

Shelter in the storm – how COVID-19 changed the lives of young LGBTIQ+ young people

1. Summary of impact

Many people lost jobs and were forced back into the family home during 2020. But shutdowns also pushed some 16–25-year-olds to the brink of homelessness, a [Social Impact Grant](#) report has found.

Based in part on a survey of 660 teens and young adults led by UTS digital and social media researcher, Paul Byron, the report found trans and gender diverse young people were particularly vulnerable.

This group made up 27% of survey respondents but accounted for 46% of those made homeless or at risk of homelessness and 35% of those who reported living with someone who made them feel unsafe or afraid, according to the report.

Accessing mental health services and other support was also a challenge for more than a third of those surveyed.

The findings are alarming but not completely unexpected, says Paul, who partnered with LGBTIQ+ support service, Twenty10, and researchers from Western Sydney University and The University of Sydney to undertake the project.

2. The problem

COVID-19 and associated lockdowns put pressure on us all, but researchers were keen to see how young LGBTIQ+ people's lives were affected.

Because of stigma, LGBTIQ+ young people – and particularly trans and gender diverse young people – are significantly more likely to struggle with mental health. For this reason, finding out how mental health service delivery was affected was particularly important.

3. Beneficiaries

The report will benefit Twenty10's operations and the drop-in and counselling service's ability to plan for and deal with future lockdowns. In helping Twenty10 to better understand its client base, the report will also ultimately benefit the young LGBTIQ+ people that use the service and others like it.

Paul is particularly cognisant that Australia is lucky to be a reasonably good space when it comes to unfolding epidemics and hopes that some of the lessons learnt here by organisations like Twenty10 are valuable for other LGBTIQ+ youth services internationally.

4. Approach to impact

The report is based on a national survey of 660 young LGBTIQ+ young people conducted in late 2020. Interviews with staff and volunteers at Twenty10, a LGBTIQ+ support service based in Sydney, and QLife, a phone and webchat based service, were also undertaken.

As part of the survey, participants were asked to answer five questions about difficulties faced and feelings experienced during the epidemic. The bulk of questions were multiple choice, but one open-ended question was included so participants could add more detail and/or raise issues not covered by the multiple choice questions.

Survey participants were recruited through social media advertising on Instagram and Facebook, announcements on other social media, including Twitter and in community Facebook groups, and through emails sent to LGBTIQ+ community/health service providers nationally. While advertising targeted LGBTIQ+ young people aged 16–25, two thirds of survey participants were aged 16–17 years.

Eleven staff members and volunteers at Twenty10 and QLife were also interviewed for their perspectives.

5. What has changed as a result of this work?

The report produced out of the survey and staff and volunteer interviews will be used to seek more funding for mental health and other support services for LGBTIQ+ young people.

‘I think a really clear need that came out was the need for more counselling staff within Twenty10, not necessarily based at the office, but to be able to support young people, particularly trans and gender diverse young people, across NSW,’ says Paul.

Difficulties accessing mental health support was the number one challenge cited by survey respondents. But it’s an issue that isn’t tied solely to the epidemic and lockdowns, says Paul.

‘The thing is, we know more and more younger people are increasingly experiencing more severe mental health issues and can’t access LGBTIQ+ support services. And that’s national. That’s bigger than Twenty10 or this survey,’ he says.

Ultimately, he hopes that the report – and others like it – will find their way onto the desks of public health policy makers to help address funding shortfalls.

6. What has helped you accomplish this work?

The project won Social Impact Grant funding from the Centre for Social Justice & Inclusion, which gave it the funding it needed to go ahead. The support of Twenty10 staff and volunteers who agreed to be interviewed was also vital.

7. Challenges

A key challenge for the project team was the short turnaround of the funding period, since collaboration takes time, as does getting Ethics Committee approval from the university.

Writing the report also posed some difficulty, says Paul.

‘We wanted to produce something that could be used internally by Twenty10, but that we could also use to effectively feedback study findings to participants and the broader LGBTIQ+ community.’

The emotional generosity of those who shared their experiences was also not lost on the researchers.

‘The analysis of sensitive and sometimes heartbreaking data was personally difficult, particularly with our need to distil these findings into a small report like this. We hope to present some of this data more fully and generously in future publications.’