Suicide Prevention Australia

Impact of COVID-19 on the sector Survey Report

Second Iteration
May 2020

Part 1: SNAPSHOT

Introduction

Australia's response to the COVID-19 pandemic is having far-reaching impacts on millions of Australians.   Suicide Prevention Australia, as the national peak body for the suicide prevention sector, is seeking to support the sector and the communities they work with during this challenging period.

In mid-April, Suicide Prevention Australia launched a survey to help inform the National Suicide Prevention Adviser about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on program and service delivery within the sector. The goal was to gather intelligence to inform the national response as well as provide an opportunity to identify ways to build sector capacity. This report captures the results of the second iteration of the survey, recording insights collected from the suicide prevention sector in May 2020.

More than 60 organisations responded to this latest iteration of the survey, providing important intelligence concerning shifts in the ways they deliver their services; changes in demand; their training and capacity building needs; and insights concerning the impact of COVID-19 related changes on the consumers they support.

Key findings

The key challenges identified in the first iteration of the survey in April 2020 remain largely unchanged' with organisations continuing to identify the absence of face-to-face support, issues with technology accessibility, literacy & security, and funding to resource their transition to providing services virtually as the main factors impacting service provision during COVID-19.

Trends are beginning to emerge as organisations report significant increases in use of alternative methods of service delivery over the period since the first edition of the survey. This version of the survey has also provided new insights that Suicide Prevention Australia's members have gathered on the ground: consumers are reporting financial hardship even as lockdown measures are easing; while others report continuing to refrain from accessing some forms of preventative healthcare due to fears of contracting the virus, despite relatively low Australian caseload numbers.

Members of the sector continue to report that they are adapting and innovating service delivery in response to COVID-19. At the same time, our results suggest the suicide prevention sector would benefit from additional support with:

- Public communications on the importance of accessing preventative healthcare during the pandemic;

- Information on referral pathways; and

- Enhanced resources to improve technology literacy for both consumers and the sector.

Suicide Prevention Australia intends to continue to conduct this survey to regularly gather intelligence while physical distancing requirements are in place. We will also continue to use the results to better inform, support and boost the capacity of our members during this period.

Key Highlights

66 survey responses

Service demand continues to increase

Key challenges remain unchanged

Lack of face-to-face support

Technology accessibility, literacy & security

Funding & resourcing to adapt

New Innovations

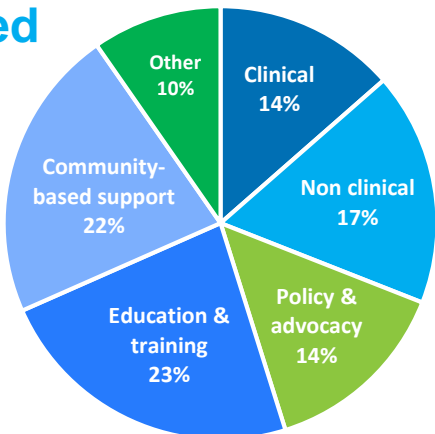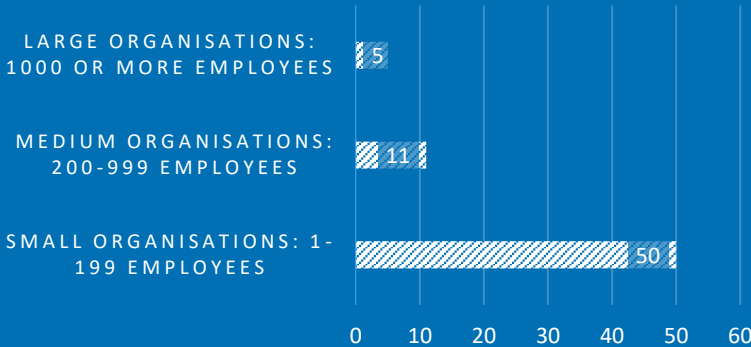**Care Navigation Program**

Adapting preventative education programs
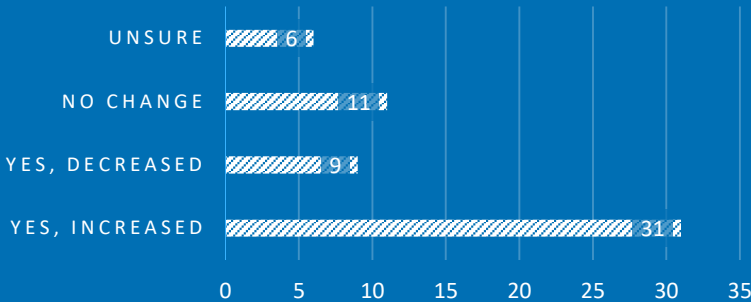
Increasing outreach work

Types of services provided

Pie chart:
- Clinical 14%
- Non clinical 17%
- Policy & advocacy 14%
- Education & training 23%
- Community-based support 22%
- Other 10%

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS (N=66)

LARGE ORGANISATIONS: 1000 OR MORE EMPLOYEES	5
MEDIUM ORGANISATIONS: 200-999 EMPLOYEES	11
SMALL ORGANISATIONS: 1-199 EMPLOYEES	50

(x-axis: 0, 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60)

HAS SERVICE DEMAND INCREASED?

UNSURE	6
NO CHANGE	11
YES, DECREASED	9
YES, INCREASED	31

(x-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35)

SERVICES ARE PROVIDING ALTERNATIVE METHODS OF CONTACT

Bar chart (y-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45):
- ONLINE
- TELEPHONE
- VIDEO-CONFERENCING
- OTHER E.G. SMS, PHONE APPS)

PROVISION OF CARE
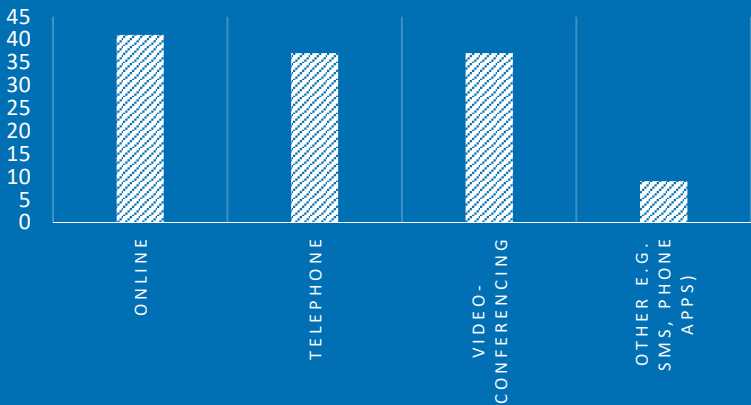
Bar chart (y-axis: 0, 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35):
- DIRECT
- INDIRECT
- OTHER
- UNSURE
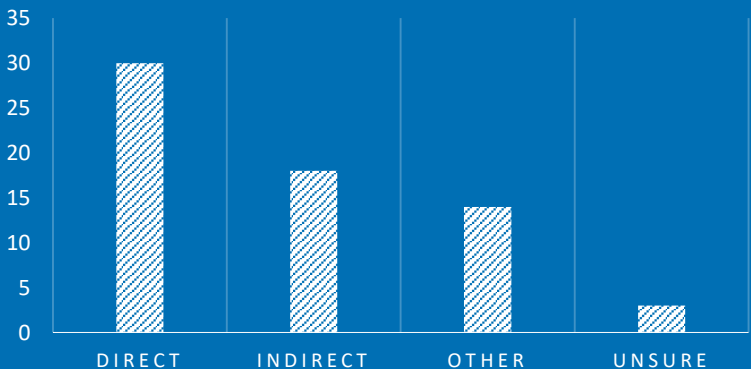
Part 2: SUMMARY RESULTS

Small Organisations

**Small Organisations:
Respondent Breakdown (N=50)**

Service demand has increased among small organisations
Almost half of respondents report an increase in service demand (46%) which is a decrease from the previous survey iteration in April 2020 (57%), 16% report a decrease, 16% report no change and 8% report unsure.

50-199 Employees	18
21-49 Employees	12
1-20 Employees	20

0   5   10   15   20   25

Services are offering alternative methods of contact to face-to-face contact
Respondents are providing a variety of alternative methods not involving face-to-face contact such as online (60%), telephone (50%) and videoconferencing (50%). Other methods include SMS, face-to-face where social distancing can be adhered to, live streaming education models, and a smart phone app for mental health resilience training.

Challenges

Lack of face-to-face support due to COVID-19 response measures in place

Respondents from small organisations across all employee sizes (1-20, 21-49 & 50-199) identified the inability to provide face-to-face service delivery remains a significant challenge. Respondents reported difficulty in service delivery due to physical distancing and poor technology literacy among clients. Smaller size organisations (1-20 employees) further identified challenges in building rapport with clients without face-to-face delivery.

People in crisis are not accessing care

Respondents report people in crisis are not accessing preventative care and support, and that those who do present to hospital are presenting with severe symptoms. People are unwilling to present to hospital out of fear of contracting COVID-19, and are putting off seeking preventative care until the pandemic is over.

Ability to provide appropriate risk assessment

Respondents report not all services are suitable for online delivery due to their ability to provide appropriate risk assessments to determine level of safety of clients.

Privacy concerns impacting help-seeking behaviour

People with lived experience are not willing to engage in online or videoconferencing methods of service delivery due to privacy and security concerns with the platforms.

Technology can be unreliable and literacy low

Challenges experienced in internet connectivity and technology literacy among clients and service providers.

Increase in volunteer capacity and demand

Respondents with 1-20 employees report increases in demand of their volunteers as they respond to service demand increases, in particular for peer-to-peer support group volunteers.
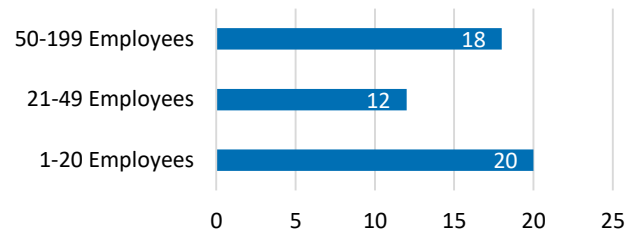
**Lack of funding to adapt timely to alternative methods of service delivery**

Small organisations continue to report funding concerns in their ability to adapt to online platforms particularly due to the simultaneous increase in service demand experienced.

Support needed to manage the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery

28% of respondents from small organisations reported they require information, training, or capability support to manage the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery. This is a slight decrease from the April survey iteration (33%). Respondents identified the need for:

- Technology literacy training for clients, volunteers, and staff.

- Funding to assist with operational costs (e.g. wages to increase staff capacity to respond to increased demand), transitioning to alternative methods of service delivery, and resources to respond to changing user needs.

Is support needed to manage the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery?

- Messaging and information sharing on the importance of maintaining healthcare needs (e.g. physical and mental wellbeing) and the risks of neglecting healthcare during COVID-19. Promotion of the absence of COVID-19 in medical facilities to encourage access to healthcare.
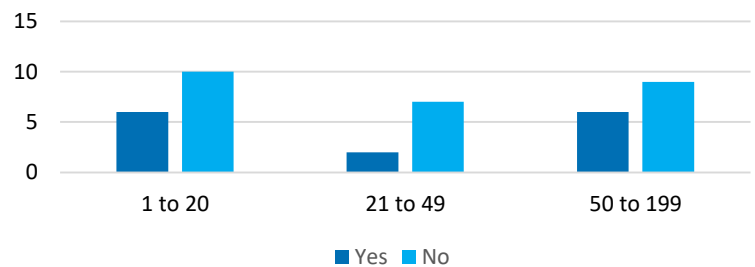
Innovations

Smaller organisations have responded to the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery by moving support programs and groups online, creating online modules to maintain engagement from homes, delivering training and workshops online and increasing outreach by calling clients to follow up and track progress.

Key highlights include:

- Development of a Care Navigation Program for first responders which provides immediate support, development of a safety plan, and linkages to information.

- Use of data analytics and qualitative research to produce resources that reflect users changing needs.

- Adapting preventative education programs for schools, universities and workplaces for online delivery while maintaining safety in sharing stories of lived experience and engaging young people.

Intelligence from consumers

Increase in feelings of isolation, anxiety and uncertainty

Feedback from consumers continues to report increased feelings of isolation, anxiety, and distress. Pressures of isolation such as financial stress is emerging, with clients reporting difficulties accessing welfare support payments and financial hardship as a major driver of fear and distress. Clients are exhibiting diminished capacity for executive functioning and emotional intelligence, and feelings of uncertainty concerning when the pandemic will end.

Volunteer organisations with first responders report increase in anxiety among volunteers at not being able to attend training sessions and respond as they usually would to support their communities.

Technology issues for vulnerable clients

Service providers report technology issues for clients who are learning how to adapt and use new platforms of service delivery takes up significant amount of the appointment time. Vulnerable clients report they don't like seeing themselves on screen, particularly when they have low self-esteem which makes maintaining engagement challenging.

Concerns among site workers in construction

With an increased focus on social distancing on sites, many workers began withdrawing out of concern for their health and the health of their families. This has cause further stress among workers concerned for the industry shutting down and consequential financial hardship that may occur if out of work.

Importance of prevention during the pandemic

Stakeholders report initiatives that support prevention and peer-to-peer work is critical during the pandemic. Stories of hope and resilience are helping people manage uncertainty and move through this period.

Unemployment is impacting youth mental health

Feedback reports unemployment rates for young people are impacting mental health. There needs to be a focus on not just connecting young people to work, but also supporting their mental health.

Medium Organisations

**Service demand has increased among medium organisations**
54% of respondents reported an increase in service demand which is a significant increase from the April iteration (37.5%), 9% report decrease, 9% unsure and 18% report no change.

Services are offering alternative methods of contact to face-to-face contact
Respondents are providing a variety of alternative methods not involving face-to-face contact such as online (72%), telephone (72%) and videoconferencing (72%). One respondent reported they are still delivering face-to-face training with limited participants.

The provision of online services by medium organisations has significantly increased from 37.5% in April to 72% in May.

Has demand for your services changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began?
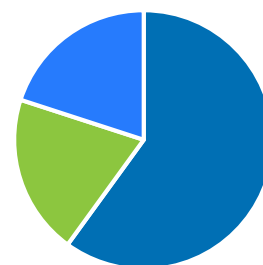
■ Yes increase ■ no change ■ unsure

Challenges

Access to adequate and appropriate technology to meet service needs

Respondents identified funding challenges in securing adequate I.T. equipment for staff and the ability to provide training to volunteers via online platforms as a key challenge. Staff working remotely require increased supervision and support during periods of heightened intensity.

Increase in service demand for Kids Helpline

Kids Helpline report a significant increase in service demand since the commencement of the pandemic (demand is 49% higher in April 2020 compared to service demand in April 2019). Key concerns identified by clients include mental health concerns, emotional wellbeing, family relationship concerns, suicide-related concerns and child abuse. Challenges have included responding to the significant increase in more serious concerns, and the impact this has on the health and safety of the workforce.

Need for funding to support service delivery

Respondents identified the need for top down support for PHNs to ensure equity of access to training and targeted areas most likely to be impacted by COVID-19/bushfires and potential economic impact.

Lack of face-to-face service delivery

Respondents report challenges in building rapport and creating connection with clients via alternative methods of contact.

Support needed to manage the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery

54% of medium organisations reported no information, training or capability support is needed to manage the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery, 18% reported yes. Support required includes:

- Additional funding to deliver training and support administration expenses. Training costs increase when delivering to smaller groups to maintain social distancing requirements.
- Resourcing to provide 24-hour service delivery to meet needs.

Innovations

Innovations have included moving online chat teams remotely to strengthen practice, reducing the size of participant groups for training workshops to continue face-to-face service delivery, and shifting face to face education and training for workplaces and health professionals to dynamic and flexible online formats.

Key highlights include:

- Working with PHNs on START, an online 90 minute suicide first aid training course while face-to-face training is on hold.
- YourTown have developed a program Circles, specifically to support two large cohorts (one aged 13-17 and 18-25) of young people with their concerns owing to COVID-19. The programs commenced on 6 April and completed on 4 May and attracted new clients in addition to supporting those clients who interact with Kids Helpline occasionally.

Intelligence from consumers

Suicide first aid training

Consumers report a need for suicide first aid training but are unsure how to fund the training and when it can occur during social distancing requirements.

Large Organisations

Service demand has increased among large organisations

A majority of respondents (60%) reported an increase in service demand, with 20% unsure whether there had been a change in demand, and 20% report no change.

Services are offering alternative methods of contact to face-to-face contact

Larger organisations are providing a variety of alternative methods not involving face-to-face contact such as online (80%), telephone (100%) and videoconferencing (100%). 80% of respondents selected providing 'other' methods but did not specify.

Has demand for your services changed since the COVID-19 pandemic began?

■ Yes increase   ■ no change   ■ unsure

The provision of alternative methods of contact by large organisations has significantly increased from April to May (online 58% to 80%, telephone 83% to 100% and videoconferencing from 75% to 100%).

Challenges

Lack of face-to-face contact and referrals impacting quality of service provision

Respondents from larger organisations report challenges of a lack of face-to-face contact due to COVID-19 restrictions, consumer issues with maintaining privacy via alternative methods of contact, and a lack of referrals occurring from traditional sources resulting in longer waiting times for clients to receive help.

Technology literacy and infrastructure

Large organisations continue to report challenges with technology literacy, and challenges with technology infrastructure for remote and rural communities.

Support needed to manage the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery

40% of large organisations reported that they did not require any additional information, training or capability support to manage the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery, while 20% reported a need for support. Respondents who required a need for support advised they required assistance with:

- Increased resources to aid online service delivery. This may include enhancing existing online support resources, providing localised devices for clients to use and providing technology training to support clients.
- Knowledge about referral pathways

Innovations

Innovations highlighted include:

- Using solution focused brief therapy.
- Utilising recreation activities, such as online cooking and fitness classes, social webinar games and events to assist client engagement and wellbeing.
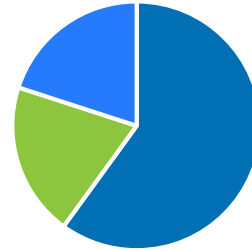
- Provision of mediation through online platforms for conflict resolution.

Research undertaken

Respondents reported undertaking research into the following areas:

- The impact across various social factors which have a link to suicide prevention
- How changes to work has affected mental health during the pandemic

About this report

Suicide Prevention Australia has reviewed all open text responses and summarised key themes for the purposes of this report.

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