

The COVID-19 Pandemic in Albury: Weathering the Storm

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The COVID-19 pandemic immediately followed the terrible 2019-20 summer bushfires that burned around the Murrumbidgee and Albury. Albury-Wodonga was impacted significantly when the border between Victoria and New South Wales (NSW) was closed, and the states were locked down in 2020 as a response to the pandemic. Many people live on one side of the state border but work on the other side, and the pandemic was a major disruptor of school attendance, community life, and the practices of community agencies to support young people and families through direct human interaction in case work. Reports of increased mental health issues due to the bushfires were already a concern in Albury, and then came COVID-19!

The Albury Project commenced in 2019 as one of two funded Community of Schools and Services (COSS) pilot sites under the NSW Homelessness Strategy. The other pilot was in Mt Druitt. Prior to receiving pilot funding, the Albury community had a history of questioning the effectiveness of the local youth, family, and homelessness services systems. A leader amongst this local discontent was Yes Unlimited, headed by CEO Di Glover, which is the major youth services organisation in Albury. In late 2017, constructive discontent crystallised into a positive initiative — Yes Unlimited rallied a group of local stakeholders to develop a COSS Model in Albury well before any funding was on the table. The story of how The Albury Project came to be was published in April 2020 in *Parity*.¹

The Albury Project has been led by a strong collective comprising the three Albury public secondary schools, the lead COSS agency, Yes Unlimited, together with other

partners, including Albury City Council, headspace, and Child and Adult Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Additionally, the project has benefited from strong support from senior officers in the local area offices of both the Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ) and the Department of Education (DoE). Population screening, a core foundation of the COSS Model, has been successfully implemented annually for over three years, despite the pandemic. The Albury Project workers were designated as essential workers by the partner schools and were able, within the safety guidelines, to continue to operate, bringing an impressive degree of creativity to their work under difficult circumstances. This shows how the COSS work was valued in the schools and community. The recognition of community workers as 'essential workers' able to work with and in schools and with families in Albury has been a major achievement for The Albury Project.

The annual population screening methodology provides for a longitudinal measure of risk but also a longitudinal measure of outcomes. In terms of current practice, three key indicators on the Australian Index of Adolescent Development (AIAD) Survey² are used routinely: At-risk of homelessness Indicator, Disengagement from school indicator; and the Kessler 10 scale for identifying psychological distress or mental health issues.

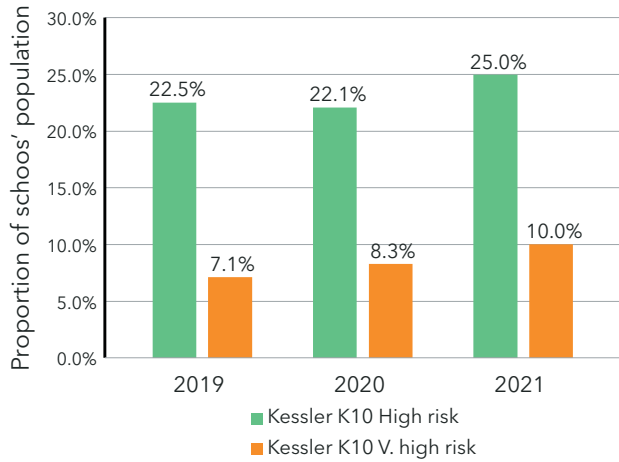
Adolescent Mental Health Issues

Older Australians are particularly vulnerable to serious health impacts from contracting COVID-19, which, depending on their state of health, can be life-threatening. For young Australians, the pandemic has been more likely to impact their mental health, disrupt their education, and contribute to educational disengagement, social isolation, and other adverse impacts on their pathways into employment. In terms of COVID-19, young



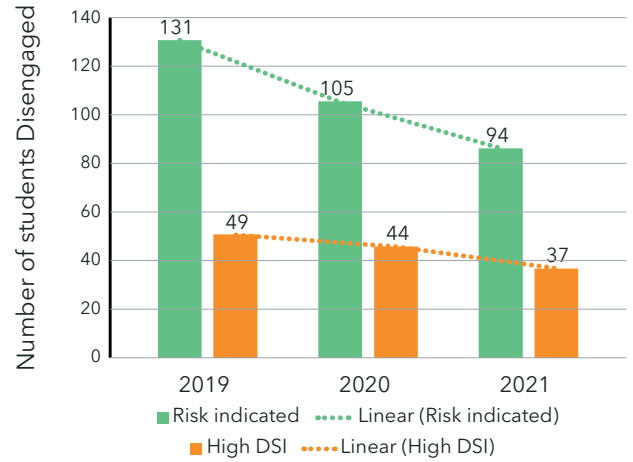
Artwork courtesy Libby Crayton, Frontyard Youth Services

Mental Health Indicator: Albury, 2019, 2020, and 2021



Graph 1

Disengaged from school indicator: Albury 2019-2021



Graph 2

people themselves identified mental wellbeing as a major concern,³ and parents reported high rates of mental health impacts on their children.⁴ Ian Hickie (University of Sydney) warned that COVID related lockdowns and isolation have adverse mental health consequences and that the mental health system needs to be able to respond.⁵

The Kessler 10 is a widely used, validated, self-report measure for psychological distress that can be used to identify those in need of further assessment for anxiety and depression, but the scale does not provide diagnostic information about specific mental health conditions. Mental health issues are known to exacerbate other adverse issues in the lives of young people. Graph 1 shows the population profile across the three participating Albury schools from 2019 to 2021 in relation to identified mental health risks.

The commonly stated clinical range of the K-10 is a score of 30 to 50, which, as shown in Graph 1, is between 25 and 30 per cent of the entire participating schools' populations. In practical terms, the more useful range is the very high-risk range of 40 to 50, which has increased from 2019 to 2021. This result is consistent with other findings of increased mental health issues due to COVID-19.

A troubling additional finding is that for this cohort of young people (K-10 range: 30-50), nearly one third had never sought or received any form of help for their mental health; and for the high-risk cohort (K-10 range: 30-39),

about half (53.6 per cent) had not ever sought or received assistance.

School Disengagement

There is quite an extensive international literature that explores the effects of COVID-19 and other disasters on student engagement with learning.^{6,7}

The Disengagement from School Indicator (DSI) used in the AIAD survey identifies students at-risk of disengaging from school. Student disengagement is usually evident from behaviours such as increasing absences from school without good reasons, challenging behaviours at school, or decreasing performance in various subjects. The DSI is useful in confirming known cases that require an immediate response, and also identifies hidden cases that may have otherwise gone unnoticed.

Graph 2 shows that, during the pandemic, the proportion of students identified as disengaged or disengaging from school has decreased from 2019 to 2021.

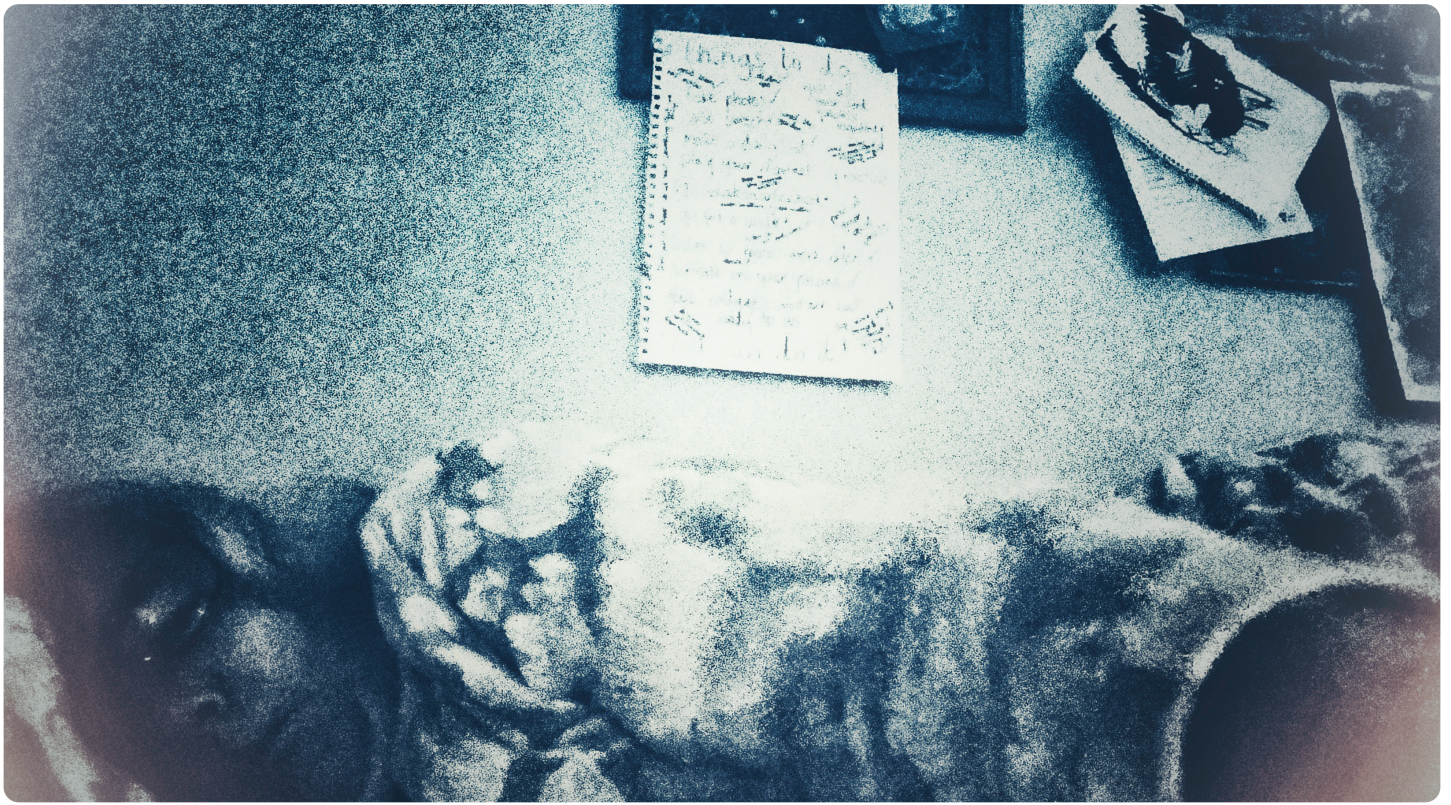
For both risk indicated and high-risk categories of DSI risk, the trend has been a linear decrease from 2019 to 2021. This trend has occurred despite the effects of the pandemic and the bushfires in and around Albury in the summer of 2019-2020, and during a time when improved response rates and implementation practices might be expected to find more disengaged students. While it does not necessarily indicate that fewer students were feeling

disengaged, this finding is counter intuitive. The commitment by each of the participating schools to maintaining strong, connected wellbeing systems, of which the Albury Project is a part, and collective practical efforts within the schools appears to have yielded a positive outcome over this very difficult time. Many commentators have argued that disengagement from school has increased and that appears to be the case more generally.

The Dynamics of Early Intervention

Annual population screening not only identifies risk, but the indicators also provide some important measures of outcomes. Longitudinal AIAD data allows for comparisons across time and trend analysis. What happened for young people identified as at-risk of homelessness in 2019? Are they still at risk in 2020 or 2021? Diagram 1 provides some answers to these questions.

Using matched records of young people identified as at-risk, Diagram 1 shows the dynamics of risk for students screened through the Albury Project. For the young people identified as at-risk of homelessness in any year, after support through the Albury Project, about half of these young people are no longer at-risk 12 months later (downward green arrows, Diagram 1). This is a reassuring finding. The following inferences are suggestive of significant outcomes being achieved during a very difficult time.



Artwork by Christine Thinkell

Some Comments on the Data

Firstly, there is evidence that mental health issues in the community have increased, but school disengagement seems to have been held down and even reduced.

Secondly, the vast majority of students who completed the AIAD in 2019 and had a low/no risk of homelessness assessment remained at this low/no risk assessment level in 2020. Only about 4.5 per cent of those students' status had changed to indicate a risk

of homelessness (upward red arrows, Diagram 1). The results for the 2020 cohort remained similar. Changes in family situations from year to year are not unexpected — 'life goes up and down'. Some students who do not show up one year as at-risk will show up with identifiable risk a year later. This is why an ongoing stream of data on risks and outcomes to inform practice is so important.

Lastly, for the students identified as at-risk of homelessness in any

one year, after support, about half were not at-risk a year later (that is, under the risk of homelessness threshold). This is one measure of the outcome of reducing the risk of homelessness and suggests the likelihood of finding a reduced flow of young people into the Specialist Homelessness Services system which has yet to be confirmed.

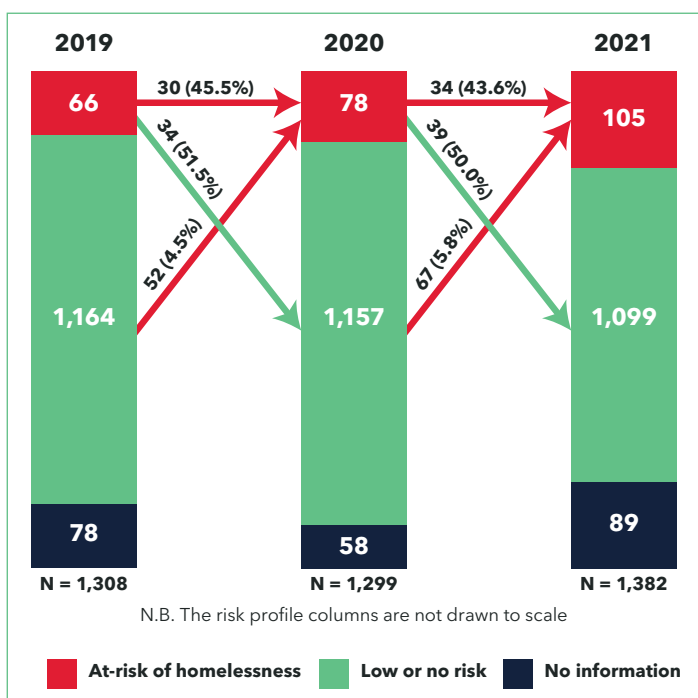


Diagram 1: Risk dynamics from 2019 to 2021, The Albury Project

Endnotes

1. Park J, McGrath K, Glen R and Quinn T 2020, 'The Albury Project Story: From Collective Discontent to Positive Action', *Parity*, vol. 33, no. 3, pp. 69-72.
2. The Australian Index of Adolescent Development survey is administered to all secondary school students in the COSS communities as part of the population screening process. For more details see: Hand T and MacKenzie D 2019, 'Data matters: Using data in a collective impact research and development project and the backbone role of upstream Australia'. *Parity*, vol. 32, no. 7, pp. 16-17.
3. UNICEF Australia 2020, 'Swimming with sandbags': *The views and experiences of young people in Australia five months into the COVID-19 pandemic*, August 2020. yourtown and Australian Human Rights Commission 2020, *Impacts of COVID-19 on children and young people who contact Kids Helpline*, September 2020.
4. Royal Children's Hospital 2020, *National Child Health Poll: August 2020*. available from <https://www.rchpoll.org.au/polls/covid-19-pandemic-effects-on-the-lives-of-australian-children-and-families/>.
5. Hickie I 2020, 'As "lockdown fatigue" sets in, the toll on mental health will require an urgent response', *The Conversation*, 4 August 2020.
6. Drane C, Vernon L and O'Shea S 2021, 'Vulnerable learners in the age of COVID-19: A scoping review', *The Australian Educational Researcher*, vol. 48, pp. 585-604.
7. Social Ventures Australia 2020, 'Identifying and taking action for students at risk of disengagement from school during phases of the COVID-19 response', *Evidence for Learning Insights Paper*, October 2020.