

# Select Committee on COVID-19

Mental Health Australia and Community Mental Health Australia welcomed the opportunity to work with the Select Committee on COVID-19 (the Committee). Both of our organisations have collaborated on this document to provide the Committee with referenced information related to the topics discussed at the mental health-focused public hearing on 15 September 2020.

## Mental illness and psychological distress during COVID-19

- For people who have previously experienced moderate to severe mental illness, the heightened stress related to COVID-19 will increase likelihood of a relapse or worsening of symptoms. Psychosocial supports will be particularly important in addressing and reducing this distress.<sup>1</sup>
- Loneliness and isolation are more commonly experienced by people affected by complex mental illness. This is exacerbated by physical distancing and quarantine requirements.<sup>2</sup>
- Historically, periods of economic downturn are associated with increased rates in suicide and there needs to be targeted programs in place to reduce the risk of suicide, including due to an increased individual perception of burden tied to financial hardship.<sup>3</sup>
- The onset of COVID-19 and related loss of jobs and incomes from February to April 2020 has increased psychological distress as well as the incidence of persistent depression or anxiety.<sup>4</sup>
  - In April 2020, 19% of all adults reported persistent feelings of depression or anxiety, compared with 10% of all adults in 2017.
  - This was especially so for people who were unemployed (29%), those in financial hardship (41%), and younger people (25% of people under 40 years old).<sup>5</sup>

### Carers during COVID-19

- The vast majority (81%) of carers said their mental health had deteriorated since the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup>
- Almost all carers (88%) had experienced increased stress in their role as a carer, with over half (52%) responding that their stress had increased by 'a lot' or 'an extreme amount'.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Mental Health Australia (2020). *Issues Paper – Mental Health Response Plan for COVID-19*. Provided to National Mental Health Commission 1 May 2020. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from <https://mhaustralia.org/sites/default/files/docs/mental1.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Mental Health Australia (2020). *Issues Paper – Mental Health Response Plan for COVID-19*. Provided to National Mental Health Commission 1 May 2020. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from <https://mhaustralia.org/sites/default/files/docs/mental1.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Mental Health Australia (2020). *Issues Paper – Mental Health Response Plan for COVID-19*. Provided to National Mental Health Commission 1 May 2020. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from <https://mhaustralia.org/sites/default/files/docs/mental1.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Butterworth, P. (2020) *How to protect mental health through the COVID-19 crisis* in Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Caring Fairly Coalition (2020). *Caring Fairly Survey*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [http://caringfairly.org.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/Caring%20Fairly\\_Caring%20during%20Coronavirus%20%281%29.pdf](http://caringfairly.org.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/Caring%20Fairly_Caring%20during%20Coronavirus%20%281%29.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Caring Fairly Coalition (2020). *Caring Fairly Survey*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [http://caringfairly.org.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/Caring%20Fairly\\_Caring%20during%20Coronavirus%20%281%29.pdf](http://caringfairly.org.au/sites/default/files/2020-07/Caring%20Fairly_Caring%20during%20Coronavirus%20%281%29.pdf).

## Income support is a crucial lifeline for many people, including those living with mental illness

*Senator Gallagher: I note you have both raised income support as a crucial lifeline for many people, including those who might be living with mental illness. How critical do you think the JobSeeker and JobKeeper payments have been in supporting the mental wellbeing of Australians?*

- Research shows inadequate incomes, unemployment, loss of a sense of personal control and loss of social support all risk corroding mental health and increase the risk of suicide<sup>8</sup>
- People who lost their jobs have had their mental health particularly impacted.
  - One study found that those who lost their jobs were 1.5 times more likely to exhibit clinically significant symptoms of depression than those whose jobs were unaffected, and were 1.3 times as likely (11% in all) to have thoughts of self-harm or being 'better off dead.'<sup>9</sup>
  - People who lost their jobs or paid working hours experienced especially elevated levels of psychological distress, depression, and suicidal thoughts. In one survey in April 2020, 35% of those who lost their jobs at this time exhibited severe psychological distress, compared with 28% of those still employed.<sup>10</sup>
- In 2013, a meta-analysis of international research on the link between unemployment and suicide estimated that the risk of suicide among people who were unemployed was on average 1.7 times that of people still employed.<sup>11</sup>
- When unemployment rose from 4% to 6% after the Global Financial Crisis (2007-2009), suicide among people out of paid work rose by 22% among men and 12% among women.<sup>12</sup>

## Many Australians would have been much worse off without the Coronavirus Supplement

*Senator Siewart: I firstly want to go to the issue of JobSeeker. In terms of the rise—in other words, the coronavirus supplement—what's the data, if you have any, around the impact that's had? In other words, from a mental health point of view, do you think we would be in a worse situation if we hadn't had that supplement?*

- After the Coronavirus Supplement and JobKeeper Payment were introduced and lockdowns were eased, financial hardship among the lowest 10% by income fell from 60% to 46% and the proportion of people experiencing personal stress due to COVID-19 fell sharply from 43% to 24%.<sup>13</sup>
- By May 2020, people on the lowest incomes were much less likely to report financial stress than at the onset of COVID19 in February. The proportion of people in the lowest 10% of household incomes (most of whom rely on social security payments) finding it 'difficult or very difficult' on their present income declined from 60% in February 2020 to 46% per cent in April. The introduction of

<sup>8</sup> Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

<sup>9</sup> Fisher, L. (2020). 'Mental health of people in Australia in the first month of COVID-19 restrictions: a national survey,' *The Medical Journal of Australia* in Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Collie, A. et al. (2020). 'COVID-19 Work and Health Study: A study looking at the health and work of Australians who have lost work during the COVID-19 pandemic,' *School of Public Health and Preventive Medicine, Monash University* in Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Milner A, Morrell S, LaMontagne A (2014). 'Economically inactive, unemployed and employed suicides in Australia by age and sex over a 10 year period: what was the impact of the 2007 economic recession?' *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 2014 in Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

<sup>13</sup> Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

the Coronavirus Supplement in that month (which mainly goes to those on the lowest incomes) contributed to this outcome.<sup>14</sup>

- People were less likely to report feeling lonely. In May 2020, 36% of people felt lonely at least some of the time, compared with 46% in April at the height of the lockdowns. Loneliness remained high among younger people (59% for those aged 18-24 and 49% for those aged 25-34).<sup>15</sup> Both the easing of lockdowns and improved income support likely contributed to this outcome.
- People were less likely to report personal stress. The number of people experiencing one or more sources of personal stress due to COVID-19 declined by nearly half from April (43%) to June (24%).<sup>16</sup>
- The ABS has found that 70 cents in every dollar of supplementary payment received by working age people is being spent, with these households spending more than usual.<sup>17</sup>
- In April 2020, ACOSS surveyed 955 people receiving the Jobseeker payment, and found
  - The number of people reporting that they were struggling with medical costs had dropped by over 40%, with only two in five people now reporting that they were experiencing difficulties paying for medicines and health services
  - 92.8% said they were able to afford fresh fruit and vegetables
  - The number of people skipping meals because of a lack of funds had dropped by over half to 33% (prior to the introduction of the Coronavirus Supplement, 75% of people said they skipped meals because of a lack of funds, with 20% of people saying they were skipping at least 1 meal per day)
  - 75.1% said they were able to pay their bills and 54% reported that their anxiety about money has substantially decreased
  - 93.5% said the removal of the supplement would have a significant or extreme impact on their ability to cover the cost of essentials.
    - 3 in 4 people on JobSeeker extremely worried about the \$300 a fortnight cut to the Coronavirus Supplement rate, which ended on the 24 September 2020.

## Telehealth during COVID-19

*Senator Gallagher: What I'm hearing is that you'd like to see telehealth as a permanent feature of how health services are delivered in the future.*

*Senator Siewert: I'll go to the issue of fear of the future. Dr Beagley, you made that comment. In terms of fear of the future, what impact will the supplement being cut by \$300 a fortnight on 25 September and telehealth not being extended, or the fact that it's ending, have on people's mental wellbeing?*

- Telehealth has brought a range of opportunities, but cannot completely replace face-to-face options.
- In the shock of the initial phase of this pandemic, public mental health and many NGO services for people with mental illness have seen a sharp drop in face-to-face care, and a withdrawal from home based and assertive outreach modes of providing such care, just when these are most needed for a wider range of patients.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Biddle N, et al (2020). 'Tracking outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic (May 2020) – Job and income losses halted and confidence rising,' ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods in Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Biddle N, et al (2020). 'Tracking outcomes during the COVID-19 pandemic (May 2020) – Job and income losses halted and confidence rising,' ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods in Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020). *Household Impacts of COVID-19 Survey – June release* in Australian Council of Social Service (2020). *The impact of financial distress on mental health during COVID-19*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020\\_08\\_28\\_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper\\_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf](https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020_08_28_ACOSS-Briefing-Paper_Impact-of-financial-distress-on-mental-health-re-COVID-19-2.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020). *Households Impacts of COVID-19 Survey – April release* in Raise the Rate for Good (2020). *Raise the Rate for Good – Factsheet*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from <https://raisetherate.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Raise-the-Rate-For-Good-Factsheet.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Rosen, A et al. (2020). *Call for a comprehensive National Mental Health Plan to respond to the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic*. Retrieved 23 September 2020 from [https://iepa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Call-for-a-Comprehensive-National-Mental-Health-Plan-to-respond-to-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.final\\_.pdf](https://iepa.org.au/wp-content/uploads/Call-for-a-Comprehensive-National-Mental-Health-Plan-to-respond-to-the-COVID-19-Pandemic.final_.pdf).