



South Australian  
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Young People  
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# Reflections on COVID-19

In their own words, South Australian  
young people reflect on the impact of the  
coronavirus on their world and their futures

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Commissioner  
for Children &  
Young People



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## Commissioner's Reflections

South Australian children and young people have been born into a century characterised by rapid and unprecedented civic, social, technological, environmental and political change. Uncertainty and complexity underpin the forging of their expectations around governments, institutions, and community organisations, influencing their values, identities, and individual and collective sense of self and belonging.

Young South Australians see themselves as global citizens whose relationships cross continents, sovereignties and ideological lines. They have grown up in a digital world that has impacted on their access to information and services and changed the way they learn. This has influenced how their opinions are formed, and the ways in which their opportunities to participate in, and influence society, are exercised.

Their digital connectedness also influences what matters to them most. At times they are more in touch with what is happening in New York than what is happening in Port Lincoln. They tune into global trends and maintain world views that extend well beyond state and national borders.

Because young people today view the world very differently to the way in which previous generations do, they also have different expectations of leadership. They want leaders to listen to them and to consider their ideas. They want a future where their contributions are validated and where the value their perspectives and lived experience bring is demonstrated through outcomes that reflect the input they have had. They want their interests, expectations and ideas to be embraced, and their emerging capacity for leadership to be nurtured.

For young people today, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to be one of the most formative experiences of their lives, significantly redefining their outlook and opportunities.

Globally, we know the impact of this pandemic is affecting everyone either socially, economically and/or politically. Children and young people, and young adults in particular, have felt the effects of the crisis in unique ways. The impact the global pandemic and accompanying global recession has had on their lives, both now and into the future, cannot be underestimated.

On 15 March 2020, when South Australia's Premier Steven Marshall, declared a Public Health Emergency due to COVID-19, our communities were changed overnight. We were literally shaken from our routines so that our daily lives could no longer be considered 'normal'. We had to act quickly, changing the ways we work, learn and play to prevent the deadly pandemic from spreading. But whilst COVID-19 brought with it unique and unprecedented challenges, perhaps what was more surprising was the innovation, adaptation, and appetite for change that also emerged.

As new ways of doing things were developed, it became apparent that young peoples' views were not being included in the growing discourse that arose around COVID-19. Much of the national and state debate at the height of the pandemic focused on their attendance at school rather than facilitating a dialogue with children and young people about what was happening to their lives.

As my remit is to position children and young people's interests, development and wellbeing front and centre in public policy and community life, I advocate to decision-makers for changes to laws, policy, systems and practices that favour our children and young people.

With the arrival of COVID-19 my advocacy work has become even more important, leading me to move my direct engagement with young people online. This has given me an opportunity to look at the different mechanisms I use to hear directly from young South Australians and adapt these to suit the COVID-19 conditions, particularly in relation to the impact of social isolation during the period from mid-March to the end of May.

I have connected with more than 300 young people from diverse backgrounds during this time. I wanted to hear their thoughts, listen to their suggestions and capture their reflections during the time of COVID-19. Gathering their collective stories through various consultations and conversations, and via a journaling project they embraced with great enthusiasm, has helped me to better understand their unique experience of the pandemic. This report is a collection of their reflections. It is drawn from young people's own views, highlighting the key themes that arose from a diversity of perspectives captured over this ten week period.

In this defining moment, I see a significant opportunity for change; one that involves young people's ideas and aspirations in plans for our post-COVID-19 response and allows them to take their

place as valued citizens, contributing in meaningful ways to creation of a better future than the one previously envisaged.

Our young people must be connected, engaged and able to participate in society. They are calling upon us to take a sharper focus through a lens that integrates economic, social and environmental issues with their input and ideas.

They want respect shown for future generations, challenging those with 'short termism' to apply sharper thinking which considers the impact post-COVID-19 decisions will have on future generations of young South Australians – not just those alive now.

The reflections describe the immediate social and economic impact the pandemic has had on young people as well as their fears that the recovery might further entrench existing power imbalances and inequities. It includes their hopes and ideas for what 'a post-COVID future' could be.

As we move to develop a state response to the pandemic, we need to fully consider the complexities and disruptions the pandemic has had on this generation of young people. We need to include their ideas and opinions so that their hopes for what the 'new normal' might look like in a post-COVID-19 world resonates strongly with their ideas. If it doesn't, we risk embedding a discontent that will amplify over time and lead to distrust, frustration and an increasing level of disenfranchisement.

The reflections expressed in the following pages are as diverse and varied as the young people themselves who contributed them. There are some consistent themes, but overall the sentiment of young South Australians is perhaps best expressed in the words of 16 year old Brayden:

“ *I never expected a health crisis to affect every aspect of my life other than my health.* ”

## Why Listen to Young People?

The reflections contained in this report are primarily those of young people, rather than children. Due to the challenges that come with safely and independently engaging with children online, our insights into the impact of COVID-19 on children under 13 years of age have come from older brothers and sisters, parents, community volunteers and community workers who have been supporting them.

Although children have not been 'the face' of the pandemic, and have largely been spared from the worst of the direct health effects the coronavirus can have, it does not mean their wellbeing has not been indirectly impacted in other ways.

For those children who are doing it tough, or who live in low income households – including those whose families have recently become more vulnerable due to the loss of jobs and income – the increased stress could potentially have long term and lasting impact on health and education outcomes.

We know that every down turn in the economy increases the number of people who face financial and social vulnerability. Over time this can manifest in a range of different ways such as evictions, mortgage defaults, family violence, child protection concerns, drug and alcohol issues, mental illness and physical health concerns, as well as parent/child conflict that for some young people can lead to the need to leave home much earlier than they perhaps would have done otherwise.

While the focus of these potential issues and outcomes has mainly been on the impact they have on adults living within family units, it would be a mistake to ignore the impact they may have on children in these same units, particularly if the fallout of COVID-19 continues to be felt over the longer term as many have predicted it will.

The impact on young children in these family units might therefore be far reaching. Research has shown that chronic stress and adversity can affect relationships and

bonds between children and their parents/carers, and that in turn this can affect the child's ability to regulate their emotions, manage stress in healthy ways, or organise their thinking. Developing these abilities enables children to acquire the essential building blocks they need to engage with and succeed at school.

The Australian Institute for Health and Wellbeing (AIHW) has reported that the Australian Early Development Census data has shown that prior to COVID-19, approximately 20% of Australian children were consistently either missing out or falling behind in their development milestones before starting school, with this data shown to strongly predict later health, wellbeing and academic success.<sup>1</sup>

Tracking of this same data in South Australia has shown a steady decline in results. These outcomes have not been contained only to low income families, but have been a factor for children across a range of households. Given the increase in the number of vulnerable families there are now, it is not too much of a stretch to predict that these outcomes are likely to worsen.

Whilst potential impacts of this kind have a long lead time and are yet to materialise, there have been more direct impacts of COVID-19 on the lives of children this year.

According to UNICEF Australia, 47% more children are experiencing anxiety as a result of COVID-19. Children are greatly influenced, not only by what they experience and see, but also by what they hear being said around them. They pick up on the unrelenting media commentary and

general family and community conversations about the crisis. This plays out in their fears, concerns and day to day worries. They frequently speak about pressure on their parents, teachers and community leaders, as well as the worry they have for these adults and the subsequent fears that come with loss of jobs and homes, holidays, activities, and family and community celebrations that they could have ordinarily expected to have enjoyed – from play dates with friends to spending time with grandparents.

Although face-to-face education in South Australia experienced minimal disruption in comparison to other states, there were children who did move to distance learning for a variety of reasons, often actively encouraged by individual schools and/or families who for health concerns needed to protect their children and/or other family members, from any risk of exposure to the coronavirus.

The COVID-19 experience has compounded the divide between the children who have access to computers and the internet and those who don't. The shift to online learning highlighted the emergence of digital poverty as a significant issue for some children and families. Lack of uninterrupted access to WiFi or to a device, impacted on children's capacity to participate, not only in their education, but also in important social activities and health services. We heard that in families with only one device, or with limited or no WiFi access, children found it virtually impossible to engage and participate in a range of critical educational, social and health services. This in turn has had an impact on these children's emotional health. Those with secure, encouraging and safe homes, where jobs and income are secure, and where access to food and learning resources has not really changed are doing okay. Those for whom these essentials are either limited or no longer available are not.

But more than the disruption to learning that not going to school, attending sport or hanging out with friends has had on those who were already considered vulnerable before the pandemic, is the impact felt by those families where parents are now jobless as a result of COVID-19. These children are emerging as the 'newly vulnerable' whose situations have worsened in ways they've not

previously known, and who perhaps are finding it more difficult to understand because they have entered uncharted territory coping with the extra stress this must inevitably cause the adults in their lives.

School is known to be both a protective factor and safety net for many children, particularly those living with disabilities, in poverty, who have care responsibilities or are suffering with mental health issues. For these children and young people and their families, school can often be their only way of accessing activities and opportunities that make and shape who they are as individuals. Attending school makes their lives more normal while supporting their sense of identity and bringing experiences of achievement and mastery, along with joy and happiness, into their lives.

School is also the place where they have relationships with friends, class mates, team mates, teachers and counsellors, all of whom make a difference to their lives. Many children and young people often tell me about the teacher who has helped them learn, and who by doing so changed their ideas about the kind of future they could have. Others have talked about the friend who has always been there for them, or the sports teacher or drama coach who went out of their way to ensure they could attend the extra curriculum activity they enjoy.

These are the connections that are especially important when you don't have a strong role model through a parent or other adult at home, and who for whatever reason, just can't be there for you. The loss of school and the relationships structure and routine it provides children must be acknowledged.

Likewise the loss of sport has been significant for many children. The protective aspects and value of sport and sporting clubs on the physical, emotional and mental health and well-being of children and young people is well understood, as is the general life-skill development participation in sport provides.

For children sport offers fun, friendship, fitness, healthy rivalry and competition, sense of achievement and success, of belonging – either as a member of a team



or as a fan – and the development of foundational skills that will allow those who dream of becoming sport professionals to reach their goal. The importance of sport in the lives of children and young people is palpable. Likewise, the simple enjoyment sport offers to connect with people children care about in a fun and frivolous way, through playing a game or just interacting with each other at training, provides an outlet through which to test and share ideas and concerns. There is often a direct relationship between hanging out having fun and feeling good and/or needing to debrief.

For children and young people, participating in sport is also about community connectedness, positive peer relationships, future focus and optimism, as well as social acceptance and increased self-esteem that can help to reduce or manage any feelings of depression and anxiety.

When sport is unavailable a large part of a child's sense of identity is diminished, as is their opportunity for enjoyment of life. Whilst for many this loss will be temporary, for others who face new financial challenges the impact of reduced incomes on their capacity to access sport could be enduring. Lower or no income will mean many families will have to forego their children's participation in sport and other extra-curricular activities such as music or dance lessons. Fees will inevitably place these activities out of reach, particularly when the costs of transport, uniforms and other equipment are factored in.

The impact of COVID-19 on children and young people is real and needs to be acknowledged by those who love and care for them at the family, community and systems level. We need to have direct and genuine conversations with children and young people about those things they say matter most to them. There is an opportunity for community leaders to build social trust with a whole generation of children and young people by listening to their concerns. By being inclusive of all citizens, and by empathising with and validating their experiences they will know that we have their best interests at heart.

Perhaps what is most striking about conversations I have had with young South Australians from very different backgrounds and with varied life experiences is the

common values they share. The majority of young people repeatedly tell me that what they want is for governments to implement legislation, plans and strategies that promote four key values: inclusion, diversity, kindness and trust.

These four key values shape the ways in which young people engage with services, businesses, governments, educational institutions, sporting clubs, religious organisations and civic spaces (or indeed with any aspect of their lives). They want to help the most vulnerable and support those who are doing it tough. They want to ensure everyone has a home, and allow everyone to believe what they want to believe without fear of being judged or treated differently by others.

Young people have said they want to be able to trust leaders and representatives. They want to trust their governments and to have faith in their effectiveness. They see trust in institutions as an extension of trust in individuals, and as a foundation for building strong and resilient communities.

They believe any post COVID-19 planning undertaken by government, business and the community, should seek to build trust between adults and young people, laying the foundations for a safe and worthwhile exchange that engages them in authentic ways beyond immediate concerns and over the long term.

Whilst adults have numerous opportunities to provide their feedback on almost every aspect of their lives, either as a citizen, parent, worker or customer – either in person or online – these opportunities do not map equally onto the lives of Australia's young people. Avenues for feedback from children and young people are often perceived and experienced by them as inappropriate, unsafe, diminished and in some cases non-existent.

The words inclusion and diversity have been co-opted by the human resources industry, but these terms have very different meanings to young people. Children and young people define inclusion in relation to opportunities made available regardless of economic or cultural background, ability, geographical location, gender, or ethnicity.



More so than perhaps any other generation before them, today's young people are acutely aware of the diversity that exists amongst their peers, both in South Australia and around the world. They are the first truly global generation, made up of young people who value diversity and place huge importance on each person's fundamental right to determine their own identity. They also understand that there is no true 'normal Australian'. Instead they know that there are thousands of ways to be a unique and valued member of the Australian community.

Children and young people want an Australia that truly reflects the diversity they see around them. They want more multicultural and queer friendly youth spaces. They want more diverse representation of society reflected in politics, and amongst those in leadership roles across their communities.

Before the arrival of COVID-19, leaders in cities across the globe were recognising young people as their city's greatest asset and untapped resource. According to the Youthful Cities Global Index Report 2015, 'young people are the secret sauce for future growth – possessing both economic and social currency – who if supported, will crack the code on what it takes to create a liveable, smart, and innovative city'. Young people want their communities to be vibrant and exciting. They have described a future vision for South Australia as youthful – one that is confident, creative and connected – a place that welcomes and values its young people.

A COVID-19 recovery that is sensitive and responsive to the broad values of inclusion and diversity will help to ensure that policies and programs designed to increase the economic, social and cultural capital of South Australians will find success amongst children and young people. When adult decision-makers get the values of inclusion and diversity right, children and young people engage with their services; they return to explore pathways and benefits that are intended to support them.

If decision-makers can commit to providing the right kind of opportunities for children and young people, then recovery for the whole state will be possible. Getting children and young people on board with the changes needed to steer South Australia toward a healthy and sustainable future – particularly changes designed to benefit them – will simultaneously support the needs of government, business, and the wider community.

But before we can confidently invest in our children's and young people's futures, we need to take time to understand their concerns, and consider their reflections on what living through South Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has so far been like for them.

**'While I was video calling with teachers every lesson and being given constant support, my brother's school was struggling to maintain regular contact with their students. Moreover, for some students at his school, they couldn't access the stable internet connection and technological resources my brother and I are lucky enough to have.' (Holly, 16)**





# Reflections



# Hopeless and Helpless

“ ‘Having been only a few years old during the global financial crisis, I’ll now live through a second world economic crisis after COVID-19. As a young person, I will have less financial safety nets than other generations, so I am more likely to struggle to gain secure employment and a liveable income in a world recovering from COVID-19.’ (16 year old)

In addition to the global impact of the pandemic, the lives and aspirations of South Australian young people have been disrupted in complex and diverse ways. They shared their experiences of having their plans disrupted and the impact that social distancing and social isolation has had on their sense of optimism for the future.

The loss of social safety nets and connections has not only made it difficult for some young people to feel hopeful, it has also highlighted a divide that exists between those who were just surviving and those who were mostly thriving prior to the pandemic.

Many young people said they believed the long-term social and economic impact of COVID-19 would be felt well into the future, and that this would have a disproportionate affect not only on their generation but also on the one that follows them.

Many young people are also worried about how the crisis has highlighted and exacerbated existing inequalities and power imbalances, with other macro concerns including the short and long term impact the pandemic will have on jobs, on government decisions to rebuild the economy, and on other critical global issues of inequality and climate change.

“ ‘Because coronavirus has taken the world front and centre, less attention is given to other equally important issues such as refugees and climate change.’ (16 year old)

Many other young people reflected on the impact the pandemic has had at a personal and community level. They describe their experiences of the digital divide, of relationship stress, declining aspirations, and lost social, economic and community participation. For some this has led to feelings of helplessness, hopelessness, and living in what they describe as a ‘surviving space’ where it was difficult to see ‘the point in living’ at all.

Others were concerned about their inability to have influence over, or be included in, the decisions being made in relation to the recovery phase. Some young people described these concerns as feeling ignored and ‘cut off’ from information and decision-making.

**'In terms of my future, as a year 12 student, I do think that COVID-19 will impact my future and the rest of my life, and the next few years. It has already impacted my final year of school, not just in terms of my education, but simply enjoying year 12 and everything that comes with it. I have missed so many opportunities that would have been amazing but unfortunately, I'll never get to have those memories.'** (Amy, 16)

They explained that they didn't feel seen, heard or understood by community leaders. Many described their reliance on family, friends, teachers, and other community members as their most trusted sources of information and reassurance. Particularly as no other 'official' information or communication was being directed or tailored to them. The consistent message they heard was 'just go to school, put up with it and shut up'.

“ 'In all truth, not much of what was broadcasted gave me reassurance at all. I found my encouragement though myself, my family and my teacher's.'  
(17 year old)

“ 'I have been staying away from media and public speaking. Nowadays the media can easily be twisted no matter which way you look at it so I tend to keep a tight knit relationship with my teachers and family and one to 2 friends that I know will help me improve as well as keep my life balanced. Knowing who you can trust to not just say your fine and help you out when your wrong or right is really helpful.'  
(14 year old)

Levels of trust in politicians and the government varied. Some young people reported that they had gained more trust in the Australian government during this time of crisis finding reassurance in the premier, the state and federal medical officers, as well as in the World Health Organisation, through websites, apps and social media updates.

“ 'I have mainly received my news about COVID-19 from the TV, so hearing updates from the CMO and federal politicians about the Australian situation has been reassuring. I have found myself giving much more attention and trust to the Prime Minister during the crisis compared to before.' (15 year old)

A significant number of young people found overseas politicians reassuring, describing them as 'knowing what they're doing' and providing 'sensible and compassionate' responses.

While some young people thought that celebrities were 'out of touch', others found comfort in the online presence of celebrity role models, particularly musicians and sports stars. Others mentioned social media, Youtube channels, comedians, books, independent journalists and news channels as key sources of information and reassurance.

# Identity and Opportunities

“ ‘As a year 12 student, I almost feel robbed. It feels as if the best year of our lives where we become independent, get our P’s, socialise and have fun, is gone. Although I know that quarantine/isolation will not last forever and am fully aware of how serious the issue is, and how important social distancing is it still does make me quite sad.’ (17 year old)

For most young people, becoming an adult brings uncertainty and challenges, raising questions like ‘what am I going to do’, ‘where am I going to live’ and ‘what path am I going to take’. Although the COVID-19 pandemic and our response to it hasn’t changed everything, it has shifted the goal posts and made the pathway to the future for young people, more winding, shaky and uneven. For some, this is a setback while they find their feet. For others it will have lasting and profound effects on their sense of identity and ability to live independently.

For many young people, the way they measure their personal success is by reaching milestones they have set themselves along the way, such as attending their graduation ceremony or pursuing travel plans during a gap year. Given many of these milestones have either been removed, delayed, reduced or worse cancelled, some young people are struggling to mark out new pathways that will bring them the same sense of achievement these would have provided.

Many young people have had to fully re-evaluate their expectations and goals. As many of the activities, relationships and places that are central to their lives were disrupted, many young people

described feeling further away from their hopes and dreams. From getting through high school, finishing year 12 and gaining work experience, to starting university or an apprenticeship, the impact of COVID-19 has cast doubt and uncertainty over plans that seemed entirely possible at the beginning of 2020. A few young people spoke about the impacts of their own job losses or job losses in their family, and the uncertainty and stress this placed on their ability to make future plans.

For some young people, having opportunities to access stable and secure employment both now and into the future is crucial to their wellbeing. For those who lost work or lost work hours, the impact was immediate. For others, the concerns were not around jobs not being available to them now, so much as what the future might now offer, including lost opportunities to pursue a meaningful and successful career.

In fact, the fear of not being able to access stable, safe and secure work opportunities was the biggest concern young people have for the future. Many worry about unemployment, underemployment and the kinds of jobs that will be available to them when they graduate. They worry about ‘how things will work out’ and how they will stay motivated to be successful in their studies to meet their personal career goals. They’re also concerned about whether their education is equipping them with the skills and knowledge they need to adapt to rapid changes and uncertainty.

They talked about the impact COVID-19 disruptions were having on their short-term and long-term aspirations; their school education, university course offerings, and on 2021 university admissions.

**'Most importantly, I lost my job as a retail worker. I was working to pay my fees, now honestly I am not sure how I will be able to pay my fees. This is something many students have as a big issue because of the pandemic especially international and those domestic students with non-humanitarian visas.'** (Fatima, 22)

They wanted to feel prepared for what was ahead, to have safe and secure job opportunities now and in the future, to enjoy strong relationships with their peers and families, as well as affordable housing and healthcare. Young people talked about how they want their rights and opportunities to participate in education, society and the economy to be protected in a post-COVID-19 world.

“ A few days ago, my friends and I had a conversation about our future dreams, and it was confronting to hear every one of us describe how being able to afford to live is something we aspire to. Each of us described how affording a house of our own was an added bonus. I am concerned about whether young people will be able to find employment and afford basic necessities after being hit by the economic impacts of COVID-19. Even before COVID-19, young people were financially disadvantaged and had higher rates of unemployment than other demographics. However, now COVID-19 will exacerbate these challenges.’ (16 year old)

Many young people also discussed their concerns in relation to disruption to the opportunities they considered central to gaining independence. These included opportunities to travel, to live independently, and to get a driver's licence. For many young people, travel represents more than a holiday or recreational activity. For some it is a rite of passage that forms part of a transition to adulthood. For those with families of origin in other parts of the world, travel is about connecting to extended family and culture, and a key part of

developing personal identity. Others talked about travel as a means of maintaining relationships with friends and family who live far away, or pursuing study or work opportunities interstate or overseas. The restrictions on domestic travel, the lock down of borders and the uncertainty around when overseas travel will go back to normal, has had a significant impact on many young people.

Some young people felt too that the impact COVID-19 has had on their relationships with friends, family and the community has been understated due to perceptions about their significant competency with technology and their ability to connect via social media.

Others were concerned about the disproportionate emphasis being placed on young people in the media, particularly when held up as examples of Australians who are not taking COVID-19 seriously. Most young people shared a clear understanding that physical distancing restrictions and the sacrifices they are making are necessary for the health and safety of the whole community, particularly those who are most vulnerable.

“ ‘It limited socializing, but that is just a part of what needs to be done.’ (15 year old)

“ ‘I want to go clubbing again! But I understand if that doesn't happen because of health concerns.’ (21 year old)

# Participation and Motivation

“ From the extracurricular activities and opportunities to seek leadership events, all things are shut off temporarily. However, now is a crucial time, for those reaching high school or perhaps finishing high school. All our opportunities to grow and expand are shut off. It is quite worrying to think of our future as a generation taking over the workforce in the coming years. That we may not be prepared or have completed the activities we planned to achieve to add onto our experiences, before we reach the stage, where we begin applying for jobs or taking tests which could determine our standing for the rest of our lives. It is worrying to think that we may not be fully equipped, and that it is not completely under our control.’ (14 year old)

For many young people, their long-term study, work, travel and relationship aspirations are closely linked to their feelings and experiences of having a sense of purpose and meaning in their lives.

This sense of purpose is usually built through connection and engagement with something bigger than oneself, or through one’s family -

something that provides a sense of achievement, of being understood, valued and known, and of having voice and influence. For many young people this sense of purpose is found through work or volunteering, or through sport and social and creative activities.

Participation is crucial to the physical and mental health and wellbeing of young people. It relieves stress and brings balance, structure and motivation to their daily and weekly routine. It is also a source of fun and social connection, providing opportunities for young people to develop skills and to lead. Participation is about much more than being entertained or not being bored. Many young people define themselves and their success by what they ‘do’ in their volunteering roles, through sport, at work, or via extracurricular activities and social and cultural events they participate in.

The suspension, postponement, loss and disruption to our social and economic lives, has impacted significantly on young people’s capacity to participate. For many young people, losing these opportunities means losing a key part of their

‘Being an Indigenous youth, family is something very important to my culture. It’s hard specifically to catch up with these family members as often they don’t know how to use current technology to do things such as video call. Other family members often live far away and make the trip to Adelaide for special events.’ (Jayde, 18)



identity. Losing access to physical places where they feel safe and can express themselves freely, as well as losing vital connections with people they trust, can be profoundly unsettling, with many reflecting on the negative implications COVID-19 has had on their routine, motivation, connections, wellbeing and future aspirations.

While COVID-19 has disrupted commitments and connections that provide many young people with familiarity and routine, these changes have not necessarily all been negative. Some young people described positive changes in the ways they thought about 'life' – from studying and working to socialising and relaxing. For some, spending more time at home was a chance to learn more about themselves, manage their time better, and discover how and where they work best. Others described the slowing down of society as providing a much needed 'pause' that enabled them to reflect on the things that mattered most to them, including the people that bring them happiness and the opportunity it gave them to catch up on the things they normally struggled to make time for, such as getting more rest and exercise.

“ ‘Yes, it has forced me to structure my day and week with much more rigour to retain a productive routine. As a result, I have become more focused on how I spend my time, what I'm doing, and what I can do now to better get where I want to be.’ (18 year old)

“ ‘I've been able to focus on myself more, being able to get good sleep, exercise in the mornings, eat better, and have a better mental state overall. I did miss my friends and found it hard to be around the same people every day, as well as not being able to go to places, although it was still beneficial (aside from 'stopping the spread') to stay at home.’ (15 year old)

Positive impacts mainly related to a young person's ability to cope and stay connected with their learning and with others. Many recognised that this was largely due to the easy digital access they enjoyed and to the safe and supportive home environments in which they lived. They also knew this was not the case for everyone, and that they enjoyed 'privileged' lives in comparison to some others.

**‘While COVID-19 will undoubtedly have impacted many more people in much more significant ways, including both physical and mental health, as well as academic performance, the crippling of campus culture has been the one thing that has impacted me the most.’ (Felix, 20)**



'For the first couple days I felt very doom & gloom. My anxiety was through the roof and I had to start seeing my psych again (over zoom of course!). However, as more time passes I realize I haven't lost all those things; they've just been put on pause. My biggest concern now is that all those connections I spent the past year forging will disappear, professional and social. I fear being forgotten.' (Annie, 21)



# Relationships and Connections

“While I have probably become more distanced between my closest friends, I have managed to strengthen old friends whom I never had time to catch up with. My relationship with my parents and family have been through some tensions due to health concerns and some due to economic stress. In some ways, my relationship with my parents has become stronger due to spending more time with just them. Since my grandparents and most of my family lives in America and South America, I have started to reflect more about my relationships with them and how I need to make more of an effort to stay communicated despite the distance.” (16 year old)

Physical distancing and the closure of public places where young people would usually hang out to have fun, dance, be creative or study together, has changed the nature of young people's relationships with their friends, family, partners and teachers. It has also limited the opportunities young people have had to connect with others, and to build or strengthen new social and professional relationships through their attendance of social events, being on a university campus, or dating.

Young people reported that feeling less connected with others and the community was the most significant impact COVID-19 has had on their relationships. Others described how physical distancing and isolation has had a significant impact on the intimacy of their friendships and romantic relationships. They described the challenges of being separated from the people

they love, particularly friends or relatives who live interstate or overseas, and those who are elderly or unwell, as immense. For young people whose romantic relationships occur within the parameters of parental influence, it has been difficult to stay connected to partners.

Many young people have mixed feelings about the impact of COVID-19 on their relationships. Some felt they had drifted away from their friends but had become more connected to their families. For others, their relationships with close friends had become stronger, while their family relationships had become more strained and tense. Many young people reflected on the positive and negative complexity of these impacts.

“I have been unable to physically connect with my girlfriend or any tentative friends I have made at uni. But I have gotten in touch with old friends. So I suppose it hasn't been good or bad but a mixture of both.” (18 year old)

Young people said that some of their relationships had become more tense during the pandemic due to living in closer proximity to certain people than ever before, or conversely being more distanced from certain people than ever before. This increase in tension in relationships was more commonly reported by young women.

“Tensions are much higher in my household and people get angry at each other quicker” (15 year old)

Others talked about becoming more conscious of and grateful for their relationships. Many gained a greater appreciation for the natural face-to-face connections and unplanned social interactions they had had with friends, family, teachers and other community members; interactions that occurred in important offline places – at school, through work, or playing sport – and which cannot be replicated in online learning or social situations. Many were also grateful that things had not changed too dramatically in South Australia, particularly when compared with other places. This knowledge added to a general sense of hope that isolation would be temporary, that things 'might work out' and that the world would 'actually come out of the pandemic better than when it went into it'.

“ ‘This crisis has made me value my relationships much more because I’ve realised just how much being able to have a conversation with a friend in-person means to me. It’s also made me realise how much we rely on visual cues like body language in communication, as communicating online has significantly depleted these cues.’ (16 year old)

Some young people were grateful for the lessons they had learned at a personal level about how they define themselves, how they relate to other people, and how they would like to work in the future. Others were hopeful that this moment would

be a chance to think about issues differently and approach them in a new way on a global as well as local scale.

The loss of physical and offline connections with peers, teachers and other trusted adults, however, has been a concern for many young people. They worry about whether these connections will return in the same way, and what this means for their lives if they don't.

“ ‘I am most concerned with the lack of physical attendance in all manner of interactions. In the future, most things will be done through camera the discovery of such is occurring now. In the future, companies can hire without a physical interview, they can do so online without interactions. We have already seen teachers without interactions through the online school, I fear that everything will be from home making us lazy and unproductive in comfort.’ (17 year old)

Others are worried about losing access to the things they consider central to their physical and mental health and wellbeing. Those who had struggled with mental health in the past and who felt they were coping well prior to the pandemic, talked about the fear and worry they had that some of the issues they faced previously would return, causing their health to spiral downwards.

**‘I see that this pandemic will completely change the future, altering hygiene practices, the implementation of more contactless work, travelling restrictions and much more. Sadly, there is always the chance that we may just be living in the ‘did you know’ bubble in our grandchildren’s history book, not on a whole page/chapter. Overall, I feel that this COVID-19 crisis, if not itself remembered, will be accredited for having been a significant cause/catalyst for many of the events of our near/distant future.’ (Harry, 16)**



'The impacts on the current public health crisis on my life have been all of my social outlets either being cancelled or moved to online forms. Other social things I participate in like my volunteer work with encounter youth green team has also been put on hold which means that once again another social element of my life is gone as this is not something that can be moved to an online platform due to the nature of the volunteer work.' (Kirsty, 20)

# Access and Inequality

- “ ‘I think education for all school-children is very important, as it was frustrating to see how students in the public vs private sector in different schools across Australia had very differences experiences with online learning.’ (15 year old)
- “ ‘There are still a lot of students who are studying from home, many because they or their families are at risk of COVID-19. These students have restricted learning resources (eg. teachers, engagement in class) and this could negatively impact their learning.’ (14 year old)

In the twenty-first century, a young person's ability to maintain relationships, to be engaged in their education, and to access information and future study or employment opportunities, depends largely on digital access. Although this was the case prior to the pandemic, the impact limited digital access has had on some young people has been felt more deeply, as COVID-19 has increasingly forced education, work and social environments to move online.

Many young people explained that digital access was central to how they were coping, enabling them to access information and stay connected with others and with their learning. They talked about the disproportionate impact the coronavirus has had on relationships with those who did not have stable digital access compared to those who did. Many worry that the pandemic has widened existing inequalities and the digital divide between societies' most and least vulnerable people.

Without access to critical digital infrastructure through schools, libraries and other safe physical spaces, many young people were unable to

remained connected, or receive information that enabled them to continue to participate socially and economically.

Young people spoke about a lack of resources and the challenges that sharing laptops presented during COVID-19, including how this created the need for them to buy their own laptop and computer equipment to enable them to work or learn from home. Many talked about sharing an unstable internet connection with several others in a household, and the impact this had on their engagement with their education. Some described being unable to complete tests or tasks at home, and being unable to access libraries or other places that they would usually go to access computers and Wi-Fi.

- “ ‘My mum works at home now and having the both of us on zoom sometimes when I'm in a meeting with my uni I've found that it isn't that great and the audio isn't too great and always comes up with 'Poor connection' (16 year old)

Sports clubs, schools and universities provide a safe physical environment where young people can feel connected and supported. They are places where they can feel a sense of belonging and purpose, form relationships, collaborate with peers and communicate with people they trust. For those who do not have digital access, the loss of access to these safe physical spaces, face-to-face appointments, and offline learning environments, has meant significant loss of physical connection and access to support from trusted adults.

Even among those who do have digital access, there was agreement that both informal and formal support networks are difficult to replace online.



**'Will the world's future change? I hope so. What's the point of a crippling and devastating pandemic if you don't use it for good afterwards? COVID-19 has not been a political thing in and of itself; it's a virus. It has no political motivations.'** (Amelia, 20)

One of the key messages received was that online and digital connection is 'just not the same' as connecting with people in person.

Others reflected on how the economic impacts of COVID-19 have been so widespread that this has changed their attitude and somewhat challenged old assumptions about issues like unemployment, mental health and government support. Young people talked about the importance of extending increased financial support from the government beyond the immediate crisis. Some young people talked about the difficulty accessing any support at all.

“ 'I feel like mental health support for young people has always been lacking but especially now during this pandemic. There's so much talk by politicians about people who 'have never experience mental health issues before' and how hard it'll be for them. Hell they've even applied the same rhetoric to people who are now unemployed! It almost feels as if there are us people who deal with these issues every day and then there are special people who, because they've never had to suffer from mental illness, deserve extra attention and treatment because gosh dang it's not their fault! Same with people on centerlink: there are bad unemployed people from before the pandemic and good unemployed people because of current events.' (17 year old)

Many young people are also concerned about growing inequalities, racism, and increasing costs of living. They worry about what this means for their long-term capacity to afford the basics, and how they will handle future issues knowing how this

will impact on their health and the health of the whole community and world. Young people not only reflected on their own freedoms and rights, they also considered the freedoms and rights of the most vulnerable people in Australia and overseas. They were worried that growing inequality and any repealing of rights was likely to affect already marginalised communities.

“ 'How will we handle future issues, not just limited to a pandemic. Whether it's bushfires or any other natural disasters, possibly an introduced superbug, anything that could cause panic, how would we be handling that? What precautions have already been set to prevent people from losing business and their lives? What will be done to protect people that are effected, if there is a superbug how can we deal with such a thing?' (16 year old)

“ 'Looking into the future, I am concerned about increasing income and social inequality creating an unnecessary divide in living standard in Australia. I am also concerned about a return to selfishness in politics where experts and evidence are disregarded to suck up to special interest groups.' (18 year old)

Young people want to protect a child's right to access education, to attend school and to go to school gatherings. This includes having equal access to online learning and to more flexible study and work options. They also want the option of going on to university, finding fulltime employment, and accessing affordable housing.



## The Way Forward

South Australia has been an international leader in its COVID-19 response. We can now be a leader in how we manage our post-COVID-19 future and invest in the wellbeing of South Australian children and young people – our future leaders and decision-makers.

The impact of the global pandemic has highlighted to us all how complex and interconnected the social and economic worlds we rely upon are. Many of the systems we had previously taken for granted, which seemed so certain and durable just a few months ago, now seem fragile and tenuous.

Indeed, every aspect of our daily routines and patterns of living have been greatly affected. A recovery by its very nature never returns the new state-of-affairs to exactly how things were before. Even if this were possible it is not necessarily desirable, as it can rob us of the opportunity to challenge previous assumptions, address inefficiencies and inequalities, and in this case, ultimately deprive us of the chance to look with fresh eyes at the ways in which we plan, create and sustain our whole economy and society.

We must search for ways of reducing inequality and ensuring every child has access to quality child care and early learning, as well as to education and health services, and a decent home and family income. We know that wellbeing and care outcomes for children are linked to this kind of investment.

To help ensure 'all children start school ready to learn and leave the education system equipped for life', we want our State to appeal to our young people, encouraging them to build their lives here, share their youthfulness and vitality in ways we haven't yet thought of, and contribute to building a future that is both vibrant and relevant to them.

The ideas conveyed in this report have implications for leaders, decision-makers and public policy influencers at both the state and local community levels, including the need to create more opportunities for young people to have direct input into shaping the future they have imagined in meaningful and practical ways.

Young people have spoken about wanting to develop the relevant skills that will equip them for the future. To acquire these skills there needs to be a more flexible approach taken to learning, like the one that has been tested and proven viable during the pandemic. Options for remote learning, flexible timetables and less rigidity around the requirements for academic success have all proven achievable and acceptable over the last few months.

**'Racism has become disgustingly more prevalent all across Australia, I honestly feel empathetic for the people who look like they are from an Asian background with many calling it the 'China Virus', this doesn't help anyone. Perhaps when this pandemic is over the government could put some funding towards educating uneducated Australians that have no cultural understanding or knowledge to spread awareness on the impacts of racist remarks.'** (Brayden, 20)

If we modify the education system to make it more responsive to individual learning styles and open to young people learning from life experiences outside the campus, we will have developed an approach to learning that is much more conducive to building trust and respect between teachers and students while simultaneously be enhancing the economic capital of young South Australians.

If we want to grow confident, creative, and connected young people who are able to participate in society, we need to grow jobs, employment and participation opportunities that come from within their own communities. We need to look closely at the work and career ecosystems we put in place to do this, and with direct input from them. The disjointed approach we currently use, just won't get us there.

To 'build back better' in SA, we need to develop a model of economic and jobs growth that ensures young people are not only prioritised, but included in strategies developed. They need to be invited to sit at the table, so they can actively contribute to and benefit from 'the new future' in whatever form it takes.

As leaders across all sectors plot the way forward for our collective recovery, we should be asking ourselves what it would look like if we put policies in place that are responsive to the things young people have told us they need to succeed.

We know South Australia's young people want to be capable, engaged, energised and optimistic young citizens. They have told us they want to live in kind communities and engage with institutions and organisations that are receptive to their feedback, and which value inclusiveness and diversity. We also know they want access to a range of opportunities that will enable them to be happy and successful on their own terms.

Many of the hopes young people spoke about during this early COVID-19 period, relate to what they believe will bring them the success and independence they seek. They want a safe and secure job, the opportunity to live a 'normal life' and to become what they want to become. These hopes for success and independence are tied to their education, to volunteering, to work experience, and to their relationships with the family, friends and community, who form their support networks.

- “ ‘Getting a good job that I enjoy and want to become professional at. Finishing school happily. Getting into the course I want. Having good support from family and friends. Being successful in my field.’ (15 year old)
- “ ‘My biggest hopes for the future is to have strong relationships and to be safe.’ (14 year old)

At a broader community level, young people want to see kindness, more equality, more listening and more trust in the world. Their desire for greater mutual respect and for equality and fairness underpins many of the changes they want to see made in their own lives. Along with ensuring all children receive a quality education, and that those doing it tough are well supported, they want discrimination and racism to be eliminated, homes that are much more affordable, and equal access to digital technology for all.

Though still aware of the digital divide, many young people appreciate the increased flexibility and accessibility that online learning, work, and health appointments can provide. They want to see flexible access options continued, particularly those that can maximise and normalise active inclusion, participation and engagement by young people living with disability and chronic illness.

Conversely many are worried that the gains in social inclusion that young people living with disability or chronic illness have made, will be lost. These gains had seemed impossible before the pandemic but now, quite suddenly, have proven achievable.

Young people want an education system that places greater emphasis on nurturing individuality; a system that allows them to pursue their own passions and interests through more self-directed learning. This includes courses that develop the relevant life skills they'll need for the future along with a more varied approach taken to learning; much like that proven viable throughout the lockdown, which offered students options for remote learning and more flexible timetables. An education system which is responsive to individual learning styles and open to young people learning from life experience outside the campus, will be more conducive to developing trusting and respectful relationships between teachers and students.

- “ ‘I think life at school would be better if there was a way for us to negotiate with teachers about things like where we sit and why...I think life at home for kids would be better if people were able to meet up with people

**‘My plan before the crisis was to move interstate for study, and find a part time job, as well as renting my own apartment. However with the restrictions in place and unclear university admissions this may not be possible. There has been a lot of speculation on how universities will continue to run, especially with the absence of international students which is creating a lot of anxiety especially because the course I intend to enrol in is extremely competitive’ (Tyler, 17)**

*from school to do homework. I think life in the whole world would be better if we could connect/communicate with people from other places/countries. Then we could walk a mile in another's shoes or see it through another's eyes'.*

During the last decade or more there has been significant levels of consciousness raising around mental health, particularly in relation to Australia's young people for whom it is widely acknowledged there is a 'mental health crisis'. Young people across South Australia have described accessing the mental health care system as a hit-and-miss experience; that responses to their needs are falling well short of what is required. Young people want to see mental health services delivered in a more timely way, be made much more accessible, and operate in an informed manner. In a post-COVID-19 world, young people want to see a greater focus on delivery of age appropriate health services, respectful of the diversity of experiences and identities young people have.

Along with concerns about study and career opportunities, addressing climate change is one of the top three issues young people continuously identify as essential to their future. They worry that a focus on the impact of COVID-19 will delay or divert from action being taken to protect the

environment. Young people want to see climate change action based on the evidence and expert recommendations of our climate change scientists become the norm; in the same way that expert medical opinion drove our responses to COVID-19.

“ ‘I think COVID-19's impact on my future will be defined by our response now. Will we use it as an opportunity to create strong climate policy, to dismantle our society's wealth inequality, to redefine the status quo, or will we be so caught up in chasing our old 'normal' that we forget that our acceptance of that normal is what brought us these issues in the first place?’  
(16 year old)

A majority of young people believe humanity has reached the tipping point in relation to climate change. Many commented on the ways in which the environment and air-quality benefitted from a temporary reduction in human and industrial activity during COVID-19. For some, this raised greater awareness of how lowering of emissions and pollution levels can be achieved when these are halted, pointing to what might be possible on a greater scale when governments listen to scientific experts and make evidence-based decisions that address these crucial life-threatening concerns.

**'Originally, I didn't think the lockdown would have any effects as I'm an introverted person and prefer to be alone rather than with people but after a short period of time I began to see many things impacted. had to stop visiting my grandparents which was really hard for me because I went up every fortnight, it is my second home. I'm not the biggest social butterfly so I wasn't too worried about this, but I take my schooling very seriously (well, decently). As the school was becoming closer to closing, worries of the year twelve cohort began to arise about whether we would have to repeat year 12.' (Maddison, 17)**

“ ‘Its given us an opportunity to see how quickly the environment can bounce back. Also how we can save so many people if we actually listen to scientists. Maybe apply that to climate change’ (21 year old)

“ ‘I think it just goes to show the possibilities of change... I think more can be done, people should be considering renewable energy and electric cars rather than the pre-corona world's everyday.’ (16 year old)

Others fear these changes will be short-lived. They anticipate a return to ‘business as usual’ approach to actions on climate change and are concerned that restrictions imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19 have inadvertently affected the momentum that climate change action had gained earlier in 2020. Others expressed fear that an exclusive focus on the immediate crisis may allow governments to sweep other important issues such as climate change ‘under the carpet’.

“ ‘I also believe this crisis will have secondary impacts on life and government, with important issues such as climate change being tossed aside and impractical to look at in a global financial decline.’ (17 year old)

“ ‘COVID-19 has had a positive effect on the environment in that carbon emissions are down and some animal habitats are thriving again but I feel like after this everything will actually go back to how it was before or even worse than before’ (15 year old)

Some young people are worried about the increased power that governments around the world have had as a result of the pandemic. This includes the potential for decisions to be made with less oversight and scrutiny in the name of rapid action. At the same time many spoke about how global responses to the pandemic have shown what is possible when countries, communities and individuals work together, listening and acting on expert scientific and health evidence and advice to save lives.

Many young people were hopeful that this unity and collaboration could translate into closer ties between governments and local communities over the longer term, and that the health crisis has presented an opportunity to learn and apply lessons to other complex issues the community cares about.

“ ‘My biggest hope is that instead of returning to our old normal after COVID-19, we use it to redefine normal to implement comprehensive, effective climate policy, increase financial support for the disadvantaged and make politics driven by empathy rather than apathy.’ (16 year old)

“ ‘That the world will come out of this better than when it entered, with people being more open-minded, listening to people and cutting down on carbon emissions once and for all.’ (15 year old)

‘Coronavirus. It’s a big word, an honestly scary word. Its pandemic pushing everyone inside as a preventative precaution. We close our doors on the outside as a civic duty to our communities and the world. To flatten the curve of the societal danger, we open the door to other problems.’ (Lou, 18)











