

## AN URGENT CALL TO

# REFOCUS AUSTRALIA'S PATHWAY OUT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC TO THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

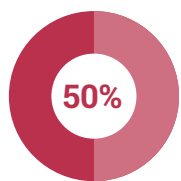
While Australia's national focus in the COVID-19 response has been on the health and wellbeing of adults, the pandemic has also had a profound impact on children and young people, the consequences of which may last long into the future. Now is our chance to place children and young people at the centre of our pathway out of the pandemic.



**Young people have less hope for the future**

# 59%

of people aged 18 – 29 felt **more negative about their future** than before the pandemic<sup>1</sup>.



Half the young people surveyed by headspace said **COVID-19 had hurt their confidence** in achieving future goals<sup>2</sup>.



**Children and young people are struggling with their mental health**

# 74%

of young people aged 12 – 25 reported **worse mental health** in August 2020 than before the pandemic<sup>3</sup>.

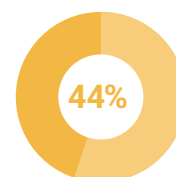
In August 2021, parents reported more than half of children had **suffered a negative mental health impact**<sup>4</sup>.



**Young people are suffering serious financial hardship**

# 63%

of young people who lost their job due to COVID-19 reported **high levels of financial stress** in 2020<sup>5</sup> despite the temporary rise in JobSeeker payments.



Nearly half of 18-to-24-year-olds reported being **unable to pay their rent or mortgage** on time<sup>6</sup>.



## Double the job losses for young people

At the beginning of the pandemic, youth unemployment was more than double the general unemployment rate<sup>9</sup>. The negative impact on young people continued, with an **employment participation rate of only 67% at August 2021**, the lowest over the past 12 months. This damage so early in their careers can take decades for young people to overcome<sup>10</sup>.



## Children have lost learning and more

# 25%

of young people reported **restrictions on sport, exercise or extracurricular activities** had a **negative impact** on their mental health and wellbeing<sup>8</sup>.



Nearly half of Australian children and young people are at **risk of adverse effects** on their **educational outcomes, nutrition, physical movement, social, and emotional wellbeing** by being **physically disconnected** from school<sup>7</sup>.



## Young people are increasingly concerned about inequity and discrimination

# 40%

of young people aged 15 to 19 identify **equity and discrimination as the biggest issue** facing Australia, even during a global pandemic.

# 62%

of young people regard it as a **national issue**<sup>11</sup>.

## The pandemic has widened existing gaps between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children and young people

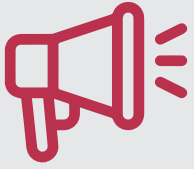
# 4x

First Nations students in public schools are four times **less likely to have internet at home** as other public school students<sup>12</sup>.

**90%** is the necessary vaccination rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, to produce the same coverage as the

**80%** target for the entire population, due to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities' comparative youth<sup>13</sup>.

However, vaccination rates continue to lag behind non-Indigenous Australians throughout most of the country<sup>14</sup>.



# WE NEED TO ACT NOW

We need to urgently refocus Australia's pathway out of the COVID-19 pandemic to the needs of children and young people who have not received the attention they deserve. Decision makers must take the following six steps over the coming months to urgently meet those needs.

1



**Give children and young people a seat at the table and plan for their futures**

**Australia's response to COVID-19 has been designed and delivered with the voices of children and young people markedly absent. This needs to change.**

#### IMMEDIATE ACTIONS:

- **Listen to children and young people**, involve them in planning our **pathway out of the pandemic**, and act on what they say
- **Develop and deliver a National Children's Plan**, made more urgent by the impacts of the pandemic, which is **co-designed with children and young people** and lays the **foundations for their development long into the future**.

2



**Get children and young people safely back to school and keep them open**

**Schools are so much more than education for our children. They are fundamental to children's wellbeing and development.**

#### IMMEDIATE ACTIONS:

- **Safely reopen schools** with a variety of **infection control measures** including mask wearing, better ventilation, staggered classes and outdoor teaching, rapid testing, and priority vaccinations for staff
- Provide support and information to students, their families, and schools, to **address anxiety about the return to face-to-face learning**
- Assess the **impact of lost learning** and extend tutoring and other programs targeted to the students and schools that have **fallen furthest behind**
- **Provide devices, data, and other learning and teaching supports** where needed for online/remote learning
- Ensure a safe and stable return to **early childhood education and care settings**, and support for children's transition to primary school
- Develop a **consistent national approach** to keeping schools open in the face of additional outbreaks.

3



**Prioritise the vaccination of children and young people**

**Children and young people have enthusiastically taken up vaccines as they have become available. As vaccines continue to be approved for younger age groups, we need to remove practical barriers and provide targeted information that promotes uptake.**

**IMMEDIATE ACTIONS:**

- Deliver **targeted, culturally responsive and age-appropriate communication**, co-designed with children and young people
- Provide and communicate **clarity on required consent to receive a vaccination**
- **Extend access to vaccines** through a range of providers including **clinics, GPs, pharmacies and schools**
- Implement and/or **strengthen access to vaccines** through measures like **family bookings, extended clinic hours, and subsidised public transport.**

4



**Urgently provide support for mental health**

**The mental health impacts of the pandemic on children and young people are clear, as are the existing inadequacies of the mental health system. There have been many welcome funding announcements, but immediate support is still lacking.**

**IMMEDIATE ACTIONS:**

- **Bridge the urgent access gap** across Australia for children and young people, including through the use of digital interventions, mobile/pop-up services, and peer-to-peer supports
- Increase the number of **mental health professionals in schools**, including psychologists, and fund and implement evidence-based whole-of-school wellbeing and resilience programs
- Expedite the **urgent implementation of The National Children's Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy** in response to the pandemic's impact on children
- Prioritise the safe **reopening of community sports and creative pursuits** that support children's wellbeing, and make them accessible for all families.

5



**Stimulate employment pathways and provide support for those in need**

**Economically, the pandemic has hit young people hard. The main industries in which they work have been devastated by lockdowns, as have the livelihoods of families who provide for children. Urgent economic support is one of the most powerful measures we can take.**

**IMMEDIATE ACTIONS:**

- To **ensure adequate social protection** for young people whose livelihoods and employment prospects have been curtailed by COVID-19, urgently and permanently **raise the rate of the Youth Allowance and JobSeeker payments**
- **Create employment pipelines** for young people by extending existing and developing new targeted programs, to support them entering the workforce and sustain their employment
- Provide ongoing **targeted support to industries that predominantly hire young people** and were hardest hit during the pandemic, including hospitality and the arts.

6



**Leave no one behind in our pandemic response**

**The impacts of the pandemic have not been felt evenly. In some parts of Australia it has exacerbated the inequalities that existed long before COVID-19. We need to recognise this disproportionate impact and make sure no one is left behind.**

**IMMEDIATE ACTIONS:**

- Ensure that our pathway out of the pandemic is **targeted and proportionate** to meet the needs of children, young people, and their families, in **communities and cohorts that have been most affected**. These include First Nations peoples, CALD communities, women, disadvantaged Australians, and people living with disability
- For children, young people, and families in those communities most affected, **prioritise and provide supports tailored** to need. This includes targeted vaccination campaigns, surge mental health services, extra educational supports and resources, and additional economic and employment support.