

Locked down and locked out?

The impact of COVID-19
on employment for young
people from refugee and
migrant backgrounds
in Victoria.



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The impact of COVID-19 on employment for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in Victoria.

During the March-April 2020 lockdown period, CMY interviewed 41 young people (aged between 18-25) from 17 different cultural backgrounds, connected with our Employment Empowers program. These findings provide a snapshot of the experiences of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds at this time.

Of the young people who were working prior to COVID-19

38%

have lost their jobs, while

33%

have had their hours reduced.



There is **widespread reduction in young people's household income** with

68%

of young people reporting that their family has **been negatively impacted.**

(That's 2 in 3)



The above is impacting on young people's:

- Housing security
- Pursuit of their own educational and employment aspirations
- Ability to support vulnerable relatives overseas.

Young people experienced high rates of **casual employment** prior to COVID-19

86%

of those who were in some form of work were casually employed.



30%



of the young people **withdrew from the labour market** during March-April 2020.



(That's almost 1 in 3)

24% of young people

reported increased **caring responsibilities** in the home.

(That's almost 1 in 4)



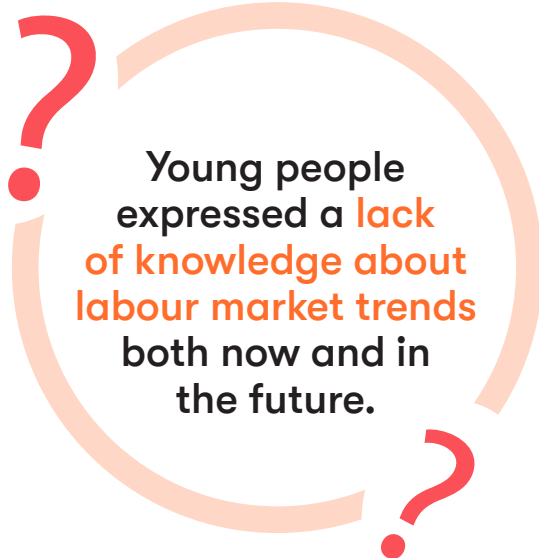
Lack of digital access is impacting on some young people's education and ability to look for work:



17%
reporting insufficient internet access.
(That's almost 1 in 5)

and **10%**
are without access to a laptop or computer.

(one in ten)



Young people expressed a **lack of knowledge about labour market trends** both now and in the future.

Young people reported experiencing a knock to their

- **confidence**
- **motivation and**
- **employment aspirations.**



Young people in employment during COVID-19 have concerns about their **physical health, safety and rights at work.**

Young people value the support of employment mentors, **even if they have withdrawn from the labour market.**

CMY acknowledges the support of the Australian Government Department of Home Affairs, the State Government of Victoria, and the Myer Foundation.

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Executive Summary

Young people are being hardest hit by job loss as a result of COVID-19, and will suffer the long-term labour market consequences of economic downturn. It is also anticipated that refugees and migrants will experience these effects disproportionately.¹

The intersection of being both young, and from a migrant or refugee background, creates a double disadvantage in this labour market crisis. However long before this crisis hit, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds faced persistent barriers – including racism and discrimination – when looking for work; barriers that contribute to long-term unemployment, underemployment or insecure employment.² In order to inform responses to this serious challenge now and in the longer-term, we must learn from the perspectives of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds who are already experiencing the fallout of this economic crisis.

This report provides a snapshot of the immediate effect of COVID-19 on both employment and the search for employment for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds in Victoria. During the March-April lockdown period, CMY interviewed 41 young people connected with our Employment Empowers program. We asked them about the impact of COVID-19 on their employment journey.

Our findings correlate with broader analysis that the impact on young people has been swift and far-reaching;³ the majority of young people who were in some form of employment experienced either job loss or a reduction in hours during this period. Many also withdrew from the labour market. Young people voiced uncertainty about their employment options both now and in the future, and confusion about what kind of work is available. Lack of digital access was a barrier for some in terms of remaining engaged with education and training, and being able to search and apply for jobs.

The majority of the young people also reported a reduction in family income, impacting on their own education and employment opportunities, housing security, and ability to support vulnerable family members overseas. This was particularly the case for those with no access to income support, and those from more newly-arrived humanitarian backgrounds. Many young people also took on caring roles in their families at this time, requiring them to put on hold their own education or employment aspirations. The need to support family presented in different ways, seemingly influenced by gender, with young women more likely to report taking on increased caring roles in the home, such as looking after younger siblings.

There were also implications for young people's wellbeing, with a number of young people reporting a knock to their confidence, motivation and employment aspirations. A number of those still in employment expressed concerns about their health, safety and rights at work in the context of COVID-19, revealing vulnerabilities to potential exploitation given many were desperate to keep their foot in the door and maintain an income source.

It is vital that those who experience disadvantage and exclusion in the job market are specifically targeted and supported to strengthen their connection to employment both now, and beyond. The increased barriers to employment that many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds will face as a result of COVID-19 requires a tailored response in order to level the playing field, support them to reach their full potential and enable them to make meaningful contributions to the community. Without intervention, many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are at serious risk of being crowded out, the end result being long-term labour market exclusion.

Whilst targeted support is critically important, we must also continue to understand and address the systemic barriers, such as racism, that serve to lock out certain groups from the job market, including young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.

1. Key findings

- The pandemic is having an immediate impact on young people's employment – more than one in three (38%) of the young people who were working prior to COVID-19 have lost their jobs, and one in three (33%) have had their hours reduced.
- Young people experienced high rates of casual employment prior to COVID-19 - 86% of those who were in some form of work were casually employed.
- Almost one in three of the young people interviewed (30%) withdrew from the labour market during March-April 2020.
- There is widespread reduction in young people's household income, with two out of three young people (68%) reporting their family has been negatively impacted.
- Almost one in four young people (24%) reported increased caring responsibilities in the home during COVID-19.
- Lack of digital access is impacting on some young people's education and ability to look for work, with almost one in five (17%) reporting insufficient internet access, and one in ten (10%) without access to a laptop or computer.
- Young people expressed a lack of knowledge about labour market trends both now and in the future.
- Young people reported experiencing a knock to their confidence, motivation and employment aspirations.
- Young people in employment during COVID-19 have concerns about their physical health, safety and rights at work.
- Young people value the support of employment mentors, even if they have withdrawn from the labour market.

2. Background

2.1 Young people and employment

In Australia, young people are far more likely to experience unemployment compared with adults. Unemployment amongst young people in Australia is three times the rate for those aged 25 and over,⁴ and almost one in five young people are long-term unemployed – a figure that has doubled in the past decade.⁵ There are also fewer full-time jobs available now than just 10 years ago, with underemployment becoming “an entrenched feature” of Australia’s youth labour market, despite years of economic growth prior to COVID-19.⁶⁻⁷

2.2 Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds and employment

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are more likely to be unemployed than other Victorian young people,⁸ particularly if they are newly-arrived.⁹ Young people from refugee backgrounds are also among the many humanitarian entrants to Australia who are over-represented among the ranks of underemployed, lowly-paid, low-skilled, precariously employed and casualised members of Australia’s labour force.¹⁰

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds’ skills and qualifications are also underutilised in the Australian labour market.¹¹ Graduates from non-English speaking backgrounds take longer to find full-time employment compared with graduates from an English-speaking background.¹²⁻¹³

Youth unemployment is also significantly higher in areas where large numbers of migrant and refugee community members live. In these areas youth unemployment can be as high as three times the national average, and twice as high in terms of youth unemployment overall.¹⁴

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds frequently face numerous barriers to entering the job market. An extensive body of research now documents how ‘ethnicity’ alone can disadvantage job seekers in Australia, such as having a name that indicates you may be from a non-English speaking background.¹⁵ Barriers young people may face include:

- Lack of bridging social capital – networks that help them ‘get ahead’
- Racism and discrimination, including unconscious bias
- Unfamiliarity with employment options, pathways and the labour market in Australia
- Difficulty obtaining Australian work experience
- Interrupted education, and
- English as an Additional Language.¹⁶

At the same time, young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds bring to the workforce a range of diverse skills, strengths and qualities that make them assets to employers and the broader Victorian community. They “tend to be globally-oriented and are motivated to develop broad social and professional networks”, while their intercultural and multilingual skills are an indispensable asset in a global economy.¹⁷

They are also 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. Despite young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds’ potential, there are considerable inequalities related to socio-economic factors and ethnic background when it comes to transitioning to employment.¹⁸

2.3 Youth employment in the context of COVID-19

Young people will be hardest hit by job loss as a result of COVID-19, both now and in the future. It’s estimated that 40% of teenagers, and roughly 30% of 20-29 year olds will lose their jobs.¹⁹

Young people are overwhelmingly employed in precarious and casualised industries, the first to be affected at the onset of the crisis. Almost half of young people working in Victoria are employed in either Accommodation and Food Services or Retail,²⁰ some of the industries most adversely impacted by social distancing measures.²¹ In Victoria, young people born overseas are even more likely to work in Accommodation and Food services compared with their Australian-born peers.²²

Young people are also far less likely to be beneficiaries of the Federal Government’s JobKeeper initiative, given they are more likely to be employed as casuals compared with the adult population.²³ Adding to this, Australia typically performs poorly internationally in terms of young people being locked out of permanent, adequate employment. This was evident despite the strong economic growth Australia experienced prior to COVID-19.²⁴

Young people will also be disproportionately negatively impacted by the looming economic slow-down as a result of COVID-19. Past financial downturns have shown that young people take far longer than other age groups to recover in terms of employment outcomes, particularly those without a degree.²⁵⁻²⁶ The rise in other job seekers who are more qualified or experienced, and under normal circumstances might not compete for the same jobs, further disadvantages those who are young or without qualifications.²⁷ What happens early in someone’s transition to employment has a long-term impact on their future working life; referred to as ‘scarring’, the likelihood of employment and future earnings can be reduced for up to 10 years or more,²⁸ with long-term implications for health and wellbeing.²⁹

These employment challenges will be compounded for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and they will experience the effects of this labour market downturn disproportionately.³⁰ Previous economic downturn has shown that the unemployment rate of migrants is higher compared with their Australian-born peers.³¹

The intersection of being both young, and from a migrant or refugee background, creates a double disadvantage in this current labour market crisis. Long before this crisis hit, migrant and refugee young people faced persistent barriers to securing meaningful employment. The increased barriers to employment that many young

people from refugee and migrant backgrounds will face as a result of COVID-19 requires a targeted response – one that works to increase their opportunities, supports them to reach their potential and enables them to meaningfully contribute to the community. Without intervention, many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds are at serious risk of being crowded out, the end result being long-term labour market exclusion.

3. Program context

CMY's Employment Empowers program supports young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds who are looking to secure meaningful employment. The program engages young people who are unemployed job seekers, underemployed, or in casual and insecure employment. The program provides opportunities for mentoring, direct employment opportunities, paid traineeships and workplace experience.

To help young people become job ready and secure employment, the program engages volunteers with significant Australian work experience as mentors, to work one-on-one with the young people in the program over a 12-month period. Through mentoring, the program enables participants to build invaluable bridging networks and form the building blocks for their working life. The program also partners with employers to match business needs with young job seekers who are keen to work and able to make a valuable contribution to their workplace.

4. Methodology

Participants:

Participants were young people between the ages of 18 and 25 who are currently engaged in the Employment Empowers program at the Centre for Multicultural Youth. All of the young people are from refugee or migrant backgrounds. At the time of the study, 59 young people were participants in the program (N = 59). From this number, 41 young people consented to participating in the study (n = 41). Therefore, the response rate for this study is 69.4 per cent.

Gender:

Of those who participated in the research study, 30 are female (73%) and 11 (27%) are male.

Ethnic background:

The young people interviewed are hugely diverse with regard to cultural backgrounds and migrant status. Seventeen (17) ethnic groups were represented in this consultation with those from Afghan (27%), Sudanese (12%) and Somali (12%) backgrounds making up the largest number of those interviewed. While a small percentage of the participants were born in Australia, the majority were born overseas with some having arrived as recently as the past 3-5 years.

Education background:

Twenty-eight of the young people (68%) have completed or are currently completing a Bachelor's degree. The young people have educational backgrounds in areas as diverse as law, international relations, engineering and architecture.

Research method:

The mixed methods research involved semi-structured interviews with the young people, containing both quantitative and qualitative questions. Interview questions were delivered via phone conversation with an Employment Empowers team member, who recorded responses on an interview template during the interview. Qualitative responses were analysed by two team members who grouped responses by theme to identify trends and key issues, and quantitative responses were analysed in Excel.

Limitations:

This research involves a specific, limited sample of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds who are involved in a community-based employment program and have expressed a desire to find work. Findings provide a snapshot into these young people's immediate experiences, and indicate key areas to further explore, however caution should be exercised in terms of generalising these to the broader population.

5. Findings

5.1 Employment status prior to COVID-19

Prior to COVID-19 just less than half (42%) of the young participants were in some form of employment. The majority of these (86%) were casually employed. This proportion is higher than figures in the broader youth population, where 75% of 15-19 year olds and 42% of 20-24 year olds are employed as casuals.³²

5.2 Impacts of COVID-19

Impact of COVID-19 on employment status

COVID-19 had a significant impact on the employment situation of the young people in the program, particularly impacting on those who were in casual work.

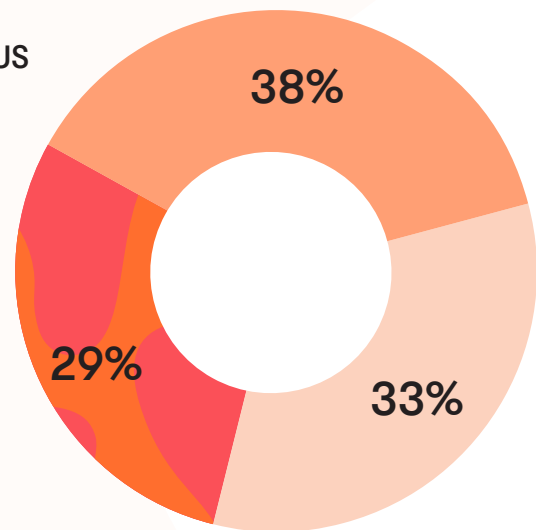
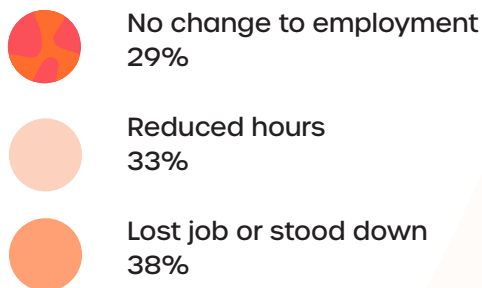
“I was employed before in a factory. I was working nine hour days, five days a week. About 45 hours a week before the coronavirus. That work stopped a few weeks ago. I was casual so I wasn't kept on.”
- Young man

First, job losses have been significant within this group with 38% of the young people who were in employment before the COVID-19 crisis having lost their jobs since.

A further 33% of the young people who had work prior to COVID-19 have seen a reduction in the hours offered to them by employers (see Graph 1). This means that 71% of the young people who were working prior to the pandemic are experiencing the immediate impact of COVID-19 in the form of either loss of employment or underemployment.

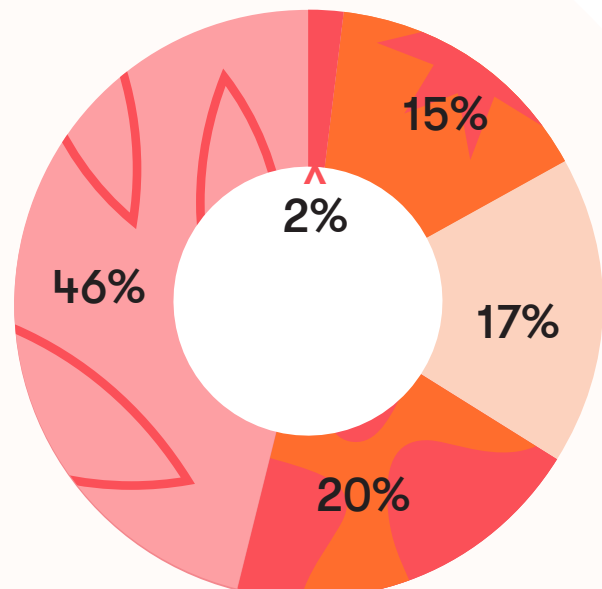
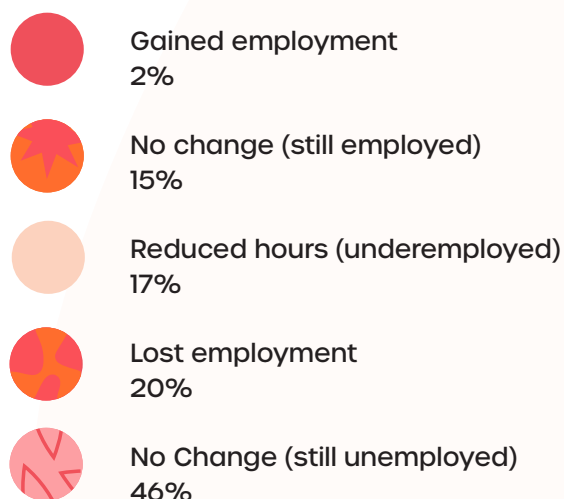
“I’m the only person that’s employed in my family. I live with my younger cousins. They are all in high school. They’re too young to start work yet... I really want to work more. I only work two days a week... I wish I could get more hours. I would work in any job that would give me lots of hours.” - Young woman

GRAPH 1: CHANGES TO EMPLOYMENT STATUS (PREVIOUSLY EMPLOYED PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS) JAN - APRIL 2020



It is also significant that from those who were unemployed in January, only one young person has gained employment. Therefore, the COVID-19 crisis has not only impacted on the young people who were in employment, but has also had a significant impact on unemployed young peoples’ search for employment (see Graph 2).

GRAPH 2: CHANGES TO EMPLOYMENT (ALL PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS) JAN - APRIL 2020



Impact on job search

Many of the young people who were searching for employment prior to COVID-19 also reported a loss of confidence and lack of motivation in the COVID-19 labour market and beyond. The pandemic was impacting upon their aspirations for the future, with implications for their general mental health and wellbeing. Contributing to this loss of confidence is a sense of uncertainty about the future and compounding setbacks including, but not limited to: rescinded job offers, cancelled internships and traineeships, and delayed or cancelled studies.

“I’ve been looking for work for a while. I finally got offered a job right before the lockdown and pandemic actually happened.

I worked for 3 days before everything shut it down... Because I was only doing trial shifts technically I’m not in the system so there probably won’t be a job for me when they re-open.” - Young woman

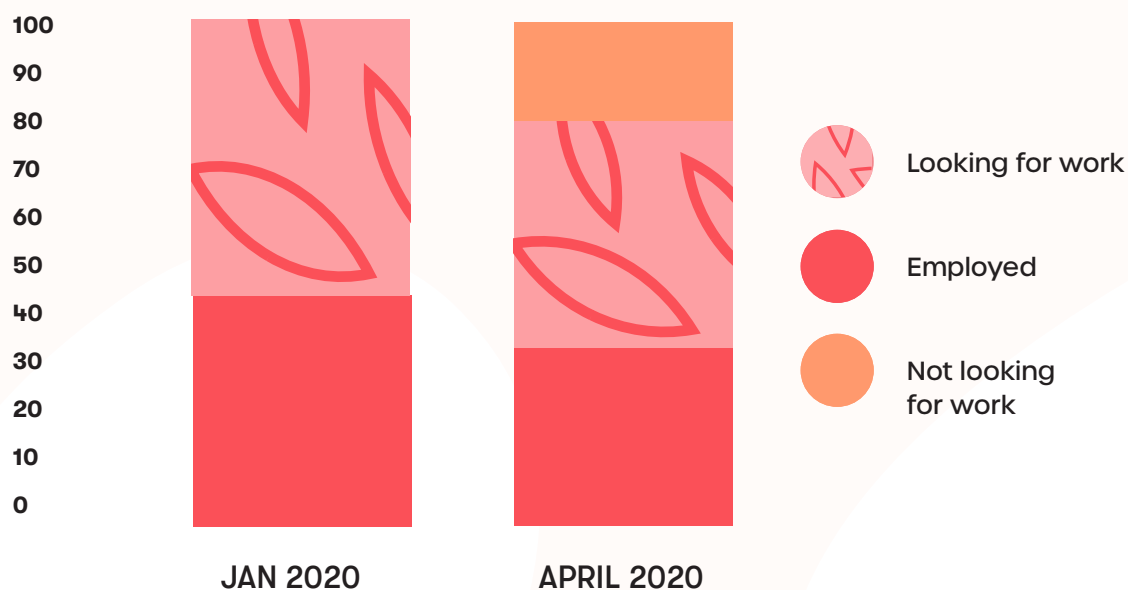
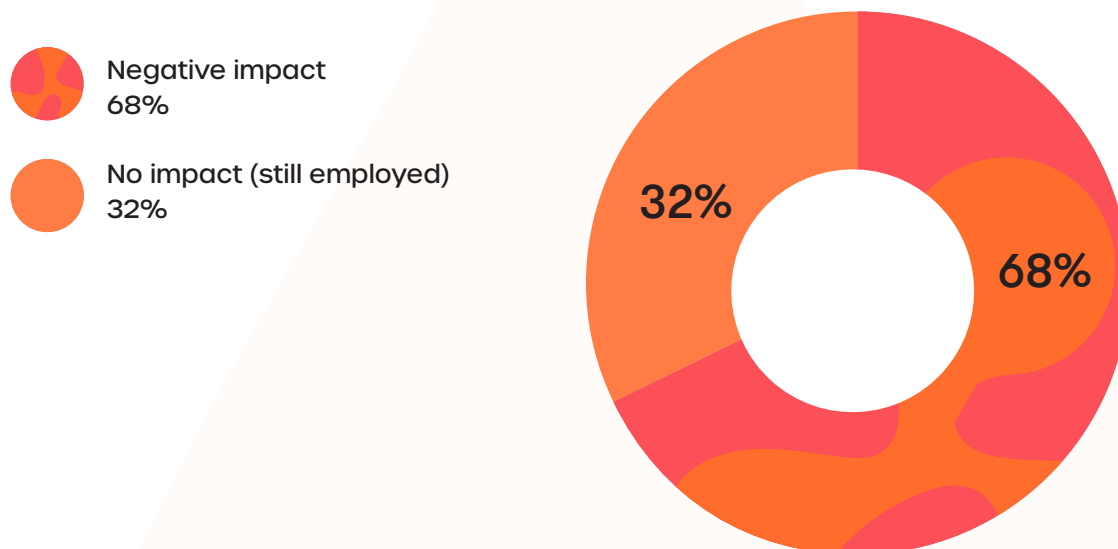
Relatedly, some of the young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds seemed to be lacking essential knowledge about labour market trends and COVID-19 impacts, and were unsure what kind of industries they should seek work in besides hospitality and retail.

Also significant is an increase in family-related responsibilities, such as supervising younger siblings’ online learning and caring for elderly and vulnerable parents. Almost one in four (24%) participants reported having caring responsibilities that are impacting on their ability to study, work or look for work. It is not unusual for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to carry increased levels of responsibility in their families upon settling in Australia, however the COVID-19 crisis appears to be increasing these demands further.³³ Young women appear to be particularly impacted.

“Right now, I can’t really look for work because I’m home-schooling my three younger siblings. I won’t be looking for work until the crisis is over. Two of them are in primary school and one is in high school. They’re all learning from home. They need supervision and help with the work. It takes up all my time now... My parents can’t really help them.” - Young woman

Withdrawal from job search/labour market

A culmination of these factors has meant that 30% of the unemployed young people in the program are no longer actively looking for work (see Graph 3) due to a lack of job opportunities, increased caring responsibilities in the home, and fear of health impacts for themselves and/or vulnerable family members. This can be compared to January when all of the unemployed young people in the program were actively seeking employment.

GRAPH 3: LABOUR MARKET PARTICIPATION JAN 2020 & APRIL 2020**GRAPH 4: IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON HOUSEHOLD / FAMILY INCOME**

Impact on family/household income

More than two in three young people (68%) have also experienced a significant reduction in overall household income as a direct result of the COVID-19 crisis (Graph 4). This figure appears relatively high compared to other reports that one in four (28%) young people in the broader Australian youth population have had their household income affected.³⁴ Young people's households have seen primary income earners lose their jobs or experience a significant reduction in shifts, raising concerns around ability to pay rent, support vulnerable family members overseas, and the implications on young people's education and employment future.

“My dad is the main income earner for the family and he’s getting a lot less work. Both my Dad and brother’s employment has been affected. They both work in construction. They have a lot less shifts. They’re at home a lot more now. They used to work five or six days but now it’s just one or two.” - Young woman

Loss of household income is particularly stressful for young people and families without any access to income support.

“I haven’t applied for Centrelink because I’m Kiwi so I’m not eligible. My sister has been trying to find Centrelink or other government support for us. She was working casually but isn’t getting shifts anymore. Dad has a business but it isn’t doing too well right now. We are struggling a bit.” - Young woman

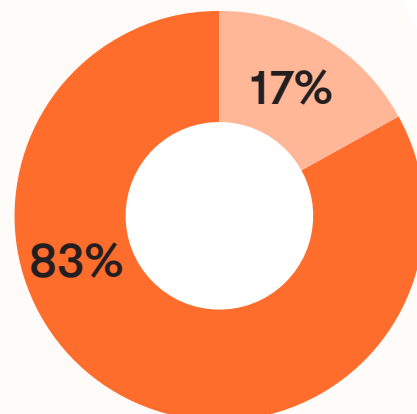
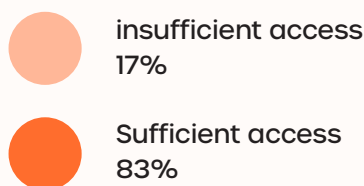
Some young people also expressed concerns about how loss of income or reduced income would impact upon **housing security**.

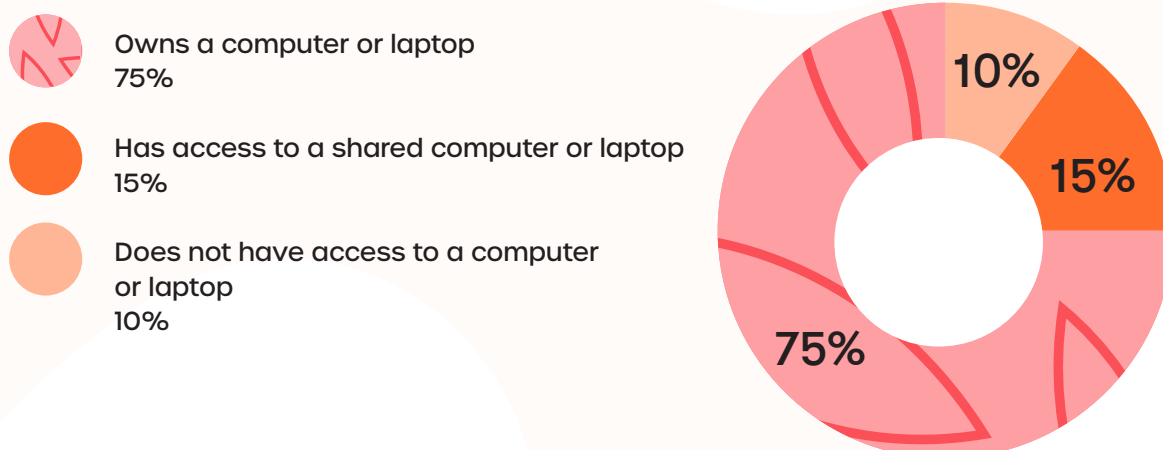
“Before the coronavirus, we could pay all the bills. We even sometimes had extra income to send to our parents in Africa. Now we’re just scraping by. The landlords are still expecting us to pay rent. We got an email from the agent saying the landlord couldn’t afford to give us a discount because they have a mortgage. Both my brothers were working in a warehouse and now they don’t get any shifts. Just my sister still sometimes has shifts. I’m worried we won’t be able to pay rent.” - Young man

Digital access

Digital access is increasingly important, particularly in the COVID-19 context. Having sufficient digital access would mean the young person is able to access to the internet with sufficient data and has access to a device to connect to the internet, such as a computer or laptop. Almost one in five (17%) participants reported inadequate access to the internet, one in ten (10%) had no access to a computer or laptop, and more than one in ten (15%) had access to a shared device only. This lack of digital access impacts on young people’s ability to search and apply for jobs, and work or study from home.

GRAPH 5: INTERNET ACCESS



GRAPH 5: ACCESS TO A COMPUTER OR LAPTOP

“My siblings have online schooling and they have to share my laptop. Two of my siblings don’t have a laptop. There’s three laptops between the five of us. I sometimes have to watch lectures on my phone on the floor in my bedroom or sometimes in the car.” - Young man

Health and safety at work

A number of young people who have remained employed throughout the COVID-19 crisis reported feeling concerned about their health and safety at work. Some of the young people were employed in roles that involved close contact with others, such as care-related work, or in positions that brought them into contact with a variety of people. Young people voiced concerns around a lack of access to Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) including gloves, masks and sanitiser. This also translated into fears that they might become personally ill, or infect vulnerable family members they live with.

“I’m working a lot less. Maybe half the hours I was before. I’m extremely worried. I go into so many homes and my work doesn’t provide me with basic PPE. I have to somehow work out how to protect myself. I need to go to the store and try to get my own gloves and mask.” - Young woman

In addition to this, some young people were unsure about their rights at work, particularly around health and safety. Some of the young people communicated that they didn’t feel supported by their employers, while others sought advice from their mentors and the Employment Empowers program about how to approach matters of health and safety at work. Some expressed a lack of choices or alternatives. Although they perceived they were unsafe at work, they felt unable to self-advocate or walk away due to financial pressures.

Job insecurity and the casualisation of work has been linked to issues of workplace safety.³⁵ Young workers have also been identified as a group particularly at risk of experiencing work-related harm.³⁶ In the context of a public health crisis, the issue of young people’s health, safety and rights at work warrants further attention.

“All the employees feel unsafe and management is not helping us. There is a lot of conflict between management and the employees. I’d rather not be working there but I need the income.” - Young man

5.3 Adapting to the crisis

The role of mentors and access to social capital

The Employment Empowers program provides the young people with ongoing employment-related support through matching them with a mentor. This provides access to bridging social capital – networks that help young people ‘get ahead’ – which has been shown to be critical in the transition to employment.³⁷ In the COVID-19 employment landscape, the role of the mentor has taken on many new forms, with mentors going above and beyond to provide guidance and support. The role of mentors in the program during COVID-19 has involved:

- giving support and advice throughout the young person’s job application process
- advising the young person about their rights at work and giving guidance around having difficult conversations
- explaining and assisting with applications for Centrelink and other financial support, and
- acting as a social connection.

The majority of young people in the program, even though some have withdrawn from the labour market, are staying in contact with their mentor and reported this as being a valuable connection in helping them build confidence, navigate their employment journey and access information at this time.

“Things are very good with [my mentor]. Even though we can’t meet face to face he keeps in touch and we speak on the phone every few weeks. He has been such a tremendous support. He gave me so much confidence.” – Young man

6. What can we do?

Research highlights key features of interventions that effectively support young people from refugee backgrounds into employment. These include:

- Individualised, holistic support/case management;
- Education initiatives that help young people and families to understand career options, pathways to employment, and expose young people to variety of opportunities;

- Targeted programs that support a young person's transition from education to employment;
- Access to paid work experience and internships;
- Providing support in the workplace (to both young people and employers);
- Mentoring programs and initiatives that build bridging social capital (links with industry, employers, professional mentors); and
- Cultural competency amongst services/employers.³⁸

We cannot afford to waste the protracted period of time that young people will spend in unemployment or underemployment as result of the economic downturn from COVID-19. As well as investing heavily in youth-focussed job creation, we must resource initiatives that specifically target young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds to continue developing their work-related skills and experience; to access to up-to-date information about the Australian labour market and employment options; to broaden their professional networks through mentoring; and gain paid internship and employment opportunities.

7. Recommendations

- 1.** Develop a targeted youth employment strategy for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, as part of a broader Youth Jobs Guarantee. This should include:
 - Creating large-scale, skilled paid internships, including identified positions exclusively for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds
 - Continuing and building on government-led initiatives during COVID-19 such as Working for Victoria, with a focus on jobs for young people
 - Incentivising and proactively engaging with industries to hire young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds through wage subsidy programs
 - Expanding social procurement with a targeted focus on young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds.
- 2.** Resource community-based employment programs, with a proven record of effectively working with young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. These should be culturally-responsive; provide wrap-around support; broaden professional networks through mentoring; increase young people's employability skills; provide access to paid, relevant work experience; and work with employers to broker employment opportunities and provide support once young people are in the workplace.
- 3.** Resource initiatives that support young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds and their families to develop small businesses and promote entrepreneurial activity.

- 4.** All levels of government must lead the way in ensuring their workforce reflects the cultural diversity of our community, and work proactively with industry to do the same. This should include promoting the benefits of a culturally-diverse workforce to Victorian workplaces, and providing support to develop diversity and inclusion policies and practices, such as those piloted through the Victorian Government's Recruit Smarter initiative. This will help to address the structural barriers to employment that many young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds face.
- 5.** Broaden access to JobKeeper and income support in order to strengthen young people's connection to education and work. Ensuring that everyone in Australia has access to an income at this time, including temporary visa holders and casual workers, will enable young people to continue pursuing their educational and employment goals, rather than having to suspend these to meet basic needs.
- 6.** Establish mechanisms to rapidly identify and communicate labour market changes, growth industries and employment pathways to young people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and educational institutions who provide this advice.
- 7.** Governments must work together and invest in a roadmap to digital inclusion. This should include, but go beyond, affordability to addresses access and ability challenges, and the long-term needs of Australians to ensure they are able to fully benefit from and engage in a digital world now and into the future.
- 8.** Review the way in which young people's health, safety and basic protections are being implemented in the workplace, particularly in light of COVID-19, and explore measures to ensure these protections are being effectively upheld and understood by all parties. This is particularly important in the current context, where young people are vulnerable to unsafe work practices or exploitation or due to high rates of job insecurity and the scarcity of work on offer.
- 9.** Undertake further exploration and research around:
 - The impact of gender on transitions to employment for young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and effective interventions.
 - Effective ways to address the impacts of racism and discrimination on employment outcomes and the translation of education into income.
 - How to work more effectively with young people and communities from refugee and migrant backgrounds around understanding the range of education and training pathways in Australia, including Vocational Education and Training.

8. Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has had a severe impact on the labour market, resulting in widespread job loss and economic downturn that is likely to disproportionately affect young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. Prior to COVID-19, the majority of the young people in the Employment Empowers program were unemployed, or employed in casual work. For these young people, the COVID-19 lockdown has had severe and immediate impacts, including job loss, a reduction in work hours, and a reduction in household income with flow-on effects for young people's education and employment aspirations. For those that have remained in some form of employment, concerns around a lack of health and safety protections at work were common.

Equally significant has been the impact on already unemployed young people who have reported a loss in confidence and motivation in searching for work. This uncertainty, combined with an unknown job landscape, fears for health and safety, and increased caring responsibilities, is resulting in a number of young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds withdrawing from the labour market. A lack of digital access has also impacted on some young people's ability to search for work or pursue study at home.

Mentors appear to be playing a strong, supportive role in terms of young people's social connection, access to information and advice at this uncertain time; the strengths of which could be built upon for the future in terms of job readiness and connection to the world of work.

An economic challenge of this scale requires broad-based policy responses to job creation and youth employment. However, we also need targeted approaches and side doors for particular groups who face entrenched barriers to the transition to work, including young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds. This will ensure they are not crowded out in this new labour market, but rather are provided with the opportunities they deserve in order to reach their full potential.

At the same time, it is critical that we also work to address the systemic barriers that unfairly lock certain groups out of the labour market. Young people from refugee and migrant backgrounds want to work. They have valuable skills to contribute, including critical multilingual and intercultural expertise. There is much work to be done to strengthen young people's confidence in the future and to address barriers to economic participation. Ultimately this requires a job market that is fair. This means access to secure and meaningful work that is reflective of young people's skills and experience, and targeted support for those who need it, to ensure no one is locked out or left behind.

9. Endnotes

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