

The impacts of COVID-19 on Young People in South and West Auckland and the way forward

Since COVID-19 entered New Zealand and the country entered Level 4 lockdown, we knew as a nation that we would need to adjust to ‘a new normal’. This is ever more evident after experiencing Auckland’s second lockdown with the appearance of a second wave. The effects of Covid have been most evident on the economy, with businesses closing or having to downsize from as early as the first week of level 4 lockdown in March 2020, resulting in job losses across the board. Industries hit hardest include retail, travel, and tourism and hospitality.

So what does all of this mean for rangatahi in South and West Auckland?

Despite the disruption of the first lockdown, as of June this year the number of South and West Auckland Young people who were Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) was sitting at roughly the same numbers as June last year according to the Household Labour Force Survey – around 13,400 young people (RIMU, 2020). The numbers were likely cushioned by the wage subsidy, and re-opening of schools and tertiary institutes in May after the first lockdown ended. However, one early forecast of economic impact of what will happen as the wage subsidy ends and the global recession bites, suggests that South and West Auckland could see an increase of 9000 more NEETs over the next two years (Stakeholder Strategies, 2020). This estimate did not take the disruptive impact of the second lockdown into account either.

New Zealand has experienced thousands of job losses to which young people are not immune. They experience the impacts of their parents and whānau becoming unemployed. Throughout both lockdowns, TSI has received reports of young people leaving school to support whānau by going to work or to look after younger siblings, and the media has reported on this phenomenon at several South Auckland schools (1 News, 2020; Collins, 2020). This of course is not picked up in NEET rates as young people are leaving school for jobs – highlighting the limitations of NEETs as a measure of what matters for young peoples’ futures. Prior to the second Auckland lockdown, the principal of Manurewa High School, Peter Jones, reported that around 7.5% of students aged 16 and over had not returned to school since they reopened in May because they had to get jobs to support whanau (Collins, 2020). TSI has also anecdotally heard that students are being moved to different suburbs because of job losses and the cost of housing in certain areas.

As good jobs are being snapped up by more experienced adults whose previous jobs have disappeared, competition will be fierce for paid work, and young people will be at a disadvantage. This increased competition for fewer jobs will be made worse for rangatahi by the flood of experienced and skilled workers returning to the ‘safe haven’ of New Zealand, and the reduced numbers of experienced New Zealand workers emigrating to work and travel abroad during the global recession and pandemic. Despite initial fears of migrant labour shortages due to the closed border, in June 2020 net migration to New Zealand was 8.7% higher than June the previous year – same rates as the highest points of 2017 due to returning New Zealanders and New Zealanders staying put (Grieve, 2020).

As we saw during the last recession, when unemployment was at its highest in the fallout from the Global Financial Crisis, youth unemployment took a far greater hit than for those in older age groups, with Pasifika and Maori youth the worst affected (Statistics New Zealand, 2013), and with South Auckland NEET rates taking the biggest hit and needing the longest time to recover to pre-recession levels (RIMU, 2020). At the same time, in our current environment youth are still leaving school and education to get jobs to support whanau, as our local evidence suggests (Tapua’i, 2020). This tightly

competitive job market may still provide jobs for young people in the years ahead, but they will likely be increasingly poorly paid as wages are generally driven down under these labour market

conditions. We are likely to see more and more companies making experienced or better paid staff redundant, in order to hire cheaper and potentially younger or less experienced workers for dead-end jobs.

Meanwhile, when looking at mental wellbeing and health, lockdowns and border closures also increase the risk of young people experiencing heightened feelings of loneliness and isolation. Before the first lockdown only 5.8% of young people experienced feelings of loneliness. During lockdown this increased considerably to 20.8%, dropping only slightly to 17% post lockdown (Scoular, 2020). As New Zealand is likely to face repeated recurrences of small incidents or clusters of community transmission, to which South Auckland is particularly vulnerable due to its proximity to the border, rangatahi wellbeing and feelings of social embeddedness will be especially shaken by repeated local shifts up and down lockdown levels. This has created concern about potential impact on mental health, self-harm and youth suicide statistics given that New Zealand has the second-worst youth suicide rates in the OECD (UNICEF Innocenti, 2020).

Given all the above information, it is imperative we plan for the future and respond quickly to support the needs of rangatahi. Despite all this, the situation provides a space for us to lean in to what we already know works, and find creative opportunities which enable *economic attachment* for young people even if medium-term prospects in the job-market are not good:

- Keeping young people in school. Finishing year 13 is the best protective factor we have against poor income outcomes by the time they are 25.
- Working with partners to support decision making whilst at school to ensure a better range of options is available to young people to go on to quality tertiary education. We have concerns with the current model which promotes low level tertiary courses, which were resulting in large student debt (average of \$17,000 for South and West Auckland) for predominately level 1-3 qualifications that students can get for free at secondary school, and which were not associated with improved income or career trajectories (Auckland Council, 2020). What we would like to avoid is the flooding of the 'market' in both West and South Auckland of these low-level courses that do not provide good career pathways or progression.
- Closing the digital equity gap to ensure all young people in South and West Auckland have access to internet at home, appropriate devices to learn and create on, and access to digital and tech learning. We need to promote digital, creative and tech skills as these will be valuable regardless of whether young people go into a digital or tech career or not. Digital inequity was particularly highlighted during lockdown.
- Facilitating, enabling and supporting young people to build their social, human and financial capital to create a youth economy that drives change in the wider economy. This will include economic literacy, critical thinking and creative skills, other forms of income generation like entrepreneurial activity and opportunities for young people to self-organise across a range of economic issues.
- Focus on the youth economy, such as supporting and funding community initiatives where there are guaranteed quality jobs and experimenting with innovations in our other programmes such as He Waka Eke Noa and Māori and Pasifika Trades Training that lead to good outcomes for young people in unprecedented times.

At the moment, financial support for rangatahi is focused on the regions. Urban centres, like South and West Auckland, have either been excluded from targeted economic recovery initiatives, or investment is far below what is needed to address the scale of the challenge and disproportionately lower than regions where youth unemployment is and will continue to be much lower. We need to advocate for the support of rangatahi in a way that will work in this current economic climate.

Below is a social media post titled 'Class In Session (School does not teach life)' written by the Head Girl of Auckland's Aorere College, Aigagalefili Fepulea'i-Tapua'i, which went viral during the first shift out of lockdown in May 2020.

"our decile 2 sch opened today. spent it watching ppl swap leavers notices for CV's cuz money is low & mouths gotta eat. remembered every joke bout high school dropouts from the mouth of higher decile school kids that didn't work a day of lockdown. it's ironic. watched our teachers try their best with what they have while richer schools have unused resources locked away in unused labs. it's ironic. when lvl 3 came, watched my friends bury their youth in every graveyard shift. day after day they were told they were essential but those chromebooks never came so i guess they were at the bottom of the waiting list. it's ironic. how ppl say "South Auckland broke the lockdown rules the most" when we ask to unarm the police. as if walking outside my house is reason enough to be shot in the street. it's ironic. how we didn't break the rules, our mobility rates are so high cuz while u work from home on zoom, we have the most essential workers. packing ur shopping, driving the buses, cleaning ur classrooms. it's ironic. how Pasifika have one of the lowest infection rates but were put at the most risk. it's ironic. turned on the TV to hear our domestic violence rates rose, then 5 mins later heard NZQA won't lower credits cuz the time we have is enough. like any kid wants to write essays when they have to deal with being beat up. it's ironic. they want us to earn credits but they never give us ours when it's due. it's ironic. poorer brown kids living the life of the hard knocks, while white girls from Epsom are making racist tiktoks. it's ironic. & no matter how hard i keep my head in these books, i'm reminded there are things only the streets can teach you. if education is key, why do our locks keep changing? if knowledge is power, why does it come at a price we cant afford? every problem of society taught in class can be found in the hood. dont need a degree for empathy. it's ironic. how NZ wants to rebuild, but it's on our backs." (Tapua'i, 2020)

References

- 1 News. (2020, August 26). Too many students forced to leave school as “act of sacrifice and love” for families - head girl. *TVNZ*. Retrieved from <https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/too-many-students-forced-leave-school-act-sacrifice-and-love-families-head-girl>
- Auckland Council. (2020). *Youth in the South: A data overview of rangatahi in four South Auckland local board areas*.
- Collins, S. (2020, August 27). Covid 19 coronavirus: South Auckland schools want to bring forward free school lunches. *New Zealand Herald*.
- Grieve, D. (2020, August 29). The ‘staggering’ potential of New Zealand’s returning diaspora. *The Spinoff*.
- RIMU. (2020). *Rolling quarterly NEET rates in the Household Labour Force Survey 2004-ongoing (internal analysis)*.
- Scoular, S. (2020). *Prolonged loneliness in New Zealand before, during, and after lockdown*.
- Stakeholder Strategies. (2020). *Whānau prosperity*. Auckland.
- Statistics New Zealand. (2013). Dataset: Work and labour force status and ethnic group (grouped total responses) by age group, for the census usually resident population count aged 15 years and over, 2001, 2006 and 2013 Censuses (RC, TA, AU). Retrieved April 16, 2020, from 2013 Census Tables website: nzdotstat.stats.govt.nz
- Tapua’i, A. F. (2020, May). Class In Session (School Does Not Teach Life). *Instagram*. Retrieved from [instagram.com/p/CAUvntwnQ3H/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CAUvntwnQ3H/)
- UNICEF Innocenti. (2020). *Worlds of Influence: Understanding What Shapes Child Well-being in Rich Countries*. Florence.