



# Submission to the SELECT COMMITTEE ON COVID-19 INQUIRY INTO THE GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO COVID-19

Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) &  
Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN)

May 2020

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## 1. Introduction

### About the Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) & the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN)

The Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) is a not-for-profit organisation based in Victoria, providing specialist knowledge and support to young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Our vision is that young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are connected, empowered and influential Australians.

Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia (MYAN) is the national peak body representing the rights and interests of young people aged 12-24 from refugee and migrant backgrounds. MYAN works in partnership with young people, government, and non-government agencies at the state and territory and national levels to ensure that the particular needs of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are recognised in policy and practice. MYAN provides expert policy advice to government, undertakes a range of sector development activities, and supports young people to develop leadership and advocacy skills.

#### 1.1 About this submission

CMY and MYAN welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to this Senate Inquiry into the Government's response to COVID-19. It has a focus on young people (aged 12-24) from refugee and migrant backgrounds. We consider this Inquiry an important opportunity to provide direct feedback about the impact of the federal Government's response on young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, including migrant workers, international students, refugees on temporary protection visas and asylum seekers on (temporary) Bridging visas. It also has a focus on Government's response up to mid May 2020.

#### 1.2 Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds

The 2016 census revealed that just under half (46%) of Australia's young people were first or second-generation migrants and that one in four Australians aged 18 to 24 years were born overseas.<sup>i</sup> Additionally, there are currently 600,000 international students and another 100,000 former students on temporary graduate visas<sup>ii</sup> living in Australia.

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds have enormous potential to be active participants in and contributors to Australian society. The crisis has significantly disrupted the plans and livelihoods of these young people. Already navigating pre-existing economic, social, and civic barriers to support and opportunities, many are experiencing new and increased vulnerabilities in response to COVID-19.

While it is true that the virus does not discriminate, the impacts of the crisis affects particular population groups differently. While the implications of the pandemic for Australia's youth population

are significant, these will be more acute for many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, due to the intersection of age, the life stage of adolescence, the migration and settlement experience, the role that young people take in supporting their families and communities, and pre-existing (structural) barriers to access and equity - barriers which are magnified in the pandemic.

The health and socio-economic impacts of COVID-19 have aggravated existing disadvantage, with marginalised individuals and communities at higher risk of exclusion and disadvantage during this crisis due to the current economic, social, and civic barriers faced by young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.<sup>iii</sup> These barriers include the migration experience, cultural and language differences, culture, language, racism and discrimination, lack of cultural competency within the service system, experiences of racism and discrimination, and responsibilities for supporting their families to navigate access to essential services and supports.

Additionally, those more newly arrived have limited social capital in the Australian context, are unfamiliar with Australian systems and processes, and are more likely to be in precarious employment. Many young people from humanitarian backgrounds may also have experienced interrupted education prior to arriving in Australia, impacting on educational opportunities and employment pathways.

These barriers often go unrecognised by policy and decision-makers as they are commonly seen as a subset of the broader youth and multicultural/settlement sectors.<sup>iv</sup>

This submission is national in scope, drawing on consultations with young people, their families and communities, and those working to support them, from across Australia.

## 2. Summary and Recommendations

The submission focusses on 6 key areas of concern:

1. Public Health Information
2. Income Support
3. Employment
4. Digital Access
5. Racism and Discrimination
6. Mental Health

CMY and MYAN acknowledge the enormous challenges that the Australian Government, as well as state/territory governments, are facing during this pandemic. The initial response to the outbreak of the virus has so far protected our nation from catastrophic health impacts, such as those experienced by similar countries around the world. We recognise the effort made by governments, organisations, and communities and young people, to ensure the safety of Australians during this time.

This crisis requires unprecedented measures to ensure the social and economic wellbeing of all Australians is protected. It has also highlighted the entrenched disadvantage that exists for many in Australia - those who are more vulnerable simply because they do not have the same opportunities to stay safe, healthy, and connected.

**Our principal concern is that the initial government response to COVID-19 did not adequately meet the needs of everyone in Australia, including young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.**

Broad-based policy responses to COVID-19 have not met the needs of everyone equally, which has the potential to exacerbate disadvantage for some, and has resulted in new or heightened vulnerabilities for others. Additionally, the withholding of essential support from temporary visa holders whose health and livelihoods have been impacted by COVID-19 has left them arbitrarily vulnerable to poverty and ill health. This places not only temporary visa holders but also the broader community, at increased risk during an unprecedented, global public health crisis.

## 2.1 Key messages

To be most effective (in the short and long term), government responses to crises must respond to the needs of all. This is both a moral imperative and a public health necessity. The wellbeing of all people living in Australia is interconnected more than ever before; making it essential to ensure everyone, regardless of circumstance, has access to the support and essential services needed to navigate this crisis.

CMY and MYAN call on the Commonwealth Government to design responses to this crisis with a strong, intentional **focus on the experiences and futures of young people**, who will disproportionately bear the economic brunt of COVID-19 in the long term.

We also call on all levels of government to ensure that all **future socio-economic and health responses to COVID-19 include targeted interventions to young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, with particular attention paid to those facing heightened vulnerabilities** including homeless youth, LGBTIQ+ youth, young people with disabilities, asylum seekers and young people on temporary visas, and regional and rural youth.

Almost half (46%) of Australia's young people are first or second-generation migrants-this group of young people are not a minority, and a lack of culturally responsive services is unacceptable. CMY and MYAN know that **targeted, specialist approaches** are essential to ensuring young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are safe, healthy, and connected. These targeted approaches are particularly critical in times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.

We encourage all levels of government to **adequately account for pre-existing barriers and disadvantages** in these responses to avoid further entrenchment of longstanding inequalities and ensure that all of Australia's young people can access opportunities for future social, economic and civic participation.

## 2.2 Recommendations

Marginalised young people, their families and communities, including those from refugee and migrant backgrounds, are at higher risk of exclusion and disadvantage during this crisis. Broad-based policies and interventions on their own will not be enough to reach many refugee and migrant young people and their families and communities at this time. The implications of COVID-19 require a targeted approach, one built on strong partnerships between youth-focused multicultural services, migrant and refugee communities and ethno-specific services, the broader service system and all levels of government, to make sure no one is left behind.

### Broad recommendations

1. The Commonwealth Government convene a national task force to focus efforts on mitigating the long-term impacts of COVID-19 on Australia's young people. This work would involve establishing mechanisms to consult with, and meaningfully engage young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in the development of educational, economic, social, and health interventions.
2. The Commonwealth Government ensures that all Commonwealth relief packages are accessible to all young Australians, including those from refugee and migrant backgrounds on temporary visas.
3. The Commonwealth Government ensures that all socio-economic and health responses to COVID-19 include targeted interventions to young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, with particular attention paid to those facing heightened vulnerabilities including homeless youth, LGBTIQ youth, young people with disabilities, asylum seekers and young people on temporary visas, and regional and rural youth.

### Targeted recommendations

#### Public Health Information

1. Develop a COVID-19 Multicultural Strategy to guide the development and dissemination of accurate, culturally and age-relevant information - including health and income support related material.

#### Income Support

1. Maintain JobSeeker payments at the increased rate post-September 2020.

2. Expand income support, JobKeeper and Medicare to those in our community who still have no access to a financial safety net, including asylum seekers, international students, and temporary migrants.
3. Provide additional financial support to compliment state/territory offerings, to ensure international students who have lost work/reduced hours can support themselves until the situation is resolved.

### **Employment**

1. Expand JobKeeper to cover all casuals, regardless of their visa status or length of employment, to promote attachment to the labour force and prevent long-term youth unemployment post COVID-19.
2. Support industries with high numbers of casual staff to maintain their workforce.
3. The Commonwealth Government, in partnership with State governments develop and invest in a youth employment strategy, that includes a targeted approach to supporting young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. This could be through:
  - a. A Youth Jobs and Training Guarantee, including targeted measures to make sure young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are a particular focus, and stand to benefit from the scheme.
  - b. Paid, professional internships and wage subsidy employment programs for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, that build work experience, skills, professional networks and provide a strong pathway to future ongoing work.
  - c. Resourcing and partnering with community organisations already working with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to ensure they can access these initiatives, particularly as digital access and literacy can be a challenge for many.
4. Ensure that people can connect by phone with Services Australia and employment services without charge.

### **Digital Access**

1. Continue to fund and work with state and territory governments and the telecommunications industry to offer essential telecommunications equipment for households without functional equipment, or who require additional equipment to meet the needs of school-age children. This is necessary beyond the pandemic.
2. Establish a free telephone service for people with low digital literacy to receive direct technical and skills support, and ensure interpreters are available through this service.

3. Invest in a roadmap to digital inclusion that addresses the long term needs of Australians to ensure they can fully benefit from digital connection.
4. Invest in national research to understand the digital divide experienced by young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and its impact on participation.

### **Racism and Discrimination**

1. All levels of government avoid misrepresentations and stereotyping of refugee and migrant young people in public narratives and ensure strong leadership to support rather than undermine social cohesion.
2. Any public government criticism of the Chinese Government's handling of COVID-19 is preceded by clear distinctions between the Chinese government and Chinese individuals and communities in Australia.
3. Early, proactive, positive messaging that positively reflects on Australia's diverse community is a part of all government public health communications. Where there are any early signs or even potential for particular communities to be targeted with abuse or racism, all levels of government must act early in consultation with the impacted community group/s in Australia to take an unequivocal, pre-emptive stance to condemn any such commentary.
4. The Commonwealth government implement a national anti-racism strategy.
5. Explore how existing reporting and data collection mechanisms are capturing the depth and breadth of experiences of racism and discrimination in the Australian community, and identify how they can be improved.

### **Mental Health**

1. Ensure that a proportion of the dedicated \$3.5 million COVID-19 mental health funding for CALD communities is specifically designated to support young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and their family members.
2. Require all services receiving a boost in mental health funding during COVID-19 to form active partnerships with multicultural youth and family focussed organisations and communities to promote access to their services.
3. Ensure that all data modelling on the impacts of COVID-19 on mental health include demographic data around vulnerable communities, including age, country of birth, language spoken at home, ethnicity, and year of arrival.

4. Ensure that all COVID-19 suicide prevention research and service improvement has a specific focus on effective interventions with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, in partnership with young people and communities.
  
5. Ensure all COVID-19 mental health communications campaigns include a dedicated multicultural strategy with a targeted youth stream, and partners closely with young people and communities to develop and roll out these messages.

### 3. Key Concerns about the Government's Response to COVID-19

#### 3.1 Public Health Information and lack of a Multicultural Engagement Strategy

Everyone must have access to information that they can comprehend and action appropriately. Health education, public health promotion, and reliable, evidence-based information has been critical in combating the spread and effects of COVID-19, however not all groups in Australia have been able to access information at the same rate. Australia's multicultural communities needed culturally appropriate, targeted communication about the health and social implications of COVID-19, and this was a significant gap in the early stages of the pandemic. 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 impacts of COVID-19 on access to public spaces and peer/social interactions.

One in four young people in Australia are from a refugee or migrant background, and more than one-fifth (21 per cent) of Australians speak a language other than English at home.<sup>9</sup> Government consultation with peak multicultural bodies in the early 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 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. There are complex cultural factors that affect how information is received, understood, and enacted and community health education strategies should have incorporated the social and cultural information needs of all diverse communities from the outset.

While comprehensive translated information has been provided by government, this information arrived late and many communities/organisations working with multicultural communities needed to develop their own resources to address the gap. Australia needed a national COVID-19 Multicultural

Strategy to ensure our culturally diverse population received the information and support they needed in the pandemic.

### **Recommendation**

Culturally responsive and youth-friendly messaging is critical in challenging the spread of COVID-19 misinformation and ensuring that young people, their families, and communities understand their rights and obligations and can make informed decisions about their health and safety. CMY and MYAN recommend that the Commonwealth government:

1. Develop a national COVID-19 Multicultural Strategy to guide the future development and dissemination of accurate, culturally and age-relevant information - including health and income support related material.

### **3.2 Income Support**

The economic fallout of COVID-19 was swift and harsh. Lockdown orders resulted in widespread economic insecurity and extensive job loss - for some, entire households suddenly found themselves without an income. Excluding people on temporary visas from COVID-19 stimulus packages and income support is a public health risk. Maintaining the health and wellbeing of everyone living in Australia is critical. Young people and their families cannot survive the extensive and far-reaching health and socio-economic repercussions of COVID-19 if they have no income or access to essential income support. If we fail to protect people's basic needs, we risk undermining efforts to stop the spread of coronavirus, placing both the people concerned and the broader community's health at risk.

Although the Commonwealth government responded relatively quickly by introducing economic stimulus packages, including new and increased income support payments, CMY and MYAN understand that many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds have and continue to receive misinformation about their eligibility for this support. We also hold concerns for the more than 1 million vulnerable people who remain excluded from this vital support. Temporary visa holders, including migrant workers, international students, and asylum seekers living in the community remain ineligible for any form of income support, or access to Medicare, despite their significant contributions to our community, the economy, and the richness of our multicultural society.

We know that Australia's migration program has significant social and economic benefits to our nation - offsetting Australia's ageing population, improving labour productivity, helping businesses to source skills that are difficult to find at short notice, and addressing the needs of regional areas and industries.<sup>vi</sup> International students make a significant contribution to the Australian economy - \$34 billion in 2018 - directly boosting Australian jobs and wages.<sup>vii</sup>

Those on temporary visas are our neighbours, work colleagues, classmates, family and community members and yet have been excluded from public support at a time when they are critically

vulnerable to the health and socio-economic fallout from the pandemic and the widespread disruption to essential social services, including food insecurity, homelessness, ill health, and poverty.<sup>viii</sup>Emergency relief is a short-term crisis strategy designed for one-off, limited payments to alleviate critical needs and is not a substitute for targeted, ongoing income support for vulnerable people in need of continuing assistance.

We cannot call ourselves a proud, multicultural society, but in a time of crisis overtly exclude the very migrants who are so central to this success from receiving critical support - the health of our community depends on it. Excluding people on temporary visas from COVID-19 stimulus packages and essential income support also risks damaging Australia's international reputation as a safe, welcoming destination and may appear a less attractive destination to future skilled migrants and international students. The pandemic requires a whole of community approach, which recognises that our public health is interdependent with caring for all members of Australian community, including those most vulnerable or who will face increased vulnerability as a result of Government policy.

#### **Recommendations:**

To ensure that all people who are losing work hours, are losing jobs and are in or at risk of financial stress during these challenging times have the support they need and an adequate standard of living, CMY and MYAN recommend that the Commonwealth Government:

1. Maintain JobSeeker payments at the increased rate post-September 2020.
2. Expand income support, JobKeeper and Medicare to those in our community who still have no access to a financial safety net, including asylum seekers, international students, and temporary migrants.
3. Provide additional financial support to compliment state/territory offerings, to ensure international students who have lost work/reduced hours can support themselves until the situation is resolved.

### **3.3 Employment**

COVID-19 is having an immediate and significant impact on young people's employment and Australia's youth population will carry the economic burden of COVID-19 in the long-term . Younger Australians have been affected disproportionately by COVID-19-related job losses, underemployment, and withdrawals of apprenticeships, work placements, or job offers. They are overrepresented in the casual workforce, and the industries most affected by the COVID-19 fallout.<sup>ix</sup> The most recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics reveals that youth unemployment currently sits at 13.8 per cent.<sup>x</sup>

CMY and MYAN congratulate the government on their implementation of JobKeeper, in order to maintain people's connections to work. However the delay between the JobKeeper wage subsidy announcements and implementation resulted in a missed opportunity to maintain crucial

relationships between businesses and employees, and the subsequent wait for support has exacerbated financial hardship.

We also hold grave concerns for the over 1 million casual workers – a large proportion of whom are young – and temporary visa holders who do not qualify for JobKeeper or other forms of income support.<sup>xi</sup> For example, JobKeeper’s exclusion of casual staff who have been with their current employer for less than 12 months, impacts approximately 500,000 young people who were employed as casuals for less than 12 months, many of whom are in the very early stages of their working life, or just making the important transition to employment.<sup>xii</sup>

Maintaining and supporting young people’s connections to employment is critical at this time, particularly for those young people who face pre-existing vulnerabilities to unemployment.

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds bring to the workforce a diverse skills, strengths, and qualities that make them assets to employers and the broader Australian economy. They are often highly motivated to embrace the educational and employment opportunities available in Australia, given these may not have been accessible to their parents’ generation or in their country of origin. However, the intersection of being both young and from a refugee or migrant background means that this group of young people face additional barriers in the transition to work compared with their peers, leaving them particularly vulnerable to labour market exclusion and economic shock.<sup>xiii</sup> These barriers include:

- Lack of bridging social capital – networks to help them ‘get ahead’
- Racism and discrimination, such as unconscious bias
- Unfamiliarity with employment options, pathways and the labour market in Australia
- Difficulty obtaining Australian-based work experience
- Interrupted education, and
- English as an Additional Language, amongst others.

Supporting young people’s engagement with work has substantial benefits in terms of their future employability, current and future contribution to Australia’s economy, and positive social and wellbeing outcomes for the individual, family and broader community. We urge the government to ensure that those most marginalised in the job market – including young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds – are specifically targeted and supported to access employment options at this time.

We know this will have far-reaching consequences, not only now but for many years into the future as Australia turns its focus towards post-crisis recovery.

### **Recommendations:**

To mitigate the impact of youth unemployment and underemployment, and broader structural and systemic disadvantage, CMY and MYAN recommend that the Commonwealth Government:

1. Expand JobKeeper to cover all casuals, regardless of their visa status or length of employment, to promote attachment to the labour force and prevent long-term youth unemployment post COVID-19.
2. Support industries with high numbers of casual staff to maintain their workforce.
3. The Commonwealth Government, in partnership with State governments develop and invest in a youth employment strategy, that includes a targeted approach to supporting young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. This could be through:
  - d. A Youth Jobs and Training Guarantee, including targeted measures to make sure young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are a particular focus, and stand to benefit from the scheme.
  - e. Investment in traineeships and apprenticeships.
  - f. Paid, professional internships and wage subsidy employment programs for young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, that build work experience, skills, professional networks and provide a strong pathway to future ongoing work.
  - g. Resourcing and partnering with community organisations already working with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to ensure they can access these initiatives, particularly as digital access and literacy can be a challenge for many.
4. Ensure that people can connect by phone with Services Australia and employment services without charge.

### 3.4 Digital Access

Pre-existing barriers to digital inclusion are magnified and exacerbated in the current context, and failure to address existing inequities in digital access prior to COVID-19 has left many young people without access to the data, devices and technology they need to remain safe, healthy and connected throughout and beyond this crisis.

As essential services such as education and health rapidly shifted online in response to COVID-19 digital inclusion became even more critical to staying safe, healthy and connected. This was a particularly critical issue for young people navigating education and training pathways – significant life stage milestones. For many of these young people, the closure of schools and education and training institutions, and the shift to online learning, has caused significant disruptions that we are concerned may have long-term repercussions.

Contrary to popular opinion, not all young people are digitally literate or familiar with technology. Evidence of a digital divide in Australia reveals that many Australians, including young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, face a number of barriers to full and equal participation

online.<sup>xiv</sup> For example, migrants who arrived more recently under the humanitarian program have lower levels of digital access than the Australian national average, mainly due to limited technical skill and the cost of equipment and data services - key barriers to digital inclusion.<sup>xv</sup> These gaps in affordability, ability and access for young people and their families, and the impact this has had on the capacity of young people to remain connected and engaged during this crisis (and potentially beyond) demonstrates a significant inequity that has genuine potential to deepen disadvantage, not just in the education context, but across all domains of life in our digitally connected world.

### **Recommendations:**

The Commonwealth government must work with telecommunication companies to take specific measures to mitigate disproportionate digital hardships that poor and marginalised groups experience. CMY and MYAN recommend that the Commonwealth Government:

1. Continue to fund and work with state and territory governments and the telecommunications industry to offer essential telecommunications equipment for households without functional equipment, or who require additional equipment to meet the needs of school-age children. This is necessary beyond the pandemic.
2. Establish a free telephone service for people with low digital literacy to receive direct technical and skills support, and ensure interpreters are available through this service.
3. Invest in a roadmap to digital inclusion that addresses the long term needs of Australians to ensure they can fully benefit from digital connection.
4. Invest in national research to understand the digital divide experienced by young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and its impact on participation.

### **3.5 Racism and discrimination**

Every disease outbreak brings an accompanying outbreak of fear. There have been persistent reports of racist abuse and discrimination across the globe since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak.<sup>xvi</sup> Once the virus reached Australia, people of Chinese and other Asian backgrounds suffered racially charged verbal and physical abuse and discrimination, influenced by fear, mistrust and misinformation, often from those scared of contracting the virus but also from those frustrated about the social isolation measures and economic hardship wrought by COVID-19.<sup>xvii</sup> Similarly, certain statements from politicians and from within the media since the outset of the pandemic have done little to counteract negative stereotyping and the conflating of COVID-19 with Chinese and Asian Australian individuals and communities.<sup>xviii</sup>

Governments and media outlets play a crucial role in promoting positive attitudes and sentiment, by sharing accurate health information, challenging COVID-19 misinformation, condemning racism and refusing to conflate immigration with COVID-19. CMY and MYAN welcomed public statements against

racism and the conflation of COVID-19, including those made early in the pandemic by Chief Medical Officer Brendan Murphy, denouncing the spread of racist prejudices towards Chinese Australians and by Hon. Alan Tudge MP.<sup>xix</sup>

CMY and MYAN suggest that a more targeted COVID-19 anti-racism strategy from the outset of the pandemic, to combat and minimise the discrimination and racism we were seeing in other countries, could have also addressed fear and mistrust in the early stages of the virus, and promoted social cohesion at a critical time.

Racism and discrimination are an ever-present reality for many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and the prevalence of negative views about refugees and migrants from politicians and the media and experiences of racism and discrimination are critical issues for the young people CMY and MYAN work with. While the fear, mistrust, and misinformation related to COVID-19 may quickly pass, the effects of racism and exclusion on those who suffer them may last much longer, contributing to poor mental health and quality of life.<sup>xx</sup>

#### **Recommendations:**

CMY and MYAN welcome the Commonwealth Government's call on Australians to promote inclusion by reporting and calling out instances of racism, and further recommend:

1. All levels of government avoid misrepresentations and stereotyping of refugee and migrant young people in public narratives and ensure strong leadership to support rather than undermine social cohesion.
2. Any public government criticism of the Chinese Government's handling of COVID-19 is preceded by clear distinctions between the Chinese government and Chinese individuals and communities in Australia.
3. Early, proactive, positive messaging that positively reflects on Australia's diverse community is a part of all government public health communications. Where there are any early signs or even potential for particular communities to be targeted with abuse or racism, all levels of government must act early in consultation with the impacted community group/s in Australia to take an unequivocal, pre-emptive stance to condemn any such commentary.
4. The Commonwealth government implement a national anti-racism strategy.
5. Explore how existing reporting and data collection mechanisms are capturing the depth and breadth of experiences of racism and discrimination in the Australian community, and identify how they can be improved.

### 3.6 Mental Health

All young people should have access to the mental health support that they need, when they need it – particularly during a crisis. Three-quarters of all mental-health vulnerabilities begin before age 25, and the social and economic insecurity and uncertainty generated by COVID-19 is intensifying those vulnerabilities. Other areas that intersect with mental health and wellbeing have been significantly disrupted by COVID-19, including housing and homelessness, social connectedness and recreation, family conflict and violence, loss of household income, and disengagement in employment and education.

Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds face additional risk of mental health deterioration during the COVID-19 crisis due to the intersection of many developmental, social, cultural, and psychological factors including: stigma, limited English language, lack of information about mental illness and mental health services in appropriate and accessible formats, lack of culturally responsive services, and the compounding of pre-existing trauma.<sup>xxi</sup> These barriers mean that they are underrepresented in mainstream youth mental health services data, despite evidence suggesting that they experience much higher levels of psychological stress than the general Australian youth population.

CMY and MYAN welcome the Commonwealth Government’s initial commitment of \$74 million to care for the mental health of Australians at this time, in recognition of the significant impact the pandemic is having upon people’s wellbeing. Although the government recognised the importance of culturally appropriate mental health resources for First Australian’s in its initial COVID-19 response to mental health- there was an absence of a similar immediate commitment for communities and young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

We are pleased to see the government recently rectify this by dedicating \$3.5 million for CALD communities as part of the additional \$48.1 for Mental Health and Wellbeing Pandemic Response Plan, recognising the importance of a targeted, culturally responsive approach to ensure all people can access the help they need. However, we note the lack of reference to youth-specific services, despite this cohort having needs distinct from the adult population. We are concerned that once again young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds will miss out on more targeted support. Almost half (46%) of Australia's young people are first or second-generation migrants-this group of young people are not a minority, and the lack of cultural responsiveness in the youth mental health system is unacceptable.

From the outset, mental health initiatives must be responsive to the particular experiences and needs of young people and families from migrant and refugee communities, so they can access the help they need, when they need it. They must also harness the strength of intra-community support channels that exist in many collectivist cultures, including peer leaders, to provide prevention and early intervention support.

#### **Recommendations:**

Mental health services receiving COVID-19 funding need to work in close partnership with communities from migrant and refugee backgrounds - including young people, community leaders, and the services that work with these groups - to build on the already established and trusted networks that exist.

Targeted investment in mental health support and prevention now will mitigate the long-term negative impacts of the pandemic on young people's mental health, leading to enhanced wellbeing, increased productivity, and positive social and civic engagement. As such, CMY and MYAN recommend that the Commonwealth government:

1. Ensure that a proportion of the dedicated \$3.5 million COVID-19 mental health funding for CALD communities is specifically designated to support young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and their family members.
2. Require all services receiving a boost in mental health funding during COVID-19 to form active partnerships with multicultural youth and family focussed organisations and communities to promote access to their services.
3. Ensure that all data modelling on the impacts of COVID-19 on mental health include demographic data around vulnerable communities, including age, country of birth, language spoken at home, ethnicity, and year of arrival.
4. Ensure that all COVID-19 suicide prevention research and service improvement has a specific focus on effective interventions with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, in partnership with young people and communities.
5. Ensure all COVID-19 mental health communications campaigns include a dedicated multicultural strategy with a targeted youth stream, and partners closely with young people and communities to develop and roll out these messages.

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- i Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) <https://www.abs.gov.au>
- ii Rizvi.A (2020) Morrison and Dutton wash their hands of the plight of overseas students? <https://johnmenadue.com/morrison-and-dutton-wash-their-hands-of-the-plight-of-overseas-students/>
- iii An extensive body of work on this topic can be located at <https://www.cmy.net.au/> and <https://myan.org.au>
- v Australian Bureau of Statistics (2016) <https://www.abs.gov.au>
- vi Gray, D. 2016, Australia is at risk of losing migrants who are vital to the health of our economy <https://theconversation.com/australia-is-at-risk-of-losing-migrants-who-are-vital-to-the-health-of-our-economy-67455>
- vii The Hon. Dan Tehan, MP (2020) Continued Growth in Education Sector Media Release 5 February, 2020 <https://ministers.dese.gov.au/tehan/continued-growth-international-education-sector>
- viii When financial hardship is unexpected or protracted, people are at immediate risk of homelessness, insecure and unsafe housing, exploitative labour practices, exclusion from vital crisis supports due to their temporary visa status, extreme poverty with long term dependency on emergency relief and charitable support, accumulating debt, disengaging from education to contribute to the family income, and declining mental and physical health.
- ix CMY. (2019). A Young and Multicultural Victoria: The 2016 Census. Melbourne: Centre for Multicultural Youth.
- x Australian Bureau of Statistics (2020) <https://www.abs.gov.au>
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