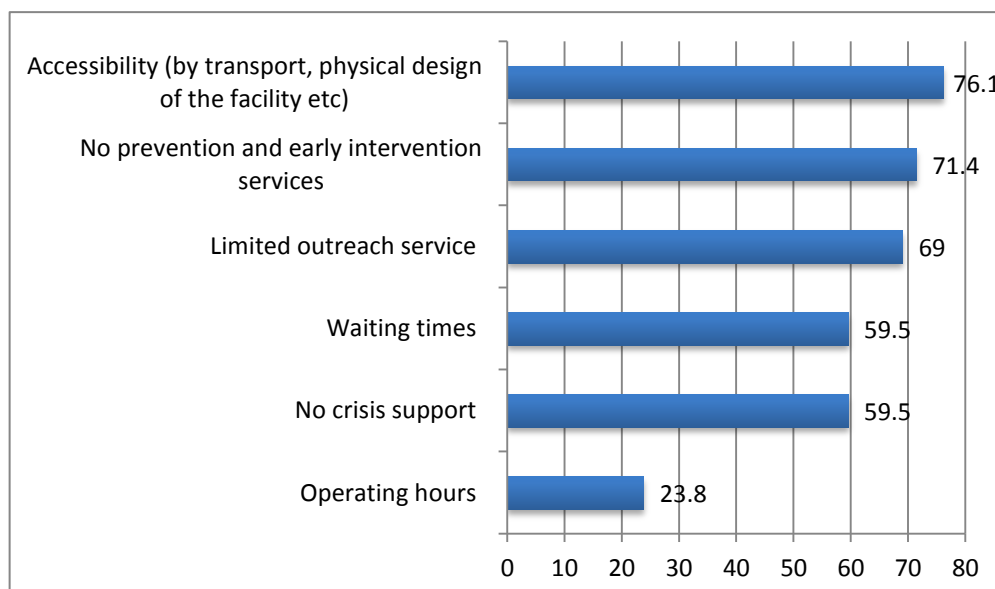
Do existing services meet the needs of young people in rural and remote South Australia?

While a range of services were identified by respondents, 80.4% felt that existing services did not meet the mental health needs of young people (4.3% thought current services met the needs of young people and 15.2% were “unsure”).

The leading factor impacting the mental health needs of young people in rural and remote areas identified by survey respondents is accessibility, particularly in regards to transport. One survey respondent described taking time off of work to travel for three hours to visit a private mental health facility, while another described the prohibitive distance for young people to travel to access services particularly for those that do not have supportive families, or have their own transport or aren’t in the financial position to access services in other geographical locations.

The lack of prevention and early intervention services, lack of crisis support and the limited nature of current outreach services were also identified as major impacts to the mental health of young people (see chart 3 below). A consistent theme throughout the survey commentary was also the impact of waiting times on young people seeking help for mental health issues.

Chart 3: barriers to services meeting the needs of young people (sector)



It became clear while analysing the survey responses that a number of communities have no resident mental health services and must rely on visiting services or travelling to communities where services are available (subject to waiting periods).

What supports are needed for young people in regional and remote areas?

We know that the barriers to young people accessing mental health services in rural and remote areas are a result of the intersection of geographical isolation, the social proximity of rural and remote communities, stigma, the shortage of services, waiting times and a range of personal factors that influence help seeking behaviour¹³.

Sector respondents to our survey have called for government to increase funding to boost the mental health workforce in rural and remote South Australia. Services have to be more reliable and more accessible to young people, particularly outside of regional areas serviced by Headspace. In addition, as Headspace is not the panacea to the mental health needs of all young people, other regular and accessible supports and services are needed across the entirety of rural and remote South Australia to reduce waiting lists and encourage help-seeking behaviour.

Young people indicated that mental health services should be easily accessible, friendly, welcoming, and free. Again young people stressed the importance of services that provide anonymity and confidentiality, taking into consideration the unique social proximity of rural and remote regions.

Young people identified a need for qualified mental health workers in schools to offer young people support and referral. In addition, more resources need to be made available for services such as Headspace to provide a greater number of options to talk to mental health professionals about mental health issues.

Based on our survey responses YACSA urges both federal and state governments to:

- Ensure more regular services exist to detect, diagnose, treat and manage mental illness.
- Support and train GP's to recognise youth mental health issues and work appropriately and effectively with young people as the first point of contact.
- Focus on and resource prevention and early intervention programs that include appropriately trained mental health professionals in schools, mentorship programs, and drop-in spaces.
- Ensure programs delivered are confidential and staffed by workers outside of the local area, particularly in smaller communities.
- Improve community attitudes toward mental illness, particularly in rural and remote locations and encourage help-seeking behaviour amongst young people.
- Ensure drug and alcohol harm minimisation programs are available in rural and remote locations.
- Further resource existing Headspace, CAMHS and other appropriate mental health supports in additional locations (including schools) across the state.
- Fund specialised youth mental health professionals who are prepared to travel to small communities to provide support for young people.
- Resource appropriate online supports coupled with face to face services.
- Resource acute and early intervention mental health services for you people.
- Provide funding for community youth services to provide general and practical support for young people to increase engagement and connection to their communities.

¹³ National Rural Health Alliance. "Mental Health in Rural and Remote Australia: Fact Sheet - December 2017", viewed 8 May 2018, <http://ruralhealth.org.au/sites/default/files/publications/nrha-mental-health-factsheet-dec-2017.pdf>

In conclusion

In this submission, the youth sector, youth sector networks, workers in rural and remote council areas and young people have described their experience of mental health services in rural and remote South Australia. YACSA has heard from young people who have struggled to access mental health services in their regions and both young people and sector respondents described prohibitive waiting times, a lack of prevention and early intervention services, limited and scarce outreach services, and a lack of effective detection, assessment and diagnostic services.

YACSA survey respondents provided a range of suggestions on how the federal and state government can fill the gaps in mental health services and these ranged from further resources to increase mental health service coverage (and reduce waiting times) to increasing appropriately trained mental health specialists situated in schools and in the community, training for GPs to recognise mental health issues and greater funding for youth service organisations to provide general and practical support for young people in their regions.

With the knowledge that early experiences of poor mental health acts as a significant precursor to mental health issues later on in life, it is imperative that governments prioritise youth mental health and ensure that funding, service provision and ongoing treatment responds effectively to young people experiencing and at risk of developing mental health issues.

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