

LGBTQ+ young people, COVID-19, & service provision in Australia

A Twenty10 case study

Paul Byron
Kerry Robinson
Cristyn Davies
Sab D'Souza

RESEARCH REPORT

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The research team

Paul Byron is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Technology Sydney, in the School of Communication. He currently researches LGBTQ+ young people's digital peer support practices in relation to mental health, and has published on young people's social media uses, with attention to LGBTQ+ young people's digital cultures of care.

Kerry Robinson is a professor in sociology in the School of Social Sciences, Director of the Diversity and Human Rights Research Centre, and founding member and previous leader of Sexualities and Genders Research (SaGR), at Western Sydney University, Australia. Kerry has published widely on LGBTQ+ health and wellbeing issues.

Cristyn Davies is a Research Fellow in the Specialty of Child and Adolescent Health, Faculty of Medicine and Health, University of Sydney. She is also a board director at Twenty10 Inc GLCS NSW. Cristyn's broad areas of research include gender and sexuality in childhood and adolescence, adolescent sexual health, human papillomavirus (HPV) vaccination, and vaccination delivery systems. She has published widely across the social sciences and health.

Sab D'Souza is a recent Honours (1st class) graduate from University of Sydney Cultural Studies. They are currently a research assistant at the University of Technology Sydney and a practising digital artist and resident at Parramatta Artist Studios. Their work is concerned with emergent encounters between diasporic and queer media users, their (web)site-specific intimacies, and how safety is felt and governed in digital spaces.

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For more information contact:

Paul Byron
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
School of Communication, UTS
paul.byron@uts.edu.au

Contents

Introduction	3
SECTION 1: LGBTQ+ young people	5
Survey findings.....	5
Interview findings	10
SECTION 2: LGBTQ+ service staff & volunteers	12
Working from home.....	13
Changing communicative norms	13
Disruptions & increased workloads	14
Managing stress.....	15
Volunteer experiences.....	16
SECTION 3: Twenty10 response & future needs	17
Building digital spaces.....	18
New needs, future planning	20
Key findings & conclusion	24

Introduction

This report considers the impacts of COVID-19 and associated ‘lockdown/s’ on LGBTQ+¹ young people and their support services. Reporting on a small study conducted in late 2020, we present findings from a survey of LGBTQ+ young people across Australia, and interviews with staff and volunteers of Twenty10 – an LGBTIQA+ youth support service based in Sydney, Australia.

Our research focuses on LGBTQ+ young people’s mental health experiences and needs during national COVID-19 lockdowns in Australia. It was funded by a Social Impact grant from the Centre for Social Justice & Inclusion at the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). The study was led by Paul Byron, as part of his postdoctoral research project, and was devised by the research team in collaboration with Twenty10, particularly Co-Executive Directors Terence Humphreys and Jain Moralee. The project received UTS Ethics Clearance (ETH20-5087).

Twenty10

Twenty10 incorporating the Gay and Lesbian Counselling Service NSW (Twenty10) is a non-government organisation that works with LGBTIQA+ people and their families and communities in New South Wales. Twenty10 provides a broad range of specialised services for young people aged 12-25 years, including housing, mental health support, counselling, and social support. Twenty10 is the NSW partner for QLife, a national tele-web peer support service for LGBTIQA+ people of all ages.

In this report, we present a case study of Twenty10 – informed by staff and volunteers we interviewed – in conjunction with national survey data from LGBTQ+ young people about their experiences of COVID-19. The report is written for Twenty10 as well as the wider LGBTQ+ youth sector, nationally and internationally. Our findings point to the vital work of this sector, along with key issues to consider for ensuring that services like Twenty10 continue providing necessary support and care in times of crisis.

This report

Our report gives specific attention to the impact of COVID-19 on LGBTQ+ young people, including closures of support services during ‘lockdowns’, alongside restrictions to social and community interactions and mental health support. We consider key lessons from 2020, and what is needed to move forward. We also consider what is lost and gained from moving traditional support services to digital media environments.

In addition to the experiences and needs of LGBTQ+ young people, the report explores the experiences and needs of community support workers and volunteers. This includes attention to how disruptions to their support for young people during COVID-19 were managed, alongside disruptions to workplace practices and relationships, and challenges to their own wellbeing.

¹ We use this acronym as a recognisable term that includes a wider range of identities and communities than the acronym suggests. Our data does not include adequate representation of intersex young people.

The research

From August-November 2020, we surveyed a national sample of 660 LGBTQ+ young people, aged 16-25 years, about COVID-19 impacts. The survey is part of a broader study of LGBTQ+ young people's use of digital media for mental health support, and the five questions about COVID-19 are explored in the following section. Interviews with Twenty10 staff and volunteers were conducted from September-October 2020, where participants were asked to reflect on: how COVID-19 impacted their roles; how LGBTQ+ young people were affected; and Twenty10's response and future needs.

Twenty10's COVID-19 response

In 2020, the Twenty10 Board of Directors worked closely with the Co-Executive Directors to govern the organisation through the COVID-19 pandemic. This included developing a new pandemic and epidemic policy for staff and volunteers that reflected best practice (implementing measures recommended by NSW Health); ongoing assessment of the financial impact of the pandemic to the organization; and implementation of strategies to mitigate risk, especially to staff employment and to the organisation more broadly. One staff member recalls:

It was a rapid planning and build-up. Twenty10 acted very swiftly. We made the decision to stop face-to-face client activities before any of the lockdown restrictions happened on a [Health] Department level... definitely, a week before at least. That happened over three days.

During the swift transition to COVID-safe practices, Board Directors personally contacted staff members to thank them for their work and commitment to the organisation under challenging conditions, and the Co-Executive Directors worked with the Board and staff to negotiate new aspects of workplace management and community outreach. Twenty10 changed much of its service provision to engage with young people online. This was required due to the inability to host regular drop-in spaces and facilitated groups at Twenty10, including the weekday Drop-In program, facilitated evening groups, and the OutWest support group held in Western Sydney. Staff worked together to set up digital spaces for young people to socialise and access Twenty10 and its services.

Other key changes include staff working from home, suspension of many volunteer engagements, and the hiring of additional casual and part-time QLife (tele-web peer support) staff. This was supported by one-off emergency funding from the Australian Government via LGBTIQ+ Health Australia. The QLife room at Twenty10 (where staff received calls or engaged in webchat) could remain open due to implementing physical distancing and enhanced hygiene measures from March 2020. The national QLife phone system needed to be reconfigured to allow remote access, which was set up by June. One QLife staff member worked from home from March (responding to webchat inquiries), with more staff working from home from June/July when the new phone system was operational, and following acquisition of additional phones and computers. Increased clinical and management supervision was also provided for Twenty10 and QLife staff throughout this time.²

² Clinical (or reflective) supervision is a form of supported critical reflection practice that develops reflective practice and the professional skills of the supervisee(s).

COVID-19 in Australia

On a global scale, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia could be considered relatively mild, yet its effects have been felt as significant (including among our participants). At the time of publishing this report, there have been over 19,000 recorded cases, with 909 deaths attributed to COVID-19,³ and a national vaccination program is commencing. The first cases of COVID-19 were recorded in late January 2020, with a sharp increase in late March (climbing from approximately 1000 to 4500 cases in a ten-day period). Late March saw the beginning of lockdowns across all states and territories, with closure of ‘non-essential’ services and many schools. These closures, and restrictions upon social movement and gatherings, would begin to ease in May. In June, stronger lockdowns were implemented in Melbourne and Victoria, following a second wave, and those restrictions started to ease in October. Throughout Australia, localised outbreaks have been met with local lockdowns and interstate border closures. Policies around physical distancing and restricted social gatherings remain in place in early 2021.

SECTION 1: LGBTQ+ young people

Survey findings

We surveyed 660 LGBTQ+ young people (16-25 years) across Australia, about mental health support, from August-November 2020. Two thirds (66.4%) of respondents were aged 16-17 years, and most lived with their families (86.2%). This high rate of living with families is partly due to the younger sample, but we also know, anecdotally, that many young people returned to family homes due to job/income losses in 2020. Most survey participants reported neurodivergence and/or mental health conditions, determined through medical diagnosis (48.1%) and/or self-diagnosis (19%).⁴ A minority (11.4%) indicated no mental health conditions, and 27% reported being unsure about this. Among respondents, anxiety was most commonly reported condition, followed by depression, then ADHD.

In the survey, we asked respondents to choose from a list of difficulties and challenges they may have experienced due to COVID-19 and associated lockdowns (see Figure 1).⁵ Challenges accessing mental health services was the most common difficulty reported (37.8%, N=245), followed by job loss or reduced employment (27.6%, N=179), financial difficulties (25%, N=162), living with someone who made them feel unsafe/afraid (18.8%, N=122), and challenges accessing medical treatment (15.1%, N=98). Lastly, four participants reported experiencing homelessness, and 31 reported experiencing the threat of homelessness.

³ <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers>

⁴ These data are responses to the question, ‘Are you neurodivergent and/or do you have any mental health conditions?’, where participants could indicate medical diagnosis and/or self-diagnosis or being unsure.

⁵ Only 436 people responded to this question, and we cannot be sure if 212 non-responses equate with a ‘none of these’ response, or if those people simply skipped the question. Percentages in this paragraph reflect the 648 participants still enrolled in the survey at this point.

Trans and gender diverse young people⁶ made up 27.4% of the survey sample yet reported higher rates of the above issues than other participants. Of those who indicated experiencing these challenges, trans and gender diverse participants account for 45.7% (N=16) of those reporting homelessness or being at risk of homelessness, 35.2% (N=43) of those living with someone who made them feel unsafe or afraid, and 35.1% (N=86) of those reporting difficulty accessing mental health services. This demonstrates disproportionate hardships faced by trans and gender diverse participants in relation to COVID-19 impacts.

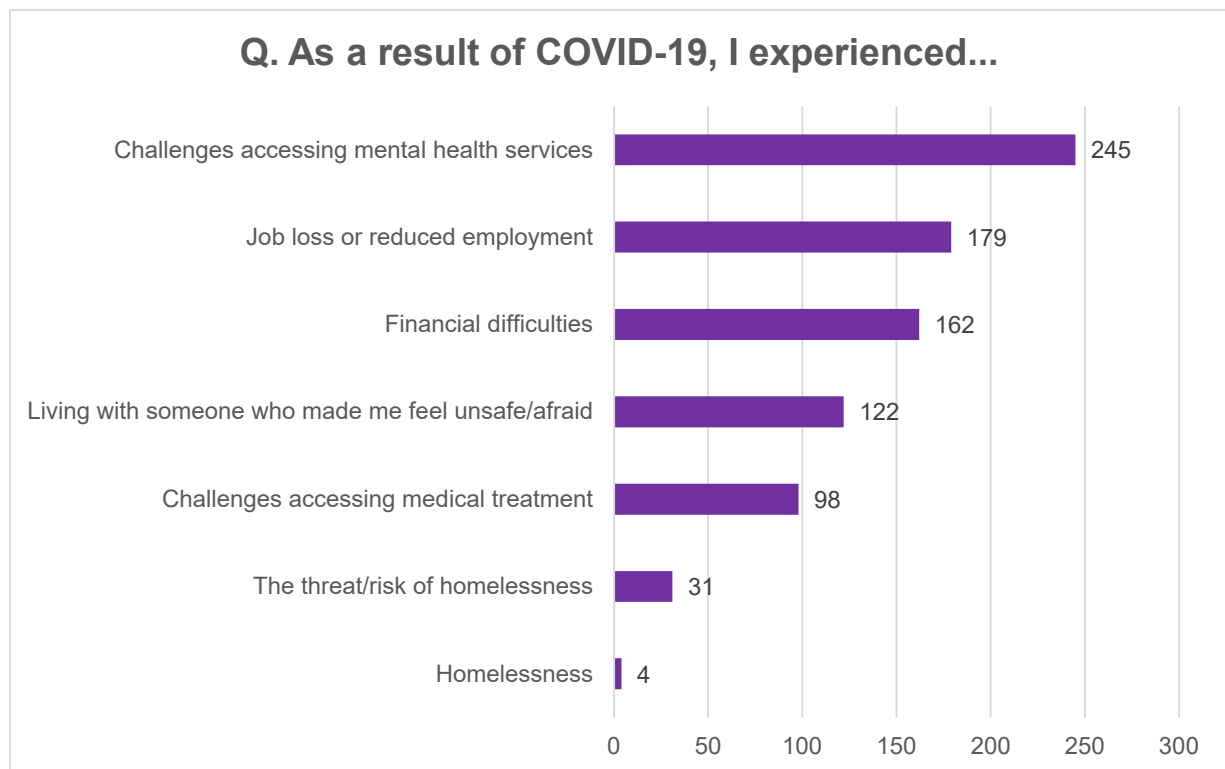


Figure 1: Challenges experienced during COVID-19

We asked participants if they phoned a helpline or engaged with online counselling during this time. Most did not (73%, N=471), but 27% (N=172) indicated doing so.

In relation to how COVID-19 felt for participants, we asked which of 12 statements applied to them (see Figure 2). Among 641 respondents, feeling more isolated (66.1%, N=424) was most commonly reported, followed by feeling overwhelmed/tired/fatigued by social media (64.3%, N=412), and more alone (57.4%, N=368). The fourth most common response was more positive, with 36.8% (N=236) feeling more digitally connected. This speaks to broader survey findings that COVID-19 and its impacts, including limited movement and reduction of in-person social interactions, generated positive experiences for a minority of participants. Many (although a minority) reported feeling supported by friends (32%, N=205), family (23.1%, N=148), and health professionals (13.7%, 88) during this time. Almost one quarter of participants reported feeling 'able to support my friends' (23.9%, N=153) and 'able to take

⁶ In this case, 'trans and gender diverse' refers to participants who responded with 'Yes' to the question: 'Is your gender different to what was assigned to you at birth?'

care/focus on myself' (23.7%, N=152). A similar number of participants reported feeling 'better off than many of my friends' (24.6%, N=158), with slightly less feeling worse off than many friends (21.5%, N=138). A small minority of participants (9%, N=58) reported feeling 'fine, no changes' during COVID-19 lockdowns.

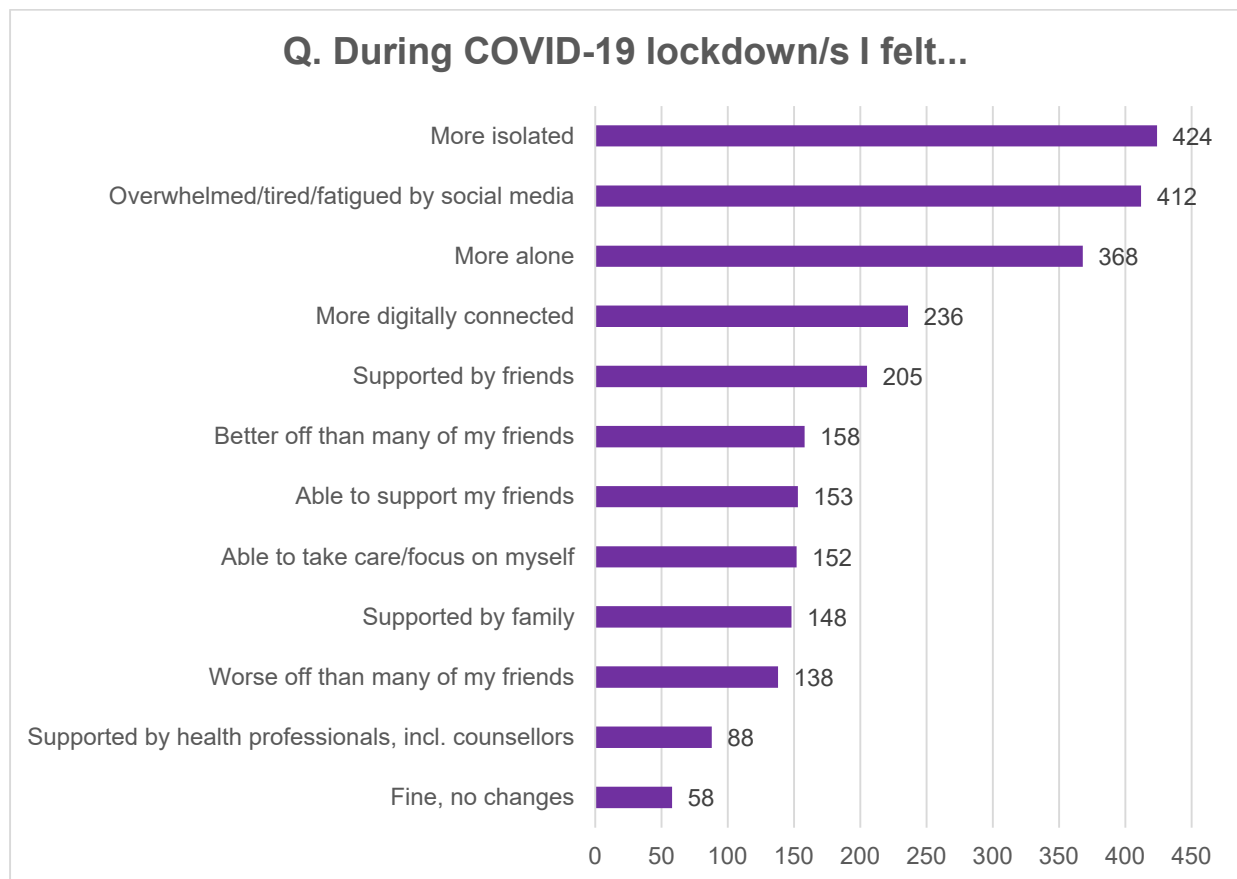


Figure 2: Feelings experienced during COVID-19 lockdown/s

It is important to note that many participants may not need to access LGBTQ+ youth support service or phone/web counselling. However, the data shows a decline in mental health for many participants during COVID-19 lockdowns (see Figure 3). Respondents were asked to rate their mental health at different points in time, including the time of survey completion ('today'), and during COVID-19 lockdowns. At the time of completing the survey (Aug-Nov 2020), 31.6% of respondents (N=205) indicated having excellent/good mental health, but only 10.2% (N=66) reported this for during COVID-19 lockdowns.⁷ At the time of completing the survey, 30% (N=195) indicated experiencing poor/terrible mental health, but this figure was double (62.5%, N=405) for experiencing poor/terrible mental health during COVID-19 lockdowns (see Figure 3). Despite the reported improvement, we note that 30% is still a high and concerning rate of poor mental health.

⁷ Victorian lockdowns were still happening in the first two months of the survey period. A boost in recruitment in October (due to Instagram advertising) meant that a large portion of responses are from October-November, including many responses from Victorian residents that have influenced these results.

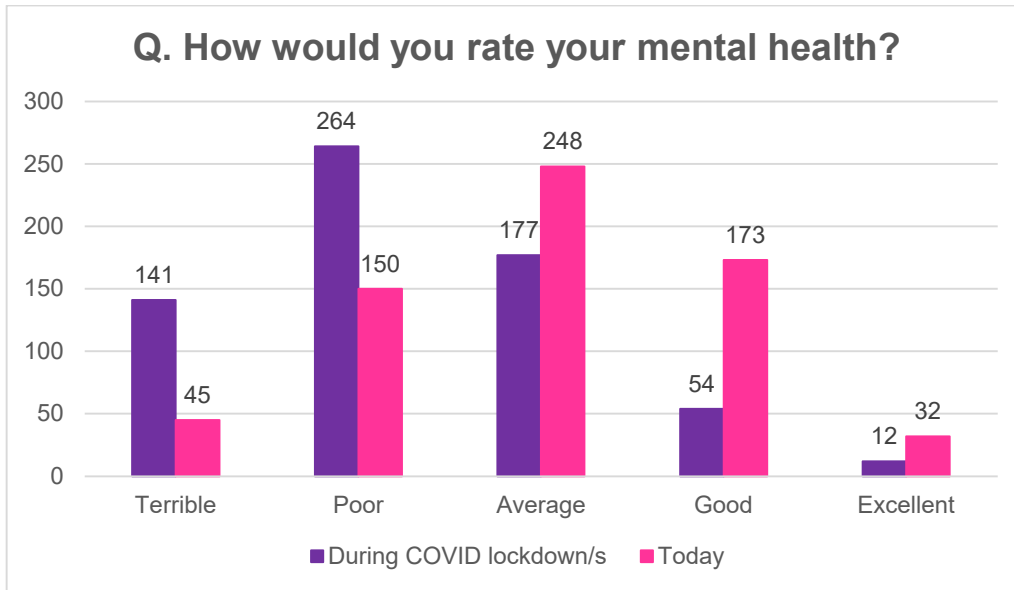


Figure 3: Self rating of mental health, during COVID-19 lockdown/s and currently

Many participants (N=185) responded to an optional question inviting them to “tell us more about how you felt during COVID-19 lockdown/s”. Most reported negative experiences (76.6%, N=144), including some (16.8%, N=31) who reported a mix of negative and positive experiences. For example:

During isolation I only spoke with people who called me by my chosen name and used my pronouns, and it allowed me to gain confidence in my identity I did not previously have. COVID also increased my anxiety 10-fold. I was constantly anxious and cried/had anxiety attacks with very little trigger. (16, non-binary, bisexual/queer)

A minority of participants reported impacts that were only positive (13.8%, N=26), and this mostly related to enjoying a break from socialising and using time alone for reflection and slowing down. For example:

To be fair it took a lot of outside stress off me. It’s actually done quite a lot in the way of giving me the time and space I needed to think. I’m quite grateful for that in all honesty. (19, non-binary, asexual/questioning/omnisexual)

Among the majority (76.6%, N=144) who reported negative impacts to this question, the most common negative experiences mentioned were struggles with school/university (N=27), missing friends (N=25), being stressed or worried (N=21), and feeling unmotivated (N=18) (see Figure 4). Following this was increased anxiety (N=17), explicit mention of isolation (N=17), and difficult home situations (N=17) (mostly in relation to families). Other key themes were explicit mentions of feeling alone/lonely (N=16), increased depression (N=11), and suicide ideation (N=8).

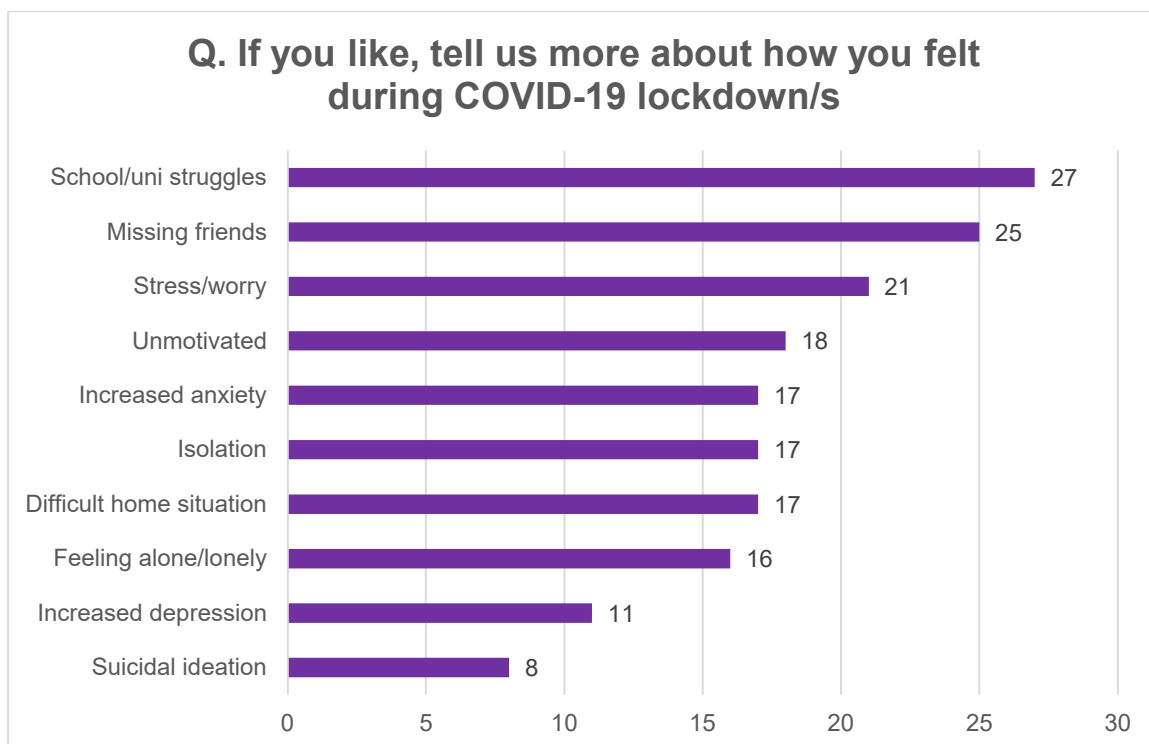


Figure 4: Most commonly discussed negative aspects of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns

Many responses to this question traversed a range of the experiences seen in Figure 4, for example:

I very heavily rely on face to face interactions so during lock down I became very unmotivated and lonely. I live with my family and they are by no means violently homophobic but still hold a lot of prejudice. This meant that when I was struggling with identity/sexuality I felt like I couldn't reach out. (16, female, bisexual/questioning)

Parents' relationship worsened and are now on verge of divorce, dog died, lost friends. Mental health went down the drain and struggled severely with the workload of Year 12. Felt anxious, depressed and alone a lot. Also constantly tired. (17, female, bisexual)

I had to leave Sydney to stay with my family for over a month due to my rapidly declining mental health. As the panic and uncertainty of the lockdown started to weigh on me, I started going downhill very quickly. I felt isolated, lost, and without purpose. I was lucky that I had my family to support me through this time, though not having my freedom and living with family could be stressful at times. (21, male, queer)

These data are useful when considering how young people were supported by the LGBTQ+ youth support sector at this time. The data also highlights young people's current challenges and changing needs and how this will impact organisations that support them. A key factor of these experiences is LGBTQ+ young people's restricted access to safe and supportive spaces

– including mental health services, friendships, schools/universities, and tailored support services such as Twenty10.

Interview findings

In late 2020 we interviewed 11 staff and volunteers from Twenty10 (including QLife staff). These participants reflected upon how COVID-19 and associated closures of community groups and services impacted LGBTQ+ young people. The following section is an overview of key concerns and issues raised about affected young people, largely reflecting the survey findings presented above. All names used are pseudonyms.

Non-supportive home environments

A key concern among staff and volunteers related to the likely difficulties faced by many young people living with unsupportive families. Staff member Rohan commented:

We did get a lot of inquiries from young people who were feeling trapped in their home environment where they weren't being respected for who they are or experiencing abuse – homophobic or transphobic abuse – from either their family or the other people they live with.

Of particular concern was the impact of isolation for young people, which was seen to be further compounded by not attending school face-to-face or seeing friends in person, as reflected in the survey data. Volunteer Nora commented:

I know there's a couple of young people that have been to the Drop-In sessions that I've been in that don't have great home situations... it was hard not to worry about people, young people, being stuck in situations that maybe weren't safe or weren't ideal and being stuck in them 24/7.

This key concern was expressed by many interview participants, some highlighting that being 'stuck' in an unsupportive home environment makes it more difficult for young people to access support through the school environment – from friends as well as school personnel – as also noted by young people surveyed.

Loss of employment and income meant that some young people had to return to their family environments for financial reasons, or risk homelessness. This was further compounded for some who were ineligible for JobSeeker or JobKeeper⁸ because of their age, which meant that their income was assessed as part of their parents' income. Damon, a QLife staff member, noted numerous calls were received from those who had to move back home, stating: 'they see that as a backwards step because they have to – for want of a better phrase, go back into the closet.' Damon observed that this was especially the case for trans young people who

⁸ JobSeeker is a national income support payment that was temporarily increased in 2020 due to COVID-19 impacts. JobKeeper is a temporary income support scheme paid to employers so that they could continue paying staff despite reduced/lost work hours due to COVID-19 impacts.

were unable to express their gender at home, and whose family members did not use their correct names and pronouns.

Young trans and gender diverse people commonly reported to QLife staff that they were unable to express their gender without compromising their safety. Having to hide their gender expression – to reduce the risks of transphobia, discrimination, violence, and homelessness – further compromised their mental health.

Trans and gender diverse healthcare

Staff and volunteers noted increased distress reported by young trans and gender diverse people during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly regarding increased anxiety, loneliness, isolation and mental ill-health. Young people reported that services for gender affirming medical care were at capacity around the country and had long waiting lists, impacting their mental health and wellbeing. This was acknowledged by QLife staff who were unable to refer people to some of these services during this time. Most interview participants raised specific concerns for the wellbeing of trans and gender diverse young people during COVID-19, citing the difficult home environments of many clients and callers they have supported, along with their knowledge that trans and gender diverse young people face significant challenges accessing supportive health care (including mental health care) at the best of times.

Housing and risks of homelessness

Many young people living independently experienced distress due to insecure housing and income in 2020, as reported across survey and interview data. Loss of income for young people living on a low income – surviving week to week without the ability to accrue savings – can result in poverty and homelessness. As evident in the survey data above, many LGBTQ+ young people lost jobs and income and faced the risk of homelessness during COVID-19, with four respondents experiencing homelessness. Young people who were casually employed in a job for less than twelve months were ineligible for government subsidies, forcing many to rely on charities to survive, as noted by Alice from QLife:

They're just living in places without power and without electricity unless the charities are paying for the electricity or the gas. So, that's been through winter which has been really bad – and just living on donated food. Once the eviction moratorium comes off, I guess they'll probably be homeless or in their cars. Quite a few people are talking about going to buy a van to live in.

In addition to homelessness, many young people who had lost their jobs could not afford to buy groceries. Twenty10 is a key service providing food for young people, in partnership with Addison Road Community Centre and other food services, including their end of year food hamper appeal. Ari, a staff member at Twenty10, noted:

Now we're having to either prepare [food] hampers for people... [or] we would get people calling and saying, hey, I need food, where can I go? We'd have to refer them to other services, and hopefully the services were safe for them.

In addition to counselling services, housing support, case management, scheduled health services, and regular meals or food provision, other resources young people used at Twenty10 included access to a shower, washing machines, and computers for internet and printing. Due to closure of the office, access to these other resources was no longer available and they would have to be sourced elsewhere.

Staff noted that LGBTQ+ international students were at increased risk of homelessness, unemployment, hunger and living in poverty during the COVID-19 pandemic. QLife experienced an increase in international students accessing support, particularly through webchat, and Alice observed additional difficulties experienced by LGBTQ+ young people applying for refugee status, who had been 'hard hit.' It was noted that many international students and young people applying for refugee status because of their gender and/or sexuality 'are living with people from churches who are putting them up' and accessing food and other services through Twenty10.

Mental health and digital services

Young people engaged with Twenty10 through the digital platform Discord, where fortnightly hangOUT sessions were developed and facilitated by staff following the suspension of Drop-In and other social spaces (see Section 3 of this report). Mental health was a topic of discussion among young people on hangOUT, Ari notes:

In the Discord chats that I've been in, there have been a couple of people who will just talk for a long, long time about how bad their mental health has been. It's good that they've got a space for that, but it's also quite sad because the isolation is real.

Some Twenty10 housing clients were particularly isolated due to health issues, Rohan noted, and were unable to leave their homes. QLife staff highlighted that increased anxiety and mental ill-health among LGBTQ+ young people were national issues, with Alice observing:

Everybody who has a mental health issue of any form, [COVID-19] just exacerbated it. People became very, very anxious, just very worried about their work, their future, their income.

Young people in Victoria reported heightened distress to QLife staff during the Victorian second wave of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown. It was noted that young people with chronic illnesses, disabilities and mental ill-health before the pandemic were significantly impacted during this time.

SECTION 2: LGBTQ+ service staff & volunteers

Interviews with Twenty10 staff and volunteers illustrated the significant impacts that COVID-19 and associated restrictions had on their roles. Key issues discussed by interview participants were: transitions to working from home; changes to communication among peers and colleagues; workload disruptions and increased workloads; and managing increased stress. The following sections address these themes.

Working from home

Working from home for staff, where this was an option, raised both advantages and disadvantages. The main advantages were not having to commute to work (freeing up time), avoiding potential exposure to COVID-19 on public transport, and greater flexibility in managing time and workload. The main disadvantages included isolation from work colleagues, the blurring of boundaries between workspace and home space, and compromised wellbeing.

Many discussed isolation from work colleagues as one of the most challenging factors, particularly the loss of more informal 'chance' meetings with colleagues or peers, and losing the ability to ask on-the-spot questions, or casually check in with each other. Apart from online formal meetings, phoning and texting became the most frequent means of connecting and 'catching up' with colleagues. For some, not seeing someone's face when speaking to them was challenging. As Ari said: 'It's an extra layer of separation.'

The blurring of established personal and professional spaces when working from home was difficult for many, especially staff who work directly with young people in crisis. Separating out a workspace in one's home was difficult to negotiate, especially for those living in small apartments. For some this meant home space was no longer a sanctuary from work. This forced some staff to reflect on their work habits and expectations when working from home. Some felt more easily distracted, and some preferred being in their own space. Some devised new strategies to cope, such as taking breaks, debriefing with colleagues over the phone, and closing off or removing workstations from sight.

Some staff raised concerns about health issues, such as disruption to healthy routines they had built around their working lives. For some, walking to and from work was a form of daily exercise and created a sense of distance from work-related stress. One staff member scheduled a walk at the beginning and end of each workday for their health and wellbeing.

In the initial transition to working from home, some staff would come to discover that their work laptops and internet connections were not able to handle the speed and size of new programs used (such as Discord and Zoom). Because staff had not had the option to work from home previously, these were new issues for negotiation, and staff would become more equipped through the provision of new work laptops.

For QLife staff, working remotely from colleagues was challenging at times, especially after difficult calls or chats. Prior to physical distancing measures, staff working in proximity could easily debrief, when useful. When working in more isolated settings, debriefing largely occurred through phone calls or online chats and were more routinised, as opposed to more casual forms of 'checking in'.

Changing communicative norms

There were significant changes to how staff communicated with colleagues during COVID-19. Twenty10 switched to using Microsoft Office (from Gmail) during the main lockdown period,

which meant that staff and volunteers had to negotiate this new system alongside significant changes to their roles. In addition, Twenty10 relocated to a new office space in September (due to forthcoming building renovations and increased rent). A new system and tools posed some initial stress and adjustments for staff, some requiring upskilling at an unfortunate time of workplace and personal challenges.

Staff faced an increase in digital communications amongst colleagues, clients, and peers, as well as weekly meetings, and staff and volunteer catch ups, now being hosted online (e.g. via Zoom or Microsoft Teams). Newsletters, phone calls, and Slack⁹ were also core modes of communication amongst staff and volunteers. Slack provided a platform to communicate across different work groups among QLife staff and volunteers, with separate chat threads for volunteers, staff, or social interactions. Staff and volunteers interacted with these platforms in different ways (or sometimes hardly at all) depending on how time-poor they were (most QLife staff held multiple jobs, some having full-time employment elsewhere).

Across the organisation, different online approaches were introduced or trialed to find the most effective tools. As noted, the lack of face-to-face interactions with colleagues, for both formal meetings and informal or ad hoc interactions, was difficult for many. Difficulties in reading nuance and tone in digital communications was commonly reported. This highlights how new modes of workplace communication can challenge established workplace relationships and intimacies, and the everyday support these provide.

There was also the perception that online meetings required more focus, energy and performance. As staff member Lyla commented:

...this morning we had our first in-person meeting – a team meeting, and it was great, because we had this conversation that was a bit more nuanced, it was about our feelings towards something that was more off the record, which I don't think would happen on Zoom... [where] there's a focusing, you're performing... there's a lot more energy that you're expending if you're [on Zoom] rather than being in person...

For QLife staff, increased access to supervision from their clinical supervisor was beneficial to discussing issues that arose with clients and getting feedback on practices. It also provided an opportunity to get to know colleagues better, since all casual and part-time staff participated in these.

Disruptions & increased workloads

Some staff reported that the everyday business of Twenty10 did not change much when the office closed. Others reported disruptions to how that work was performed, and this caused some anxiety for some staff. For example, face-to-face programs, which were core to many people's jobs, were suspended, as Lyla highlights:

⁹ A channel-based messaging platform mostly used by workplace colleagues for regular, ongoing communication.

I was like... what the hell am I going to do now? My job is based on face-to-face. It revolves around face-to-face contact and community and connectivity and inviting in. Then there was a period of having to adjust to that and realise what a pandemic was... and then also work through it and then also take care of my own mental health.

Another staff member, Rohan, pointed out that not being able to do key aspects of their job, which involved assisting young people with living skills, moving into supported housing, or getting to appointments, was 'incredibly restrictive.' This work had to be done by phone or online. Rohan described this essential work as 'doing case management with my hands tied behind my back because it really did limit what we could actually do.' Providing referrals and information was still possible, Rohan said, but 'quality engagement work was really hampered.'

Some staff indicated that their workloads had increased, some commented that work felt more 'intense' and many noted an increased volume of email. Concerns about the impact of COVID-19 restrictions on young people's mental health resulted in staff making themselves 'more available' by phone. Rohan stated that there was 'a lot more incidental counselling support' offered to young people, which had a significant impact, 'considering that you're also going through this pandemic.'

QLife staff had been asked to try and keep phone calls and web chats to 15-20 minutes, though it was acknowledged that chats often took longer than calls, and that 'chatters' were predominantly younger people. Sophie described chat as being more direct yet slower, and often resulting in referral with less discussion and listening support. Alice noted similar issues:

Webchat always takes a bit longer, it's a bit longer to establish where somebody is. You don't have all the voice signals and breathing and stuff.

Aside from limiting time spent with clients, QLife staff did not always notice increased volume of calls/chats. This likely relates to the extended service implemented in NSW, and increased staffing. Staff did, however, report greater intensity in the nature of calls/chats, and so welcomed the opportunities provided for more group supervision meetings with colleagues.

Managing stress

For some staff there was increased anxiety and stress beyond their employment or engagement with Twenty10. Some volunteers lost income from their jobs as a result of COVID-19. One staff member also cared for an elderly parent during this period. Managing stress was difficult but for some the pandemic resulted in some important realisations. Damon (QLife) stated:

I think a lot of us are quite hard on ourselves. We're quite self-critical so it is a good exercise for us to just reassure each other that we're – there are limits to our service... We're not there to solve all [caller] problems. It's a one-off anonymous inconsistent service. There are limits to it and we need to recognise that sometimes.

Similarly, Lyla reflected on learning new ways to cope with work encroaching on non-work time and domestic life:

I think the key lesson is to learn how to compartmentalise work from home and from relationships to friendships... and understand that if I need to not be on my computer, that that's okay... Just being more in touch with your boundaries and why they exist, and actually sticking to them. Don't burn yourself out...

Staff also noted the value in workshopping and sharing new workplace issues and stresses with colleagues, and a need for interactions to facilitate this. One staff member highlighted the importance of 'being able to share our experiences and know that I definitely wasn't alone in those challenges.'

Volunteer experiences

Volunteering across Twenty10 programs, including QLife, was put on hold in 2020 since most volunteer engagement involved working face-to-face with clients and/or staff. This was no longer feasible under state-based public health orders. Volunteers we interviewed supported and understood this decision. One volunteer, Shane, seemed to understand this as part of a scaling back of services, stating: 'Twenty10 must remain viable. So, if that meant cutting back services to a bare minimum to ensure their ongoing survival, I'm all for that.' Although Twenty10's survival was not in danger, and service adjustments reflected public health orders, rather than scaling back, Shane's sentiment reflects a concern among all volunteers about the potential negative impacts that COVID-19 may have on the organisation. All volunteers expressed tenacious support for Twenty10, despite their hiatus from participating in service provision at the time of our interviews.

As noted, QLife volunteers were no longer engaged to respond to callers/contacts during COVID-19, yet some volunteers were recruited to casual and part-time positions within the QLife program to meet demand as much as possible.

Volunteers we interviewed had facilitated a range of programs, including Drop-In, evening social groups, and the OutWest groups. All spoke of missing this engagement, and the satisfaction it brought. Of OutWest, Mila said, 'I miss it so much!' While understanding the need for suspending face-to-face gatherings, volunteers commonly expressed sadness and a longing to return to engagement with young people in their roles. When asked if they would be interested in volunteering in digital spaces (such as Discord), some felt they would, yet there was some reticence given that most found value and satisfaction in casual, in-person, contact with young people in familiar settings. Some felt that there was less need for them to participate in digital outreach work, with Nora stating that 'there's really not that much we can do with the virtual stuff.'

Most volunteers we interviewed had engaged with Twenty10 for years, if not decades, so there was a habituated sense of what this entailed. Many offered fond memories of their engagement with young people, alongside their knowledge of Twenty10 clients' diverse needs, struggles and strengths – knowledge gained through sharing space that involved tasks like cooking or playing cards, or simply chatting with clients and witnessing their interactions.

Such casual interactions would be difficult to translate to digital spaces, and some volunteers felt they had limited knowledge of such spaces.

SECTION 3: Twenty10 response & future needs

Overall, interview participants were pleased with Twenty10's rapid response to COVID-19 to ensure the safety of clients and staff. Regular and clear communication from management and the Board was applauded, and staff, including Rohan, appreciated that there was no pretense that it would be 'business as usual':

I think that was really clear communication from management that we aren't expected to work... [as though] we weren't in a pandemic and we weren't being impacted by it. That was one of the most valuable things.

Rohan also noted that the Board's formal acknowledgement of staff's extra efforts 'was really quite significant.'

While volunteers had less engagement with the organisation in 2020, those we interviewed appreciated regular updates from Twenty10, and highly praised the Volunteer Coordinator for keeping them in the loop. They were informed of new modes of service delivery, even where these had no direct relation to their volunteer roles. Mila was particularly impressed with the hangOUT Discord server and felt that 'Twenty10 has done an amazing job to try and accommodate the radical change that's occurred.' Opportunities for volunteers to participate in social gatherings (via Zoom) were also appreciated, even though many were unable to attend.

Responding to the needs of clients through offering the Discord server was highlighted as a key success by many interview participants, and Ari states: "I think we responded pretty well, considering. We listened to what people needed, and we just tried to do our best to get it out there." Staff and volunteers noted the collaborative effort involved in expanding digital engagement. Like Ari, Nora (volunteer) saw this as a key aspect of Twenty10's adaptation to COVID-safe service delivery:

So it does feel like a very collaborative organisation and an organisation that very much listens to the people that are using the service, that are working within the service and that are volunteering for the service.

Nora acknowledged that 'it would have been easy for the staff to just go oh, we've had to shut down, we can't do this,' however she witnessed staff 'going out of their way to try to think of new ways to change the service and see how they can reach people.'

Group supervision was provided to staff via an external clinical supervisor, with sessions held every three weeks during COVID-19, with 1-on-1 supervision available, as required. This additional support was appreciated, as particularly noted by QLife staff including Alice:

...if we ask for any support we get it. They're very good about giving it to us, but sometimes you've got to remember to ask for it, because that's a new thing.

Alongside the sense that staff 'needed to remember' to ask for support, was a sense that some staff may be reluctant to take up offers of additional support from management, given a common awareness that organisations in this sector have limited resources.

Although there was strong appreciation for how things were managed by the Board and management, there was also significant discussion of how the organisational shifts, and the additional labour, upskilling, and negotiations of new practices and technologies had taken a toll on staff, with many feeling exhausted at the time of our interviews. As Lyla stated, 'I think everyone went into crisis and we're still in damage control.'

Building digital spaces

Prior to COVID-19, Twenty10 already used several social media platforms to connect with communities and LGBTQ+ young people – particularly Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Uses of social media slightly shifted once face-to-face services closed, and more effort was made to keep people engaged, providing more uplifting content and a stronger community focus, according to Ari. This included 'Twenty10 and friends' posts, where staff and volunteers provided 'a few little top-fives of cute things to do,' Ari recounted. They further stated:

we want to get content out there that's enriching and making people feel good about themselves. I think that's almost amped up a bit, an extra level because everyone is feeling a bit isolated.

Before the transition to Discord, Twenty10 hosted some Instagram Live sessions. These offered young people an opportunity to engage and invited them to suggest future digital events. Nora attended one of these, saying, 'it felt really interactive', and she hoped these events would continue.

Setting up a Discord server¹⁰ was an innovative strategy developed during the pandemic. Discord 'hangOUT' events, initially scheduled fortnightly on Wednesday afternoons, provided a social space for young people (13-25 years) to connect with each other and support workers, as per the Drop-In service previously available at Twenty10. Ari, who helped set up the hangOUT Discord, saw this as a necessary space 'for young people to connect with us.' They noted that hangOUT was only available at specific times and was more 'scheduled' than Discord use would otherwise be experienced by young people. This was necessary due to the need for staff to carefully moderate the space.

¹⁰ Discord is a social media platform used to host community and friendship groups, in which users can communicate through text, voice or video chat – privately or to the group. A group is referred to as a 'server' and typically hosts different channels for different topics. The platform supports screensharing and was popularised by gamers, but rebranded in 2020 as a site for communities and friendships.

Several staff we interviewed played a role in setting up hangOUT and acknowledged that this was new terrain, though something that had already been on the agenda. Ari states: 'We actually did polling online, and overwhelmingly everyone said we want Discord.' Lyla noted that the current situation 'accelerated' existing plans 'to move a lot of stuff online.'

When reflecting on why Discord was most favoured among clients, Lyla noted that 'a lot of them are gamers... [and] a lot of gamers use Discord as a platform to communicate, and it is quite user-friendly.' Lyla also discussed how Discord culture and vernaculars make this 'a more accessible space for young people.'

Setting up Discord happened through consultation with clients, often through existing social media channels. Once established, use of the Discord server was refined through trial and error, with clients often guiding the staff, as Ari explained:

That was such a learning experience for all of us because it was hilarious, you'd get in the room, and you'd be like, okay, we're doing this, and the young people would be like, go to here, go to this setting, and change that.

Staff noted that many other services moved to digital client engagement more quickly, but in hindsight it was seen as more valuable that Twenty10 took extra time to build something with young people to ensure that it worked best for them and would be safe. As well as involving young people's direct input, time was taken to perform a full risk assessment – deemed necessary and important to ensure young people's safety, given that users would be aged 13-25 years. Kai from Twenty10 noted:

I think that they've done a really remarkable job getting it done, and considering things like safety and stuff, and not pushing forward and just putting something out.

Ari noted that while young people may want the server to remain open 24/7, this was not feasible due to Twenty10's duty of care and need to moderate this space. Time is also taken to 'intake' each young person before they participate in hangOUT, and this is done through a short video interview on Discord itself. Ari saw hangOUT as a work in progress that was being further developed with young people:

I mean we have such a wide age range, 13 to 25, that has so much life experience within it. So we're trying to figure out ways that we can have the server open more often. We've gone from once a fortnight to three per fortnight, which is really exciting.

hangOUT has been successful in offering a private, moderated online environment where young people can be supported and engage in: leading a workshop of interest; participating in structured activities; playing games; chatting about different topics; and engaging with external guests. Twenty10 has been able to reach a new audience of young people through hangOUT, particularly regional and rural young people. The move to Discord was also more seamless because this is an environment with which many LGBTQ+ young people were already familiar.

Alongside the value of the Discord, and its accessibility to new clients who could not access the city-based Drop-In, some limitations were noted. A key challenge was identifying the needs and concerns of clients through only using online or remote technologies. Reflecting on hangOUT, Kai commented on the difficulty of:

Not being able to see who's there. Not being able to read those things, like you see everyone in your [Drop-In] group, [like] who's not engaging. What can you not tell? What are we not picking up on? What's happening in someone's home environment?

Rohan reported a diversity of young people's responses to accessing services online, noting that introverted clients who were already deeply invested in digital activities and interactions were more suited to accessing online support. As such, these clients tended to be less impacted by COVID-19 restrictions and reported less mental distress:

I'm glad it was only about half of my clients who experienced that increased mental distress. The other half went the other way. So quite a few of my clients, particularly those who are much more introverted and they engage with the world online – so their social world is really through gaming platforms or just online, other social media platforms – it really normalised their lifestyle and a few of them have expressed that it really worked for them.

This knowledge of Twenty10 clients informed the set-up of the Discord server, which would also benefit young people from regional and remote NSW who were previously unable to engage with most Twenty10 social spaces. Similarly, this space was more accessible to disabled and chronically ill young people. However, some young people who had regularly engaged in face-to-face services at Twenty10, especially the regular Drop-In service, did not attend hangOUT. Kai observed:

I think it's been really good for some people, but there are people that just haven't engaged, that were coming to Drop-In three or four times a week, or once a week or whatever, that haven't engaged with the online space. So, the online space isn't for everyone. And then it's just like, how do we keep those people engaged in the service, or make sure that they're getting what they need?

New needs, future planning

Funding issues

With the benefit of hindsight, we asked interview participants if some things could have been handled better. On the whole, participants felt that things were managed well for an unprecedented disruption. It was noted that while nobody foresaw a need for contingency planning in the case of a pandemic, many now think this is needed.

In considering how things might be handled differently in future disruptions, many staff and volunteers highlighted the limited resources available to the LGBTQ+ youth support sector which meant they were not well-placed to respond to crises. Many pointed to an ideal scenario of increased funding to hire more staff to soften service disruptions and support easier transitions. Kai states:

In an ideal world, with extra funding, and more people to work on things and stuff, there's more that could be done of the spaces. It could have happened faster, or whatever, but it's like such a huge shift to change all of your services, and to do that with the people that are in there.

Mila (volunteer) states, 'unfortunately the bottom line is funding.' Similarly, Damon was reluctant to forecast QLife's future because 'it depends on their funding for next year.' This uncertainty is not new to organisations like Twenty10, but unprecedented disruptions such as COVID-19 place significant and unfair pressure on support staff and the organisation as a whole. These stressful working conditions are also likely to impact young people's experiences of these services.

Workload issues

As an exhausting year for staff, it was suggested (in hindsight) that some regular duties may have been dropped to focus on the most vital tasks, alleviating some risk of staff burnout. According to one staff member:

...one thing that probably didn't happen as much as it could have is stopping – maybe stripping back a bit of the work that we were doing in order to focus on our core roles.

As such, it would be useful for contingency planning to clearly outline staff's core duties, as well as their lower priority duties that can be paused if necessary.

Tech issues

An issue mentioned by several staff related to computers that needed to be upgraded to handle additional digital workloads, including the use of Zoom and Discord. These computers, prior to COVID-19, were adequate in situations where most client engagement and staff interaction was in-person, but greater digital engagement during COVID-19 required better hardware – an issue faced by many organisations. Staff computers were replaced or upgraded, yet this did not always happen immediately in COVID-19 contexts, and many staff tried to work with what they had, which caused some frustration. This highlights how the changing nature of the workplace requires ongoing needs assessments, which is pivotal to maintaining staff abilities to perform their roles, especially in the context of developing new modes of digital outreach and service delivery. As Lyla noted, 'That took a little bit to get to, but I think now we're pretty resourced.' A need for technology upgrades also extends to QLife, where Sophie noted that tech issues have always been common: 'that's always something that can be worked on.'

Working from home

Contingency planning around working remotely was also discussed as important for future operations. While working-from-home arrangements were facilitated immediately, there was some delay in making this possible for QLife staff since this depended on a national service upgrade to existing technology. Contingency plans herein could factor in likely needs to work remotely and more flexibly, and to ensure there is technology to do so, where possible.

Many noted a preference for flexible work environments that took their personal situations into consideration. This went both ways, as many staff preferred to work from an office space

– particularly to keep workplace stress away from their home life. The experience of needing to work from home during COVID-19 for many workers across the Australian workforce generally has raised issues about possible new and different working arrangements in the future, including more permanent working from home arrangements.

Staff and volunteer communication

As noted, communication to staff and volunteers throughout the pandemic was strong and highly valued. Yet in hindsight, some felt that staff gatherings via Zoom might have happened faster, to quickly ensure that staff felt included. Alice stated:

I think maybe just go to the Zoom catch-ups with the staff who are working externally as quickly as possible, I think they were good... I would say that that's the big thing, in making people feel that they're still part of the organisation.

QLife services

QLife staff had a broad understanding of the added pressures on LGBTQ+ people throughout the pandemic, and so are in a position to forecast the future and ongoing needs of LGBTQ+ young people nationally. This includes the ongoing need for extending and better resourcing QLife services to meet community needs for peer support. Alice suggested that if QLife were better resourced, 'we could easily go 24/7, and a lot of our callers have said they'd love that.' According to Sophie, 'QLife's responded fantastically and could respond even more fantastically in the future is that they were able to hire more staff.' For Damon, increased resourcing for QLife could come through bringing volunteers back on board: 'I guess an ideal scenario would be a return to our volunteer pool because that's a lot of people.' Expanding QLife's operations was also justified through reports from callers/contacts of poor experiences with mainstream tele-web counselling.

Among QLife staff, the increased ability for telehealth referrals was seen as a key advance in how they can support clients, particularly young people from rural or remote areas, or those who are disabled. It was noted that this option has been necessary for a long time, but was finally realised through the national health response to COVID-19.

Increased counselling capacity

Many staff and volunteers pointed to a need to continue and further enhance digital outreach services, such as through Discord. Lyla was also in favour of this yet felt that increased counselling services for young people were a higher priority and were necessary before expanding Twenty10's client base through digital means: 'for me, the priority is the counselling capacity before doing that outreach.' Lyla further stated:

...we can always do with more counsellors here. We have one, so having a counsellor online, available at all times, every time we run a program, would be so beneficial... We've always been under-resourced in the counselling and therapy side of it.

Lyla further noted that it would be ideal for additional counselling services to reach young people beyond metropolitan Sydney, with counsellors based regionally, 'not just inner city or city directed therapy.'

Extending outreach and service delivery

Interview participants pointed to an ongoing need for expanded outreach to clients, including digital spaces that can better engage young people outside central Sydney. Hosting more digital spaces to connect with young people was seen as an important strategy to continue to diversify support services, ensuring greater accessibility to disabled young people as well as those based regionally and rurally. As many noted, broadening Twenty10's modes of service delivery in ongoing and sustainable ways would require additional staffing. Interviewees also pointed out that expanded or new forms of expertise may be needed for providing more digital outreach and access points for young people.

The limits of digital spaces

Interview participants reported that although Discord was beneficial to many young people, and it boosted access to Twenty10 among regional, rural and outer-suburban young people, there was a limit to what this technology could offer. As Lyla stated, 'You're not going to join a Discord if you're in crisis, you're going to seek the help that you need.' This was further reflected by volunteers familiar with the Twenty10 physical space, who noted that many young people attended the service to do their laundry, access food, and engage in less structured and more casual forms of socialising.

Upon returning to face-to-face service provision, staff and volunteers noted that some LGBTQ+ young people were likely to need greater support due to how they were impacted by COVID-19, community lockdowns, and social isolation.

Perhaps [needed is] the preparation for any fallout, particularly those that struggled in households that may not have been very accommodating. That would have definitely had an impact on a young person's state of mind. (Mila, volunteer)

...there's going to be people probably with much more severe issues than there had before COVID-19. I think people are going to be much more vulnerable and much more anxious. (Alice, QLife)

These statements echo wider sentiments that appointing more counselling staff to provide more therapeutic services was a key priority in moving forward, and for meeting an increased need for support among young people impacted by COVID-19. However, this is dependent on the organisation receiving the additional funds necessary to implement such changes.

Key findings & conclusion

The story of Twenty10 is offered as a case study (alongside data from LGBTQ+ young people) to consider the broader needs of the sector, including aspects of digital outreach, accessibility, organisational sustainability, and pressures faced by staff and volunteers. Ongoing attention to the needs and experiences of clients, staff and volunteers in the LGBTQ+ support sector is vital for ensuring a viable, sustainable, and continued culture of care and support. Notably, the provision of support for LGBTQ+ young people must respond to new and ongoing challenges to their mental health, including the enduring impacts of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns.

Our national survey of 660 LGBTQ+ young people found that most were negatively impacted by COVID-19 lockdowns. Notably, most participants (66.4%) were aged 16-17 years and studying at high school. Many faced greater social isolation (particularly from being away from friends), greater mental health challenges (such as increased anxiety and depression), job losses and reduced income, struggles with schooling, a lack of motivation, and difficulties in accessing mental health services. Many felt 'stuck' in unsupportive home environments, often due to school closures or job/income losses. Some participants reported homelessness or facing its risk, as well as suicidal ideation. Some struggled less than most, with a minority of participants reporting positive experiences.

While LGBTQ+ young people have long reported negative experiences of schooling – including school-based homophobia, transphobia and discrimination – educational settings can also act as an important safety net, as our findings demonstrate. This is especially the case for those living in unsupportive and unsafe home environments. No longer having access to school spaces, and regular opportunities to be in the company of friends, negatively affected many. This isolation from friends and safe spaces took the greatest toll on those who already experienced poor mental health.

That 37.8% of survey respondents (N=245) reported difficulties in accessing mental health services was echoed by QLife staff who also heard these stories from young people. They noted that trans and gender diverse young people were more severely impacted by service closures or long wait times for appointments. This finding should be factored into future strategies for LGBTQ+ mental health service provision that increase access points for trans and gender diverse young people, particularly those aged under 18.

Young people's experiences of COVID-19 no doubt differed in severity in accordance with a range of intersecting factors, including age, whether living in rural/regional/urban settings, race and ethnicity, (dis)ability, socio-economic background and more. As a short report, we have not delved into many such intersections, but hope to do so elsewhere. Notably, LGBTQ+ young people without access to welfare support faced increased risks of hunger and homelessness, including international students who relied on the support of charities.

Trans and gender diverse young people have been particularly impacted by COVID-19 and associated lockdowns. As many participants suggested, living through COVID-19 will have lasting effects for many, necessitating increased opportunities for tailored counselling and

therapeutic support. Organisations such as Twenty10 are well placed to offer this, though this requires additional funding for staff appointments.

Twenty10's increased online service provision, particularly through the use of Discord, led to an increased service access to young people across NSW, including those with disabilities and/or chronic illness. As such, many staff and volunteers want this to continue and expand. Yet, some young people who regularly attended Drop-In services did not access hangOUT. Evidently, a digital format does suit everyone, particularly those who relied on Twenty10 for accessing food, a kitchen, a laundry, computers, and extended social interaction with peers.

Survey data from young people also highlight that digital sites of support in the face of crises such as COVID-19 are important but can have limited value. While 36.8% (N=236) of survey respondents felt 'more digitally connected' during COVID-19 lockdowns, 64.3% (N=412) also reported feeling 'overwhelmed/tired/fatigued by social media' (see Figure 2). This suggests that the creation of new digital spaces will not guarantee their use. Staff, too, reported digital fatigue and a dissatisfaction with the 'distance' felt through digital communications. These isolating effects will be a continued challenge for many staff, volunteers, and clients. This is not to say that the hangOUT Discord and similar spaces are not valuable, but these spaces cannot fully substitute regular opportunities for in-person engagement, as provided by Drop-In services and shared office spaces that were, until recently, the norm. Our findings highlight the different needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ young people, whereby a single mode of service delivery is recognised as insufficient.

Setting up the Discord server was a key achievement of Twenty10 and the staff involved. Its success, including enhanced opportunities for service access among LGBTQ+ young people, was attributed to the careful and collective building of the space. That this development took direction from young users is noteworthy. This, alongside other staff transitions to working from home, developing new communicative norms, and navigating many disruptions and stresses, demonstrated the adaptability and tireless commitment of staff at Twenty10. However, staff also reported exhaustion, with several suggesting that time was needed to heal – on both a personal and community level.

Twenty10 staff and volunteers highlighted how both service provision and staff practices rapidly diversified during COVID-19. It was felt that new flexibilities (such as working from home, and newly imposed digital communications) should continue, based on what was learned during this time. However, it was also recognised that greater flexibility, particularly in relation to client services, would require additional planning, labour, and time – and therefore additional funding support. For example, maintaining Discord hangOUT while also re-opening Drop-In will require additional staffing.

Many volunteers expressed sadness at being unable to participate in the organisation through scheduled face-to-face volunteer shifts, yet understood that this was not feasible or safe during COVID-19 lockdowns. Volunteers we interviewed still felt valued and included by Twenty10 and looked forward to returning to their roles. Mostly these roles were imagined as in-person, rather than digital, though some were open to this change.

Several interview participants noted that participating in this research afforded the opportunity to reflect on 2020 – a year in which the pace and scale of change limited time for thinking about key lessons or achievements, whether personal, organisational, or community-based. In one reflective moment, Rohan stated:

I've been so heartened by being part of such a proactive community... I've felt more connected to a community; my workplace community, the queer community but also the broader community and to feel like the community has been really investing a lot in the safety of each other. I think that has been really nice. To be held together in that way, to acknowledge that when it comes down to it we do prioritise the health and wellbeing of one another, and that has been really apparent.

Despite the stress and challenges faced by staff, acknowledgements from management and the Board were greatly appreciated. Staff were thankful that they would not be asked to work 'as normal' and were offered additional support when required. Participants also reflected on a need to commemorate what everyone had been through in 2020, and the achievements of the organisation:

Shane: I do hope there is an opportunity soon to celebrate something with people at Twenty10.

Lyla: I definitely feel like there needs to be some kind of end of year connectivity, at least to keep the clients engaged as well, to know that we're still here, we haven't disappeared off the face of the earth.

For most of our participants – whether LGBTQ+ young people or service staff and volunteers – 'getting back to normal' was far from sight. However, the collective experiences and reflections of young people and their supporters are rich resources for future-proofing this sector – a process to which we hope this report contributes.