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The social impacts of COVID-19

Reset not restart: taking advantage of a crisis for social change

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Deloitte
Access **Economics**

Preface

In the short term, responding to COVID-19 has required governments to prioritise managing the health crisis and responding to the economic fallout.

Societies have grappled with different approaches, with varying degrees of success. Though success does not just sit in the hands of government – the actions of communities, our culture and businesses shape the nation's trajectory. While some nations have adopted effective tracing using surveillance techniques such as facial recognition or CCTV footage, this use of surveillance may be less welcome in other nations. Similarly, the social fabric and understanding of one's individual role in contributing to a community response influences the success of our public health response.

In Australia, the focus has appropriately been on the public health response and cushioning the economic impact. The decisions associated with the economic and health impacts have flow-on effects to our society. To date we have observed negative changes in our broader social indicators, including rates of domestic and family violence, mental health, child protection, and justice system.

Yet it is not all bad news. We have witnessed social connectedness on a global scale, and innovation and adoption of new technologies at an unprecedented rate. The use of new technologies is also changing the way we deliver social services. We have seen restaurants and the arts sector change their business models, new apps to connect those who need support with volunteers, and messages of hope that create community connections.

We need to understand, monitor and document these affects – positive and negative – to ensure our immediate and long-term policy responses account of these changes, take advantage of the positive aspects, and provide an effective mechanism to address the social impacts of COVID-19.

Preface

While we have a menu of imperfect choices, all with differing consequences, one thing is certain: the choices and trade-offs we make today will affect our trajectory in terms of the impact on our nation's health, economy, environment and social system. We must not lose sight of the social impacts – to ensure the decisions being made today and during the recovery phase leverage the social gains, and continue to protect those who are most at risk.

The economic challenges of COVID-19 are deep and broad, but we have the opportunity to use these challenges to fast-track positive investments that will ultimately deliver better social outcomes. That way, when we do get to the other side of the proverbial bridge, we can be confident that, not only did we successfully address the social impacts, but we took advantage of the impetus to change the way we delivery social services across our nation. And maybe this will change our collective understanding of how we, as individuals and society, contribute to building a better future.

Lets not just press Restart, lets press Reset.

Natasha Doherty
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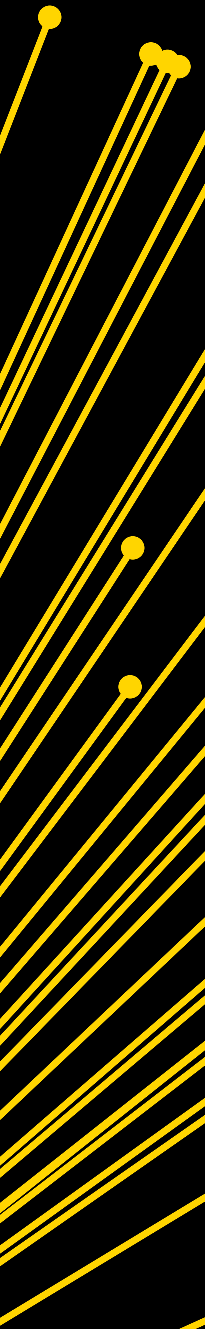
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Australia's public health response to rapidly contain the virus has, thus far, proven to be crucial in preventing widespread infection, death, and an overburdened health system. This 'lockdown' style response, involving strict social distancing, working from home, and closing of business operations, has shown to be effective in curbing the spread of COVID-19.

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01 — A framework for social impacts

While necessary, these responses have led to a range of social impacts. The primary focus of decision making has been on appropriately protecting our health systems and population, while minimising the detrimental effects of a closing down of the economy. The social impacts have, however, been more of a secondary factor in immediate decision-making processes, across community, businesses and government alike.

The range of policy responses that were implemented can have flow-on effects that impact on other areas of our lives. These can be positive, such as the uptake in innovative technology in order to remain connected, but can also lead to devastating impacts, such as an increase in family violence. Take for example the corporate world: office-based businesses were quick to take the lead on encouraging their employees to work from home to promote social distancing – a worthy pursuit. But in making this decision to mitigate the spread of COVID-19, there can be significant adverse effects on employees with unsafe home environments. In many cases, these social impacts can also disproportionally increase inequality, by having a greater effect on already disadvantaged or lower socio-economic groups in the community.

So, if we are to plan how we leverage the positive social impacts that have occurred, while continuing to mitigate against the negative impacts, we need to understand what the impacts are likely to be. As the crisis abates, but the social impacts continue to be felt, ongoing consideration of health and social care reforms is key to ensure support for Australians is maintained.

The social impacts operate in a **framework** of policy responses and funding decisions, which are underpinned by the public health response.

01 — A framework for social impacts

Figure 1 aims to conceptualise the economic, social and environmental impacts that occur as a result of the public health response. These impacts then result in the need for policy and funding decisions to be made in order to adapt to the current circumstances and the 'new normal' we find ourselves in. This report focuses on the social impacts. Chapter 2 provides an overview of three plausible and relevant scenarios that consider the trajectory and impact of the pandemic on the social services sector. Chapter 3 discusses these social impacts in more detail, along with sector specific case studies. Deloitte Access Economics has also produced separate reports which detail both the economic impacts, and the environmental impacts of COVID-19 in Australia.
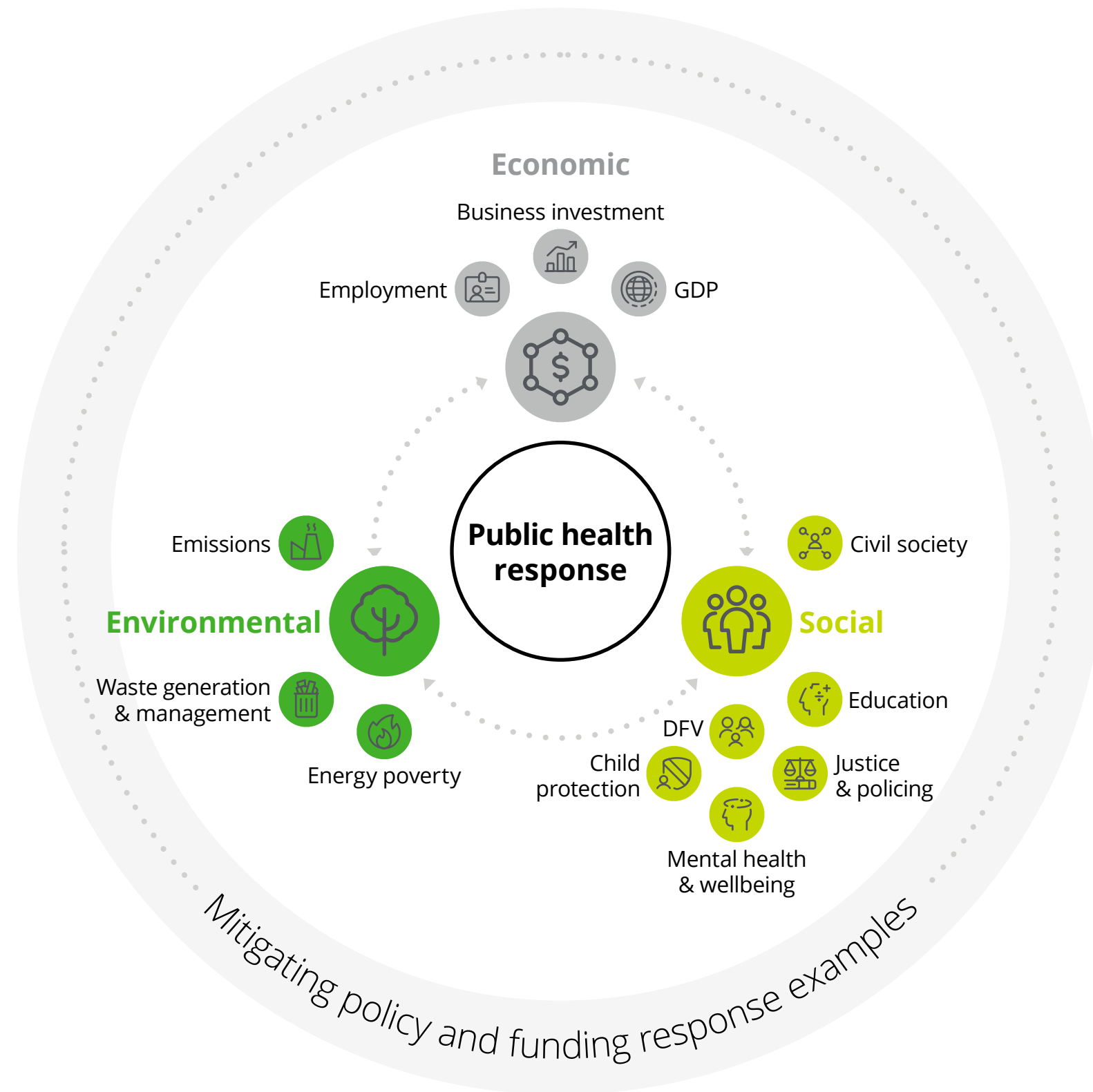
02 — Scenarios of the consequences of social impacts

Deloitte Access Economics has explored three plausible and relevant scenarios that consider the trajectory and impact of the pandemic.

02 — Scenarios of the consequences of social impacts

Each case posits a potential future state by considering possible policy and behavioural responses – and the corresponding impacts to health and the economy. These scenarios are described below, alongside a consideration of their social impacts on the Australian population over the next two to three years. These cases are not predictions; these are hypotheses about what could happen under different scenarios, designed to frame planning discussions.

2.1 Scenario one – mild case

This scenario achieves rapid control of the virus and a swift return to economic normalcy – enabled by strong collective action and a cutting-edge surveillance toolkit.

Public health response: Strong social compliance leads to a swift reduction in transmission, as Australia becomes a model in early containment. Rapid technological shifts occur in parallel, enabling at-scale testing and rigorous digital-driven contact tracing. Widespread and effective surveillance, coupled with strong social compliance, prevents a resurgence, even as social distancing measures are relaxed.

Economic recovery: A period of economic shutdown will cause major economic disruption in the short term. However, strong fiscal stimulus enables the economy to successfully go into hibernation while maintaining organisations' links to its assets and labour. This supports a relatively quick economic recovery to pre-crisis levels the following year.

Consequences to social impacts: A swift return to economic normalcy limits the scale of social impact consequences. Having the shortest period of both social distancing measures and economic disruption, the economy returns to the pre-crisis levels in early 2021. The social impact consequences are most strongly felt in the first two quarters of 2020.

02 — Scenarios of the consequences of social impacts

Having a shorter length of disruption limits the long-term consequences as the Government are able to provide strong fiscal stimulus in the first six months. Both the economy and the population are more resilient to manage disruption in the short-term. Those impacted significantly are disadvantaged members of society.

A relatively quick economic recovery limits the increase in homelessness and the required housing response. Employment levels and homelessness return to pre-crisis levels by 2022.

As education institutions reopen quickly, disruption is limited, and education disadvantages subside in the medium-term, with minimal long-term consequences. Similarly, justice and policing return to normalcy quickly with minimal long-term consequences.

Having the shortest period of social distancing measures and economic disruption – leading to less time in confinement and lower levels of financial hardship –results in the lowest increase in family violence and need for child protection. A quick return to normalcy limits the stress in households and the period of confinement, reducing levels of violence by 2022.

There is a significant impact on mental health in the short term but this eases by 2022 as providers adapt to the new normal.

02 — Scenarios of the consequences of social impacts

2.2 Scenario two – harsh case
This scenario achieves rapid control of the virus, however the lack of advanced detection technology and effective anti-virals prolong recovery

Public health response: In the absence of innovative technologies, social distancing measures are continued to curb future virus outbreaks. A vaccine is made available in 18 months, as the small number of daily infections gradually decline to zero. The number of active critical cases does not exceed ICU capacity. The death rate thus remains reflective of the virus, without the compounded effect of a strained health system.

Economic recovery: The economy ends up stagnant for a number of years characterised by little to no price inflation, and a lack of business investment. Despite some fiscal support aimed at driving a stronger recovery, relatively high unemployment rates persist, and household consumption remains low.

Consequences to social impacts: A prolonged recovery to the crisis means that society adapts to limit the social impact consequences. Significant disruption occurs in the short term, with a lower level of disruption remaining over the medium term. There is a move towards economic normalcy but does not return to pre-crisis levels until 2022.

A 'new normal' is reached in by early 2021 where society adapts to adhere to the social distancing measures. Those at a social disadvantage are less able to adapt. Fiscal stimulus is weakened compared to the immediate response, but is stronger than pre-crisis levels. Some economic disruption causes a rise in unemployment and homelessness in the medium term. People who lose their employment and community members at higher risk of disadvantage are impacted significantly.

Education providers adjust their way of teaching, but despite adjustment to teaching methods, there are still adverse impacts on education for children and young people, more pronounced for disadvantaged kids. Similarly, disability services also adjust with lower levels of servicing for those with disabilities until 2022. Justice and policing adapt their service provision and, following the initial peak, return to relative business as normal.

Family violence and demand for child protection fall following the short-term major disruption due to relaxed confinement requirements; however, they still remain above pre-crisis levels. Service providers adapt to their services under the lower levels of social distancing. Increased interaction between family members and external people, such as colleagues and teachers, results in some additional support in recognition and referral to appropriate authorities and services.

There is a significant impact on mental health in the short term, the long term mental health impact will need to be tracked over time.

02 — Scenarios of the consequences of social impacts

2.3 Scenario three – severe case
This scenario follows a similar trajectory to the Spanish Flu, with a second wave of infections and a prolonged recession.

Public health response: Growth in the rate of new cases continues to fall, and the government moves to wind back restrictions. No vaccine is discovered. As the public senses safety, social distancing fatigue sets in, leading to a rebound in the number of cases. The death rate rises as the health system struggles to cope.

Economic recovery: A double dip recession, with the second shut-down taking a toll as businesses struggle with weak demand and tightening credit. Incomes are devastated by widespread job losses and substantial absenteeism. Some industries see the majority of small businesses result in bankruptcy.

Consequences to social impacts: A prolonged recession results in the highest social impact consequences. Having the longest period of both intensive social distancing measures and economic disruption, the economy doesn't return to the pre-crisis levels until 2022.

A second – and larger – wave requires stronger fiscal stimulus, but Government constraints mean the economy gets a relatively smaller injection compared to the other scenarios. A prolonged economic recovery from a second wave of major disruption has the most severe impacts on unemployment and homelessness, which continues over 2022–2025. Those impacted significantly are the most vulnerable members of society as well as those in industries with significant job losses. Going through a second period of intensive lockdown causes significant civil unrest.

02 — Scenarios of the consequences of social impacts

Extended periods of intensive social distancing measures cause significant disruption to education institutions. Education disadvantages will be significant over 2020, with effects being seen over the next two to five years. Those that are socially disadvantaged will be the most impacted and will create larger disparities in educational achievements. Justice and policing experience a significant increase in demand resulting in delays for the judicial process compounded by the delays associated with virtual court processes. Adaptions to servicing are required and remain until 2022.

Longer periods of confinement within households and more severe economic hardship will result in the largest increase of family violence and need for child protection. Much of this increase in violence could remain unidentified as the lack of contact with people outside of the family will limit exposure to the appropriate authorities and services. While violence within the home will decline as social distancing measures are eased, the longer-term economic impact will cause a level of violence above pre-crisis over 2022–2025.

There is a significant impact on mental health over the next few years and beyond.

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03 — Sector impacts

Deloitte Access Economics has explored the social impacts of the public health response across some key sectors, considering the evidence to date, and what this might mean in a post-COVID-19 world.

03 — Sector impacts

3.1 Domestic and family violence

The need to socially isolate has meant victims of domestic and family violence could be at greater risk in their homes.

As unemployment and financial stress of households increase, the risk of domestic and family violence rises. There have been anecdotal reports of perpetrators using the pandemic to increase their control over victims, and statistics also suggest that there has been an increase in domestic and family violence. A recent study undertaken by Monash University surveyed 166 family violence practitioners across Victoria during a four week period from April to May. Fifty-nine per cent indicated that the frequency of violence against women had increased, and over half said that the violence was more severe[1].

A survey of 15,000 women undertaken by the Australian Institute of Criminology, released in July, found that almost one in ten women in a relationship experienced sexual or physical violence between March - May 2020. For a third of these women, this was the first time they had experienced domestic violence in their relationship.[2]

Queensland's emergency departments have seen an increase in trauma caused by domestic and family violence,[3] and government's Victims Services program in NSW has seen a ten per cent increase in urgent assistance being sought.[4]

Online searches about domestic violence have increased by 75 per cent compared to the average volume over a 5-year period. Some agencies have experienced an increase in helpline calls, including 1800 RESPECT which has seen call volume increase by eleven per cent.[5]

However, demand for support services more broadly has been variable across States and Territories; in some locations there has been a decline in demand, potentially suggesting some victims are struggling to seek help.[6]

An activist working for the Women Support Services South Australia has found that while calls for help have decreased, she has received an increase in text messages and emails, which suggests that victims are avoiding phone hotlines where they could be overheard by the perpetrator.[7] Similarly, use of online domestic and family violence reporting has spiked; for example, 1800 RESPECT has recorded a 38 per cent increase of its online chat tool between March and April.[8] Demand for support services are expected to increase following restrictions easing as those living in unsafe environments have the opportunity to move more freely.[9]

03 — Sector impacts

There is also early evidence to suggest that there is a spike in men contacting domestic and family violence hotlines for advice in avoiding committing acts of family violence. Calls to the Men's Referral Service, a national counselling hotline for potential perpetrators operated by No to Violence, has spiked by 94 per cent, and calls to Mensline have risen by 26 per cent.[10] This data may indicate there is increased domestic and family violence, or it may reflect increased motivation among men to change behaviour.

For victims, Western Australia has responded to COVID-19 by amending legislation. Among other reforms courts can now impose electronic monitoring of offenders and applications are able to be made online.[11]

Queensland has responded to COVID-19 through provision of an additional $5.5 million in funding for domestic and family violence services. The funding has been delivered to boost capacity of 24/7 crisis centres and enable online support, create additional capacity in crisis shelters by transitioning women to alternative accommodation, funding for specialist support services and a new awareness campaign.[12]

In early May, Victoria also took steps to respond to greater risk and incidences of domestic and family violence during the pandemic. The state has launched a Respect Each Other: 'Call it Out' media campaign to help educate communities about domestic violence and the need for individuals to report any violence they observe Victoria's Government has also invested $40.2 million dollars to help crisis accommodation and family violence services meet the expected increased demand for their services during the pandemic.

Despite the barriers to delivery of support services, which typically rely on face-to-face contact, social services have been able to adapt. These adaptations may serve as promising steps towards evolving service delivery in future. As victims of family violence are less visible due to isolation, retaining access to those at risk through virtual communication remains imperative.

"As financial stress increases the risk of DFV rises, we must adapt to ensure victims can access the services they need".

Case study: McAuley Community Services for Women moves online

McAuley Community Services for Women support women and children facing family violence and homelessness. McAuley has recognised that the public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic has the potential for indirect consequences relating to domestic and family violence. In an article published on LinkedIn, Jocelyn Bignold, the CEO of McAuley spoke of how the shift to working from home places victims in a potentially dangerous position:

"For those who are living with a violent partner, going to work each day safeguards them in ways that go beyond the simple fact that —for several hours at least — they are away from the place of abuse. Even if the employee doesn't choose to speak about what's been going on at home, the support and camaraderie of her workplace might be very important in helping her cope."

In response to COVID-19, McAuley has moved to online delivery of programs. This includes supporting women and children over the phone and through zoom as well as moving the psychologists counselling service to telehealth.

McAuley is now in the process of adapting the tutoring program for children whose education is disrupted by family violence into an online delivery method and has restarted its social and recreational program by offering virtual workshops in areas such yoga, and digital literacy, which is so important to women who have been isolated.

Moving these services online has proved successful for McAuley and they intend to continue to offer a hybrid of face-to-face and online into the future.

Whilst they are an essential service, McAuley's office remains open and some staff are needed onsite at all times; as many as possible are working remotely which has allowed them to reduce the number of people in the office spaces in line with recommendations around social distancing.

03 — Sector impacts

3.2 Child protection and out-of-home care

Child protection advocates expect that the number of children at risk of separation and in need of out-of-home care will continue past the COVID-19 crisis due to longer-term socioeconomic impacts.

Evidence from previous epidemics indicates that the risks faced by children in out-of-home care or in child protection are exacerbated by disease prevention measures. As a result of COVID-19, vulnerable children will have less access to adults outside their home environment including teachers or social workers, and safe places such as schools. UNICEF highlights how this isolation creates increased risk of neglect, family violence and sexual abuse for children.[13] Advocates also highlight the potential for negative mental health impacts for children who are already unhappy in out-of-home care.

Australian child protection agencies have started making changes to mitigate further risks to vulnerable children as a result of the pandemic. In New South Wales, the Office of the Children's Guardian has authorised staff who are known to a protected child, to act as their foster carer in an emergency arising from COVID-19.

Victoria has also acted with a COVID-19 Plan for Care Services for children in out-of-home care. As of the end of March Victoria has implemented stage two of this plan. This includes implementing alternative modes of service delivery through telephone rather than in person. Those involved with supporting at-risk children will need to ensure short-term plans to shift to virtual delivery, and longer-term plans to manage a potential ongoing increase in need for their services. However, this isn't possible for all staff who work on the frontline in the child protection system, making these staff more vulnerable to both catching and spreading the virus as they travel between different clients.

Both foster carers and foster children are more likely to belong to population groups who are at higher risk of more severe COVID-19 symptoms. Eighty-eight per cent of foster carers in Australia are over 40 years old, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are 11 times more likely to be in state care, foster care or kinship care placements.[14]

As family pressure increases many children are likely to require support, providing more instability for these vulnerable children.[15]

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Case study: Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

Given the impact of COVID-19 on child protection and out of home care services, the **Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare** conducted a survey to assess the impacts on a number of services: Orange Door; Child FIRST; and Integrated Family Services in Victoria. This survey also aimed to understand the main challenges experienced by their clients, and creative solutions being implemented to maintain the visibility and safety of clients.

The Centre for Excellence found that the biggest challenges for these services have been a rapidly changing environment and a sharp increase in demand with a lack of resources to meet it. In some ways organisations have adapted quickly to the new environment, whereas other have experienced challenges supporting children and families. For example, services in regional communities or providing services to those with intellectual and/or physical disability, high risk child protection families, and culturally and linguistically diverse users, have struggled to provide face to face support and to adhere to the social distancing requirements.

Service users themselves are also experiencing a myriad of challenges:
- Practical challenges including material hardship, limited access to support workers and increased family stressors.
- Wellbeing challenges including limited visibility in the communities and mental wellbeing.
- Child protection challenges including lack of oversight by care teams and limited face-to-face interactions.
- Challenges for refugees and asylum seeker services including increased isolation and lack of access to basic supplies.
- Intellectual and physical disability challenges including lack of face-to-face therapeutic support and difficulty managing without this support.

Community services are responding to these challenges in a variety of ways, including through:
- Online service delivery using technology that the family prefers, which is secure and accessible
- Organising specific times with families when children can be sighted or engaged with from a distance
- Sending resources and supplies via post or dropping off basic necessities
- Increased communication and collaboration between services
- Rotating roster of mobile workers in some regional areas
- Providing shopping and petrol vouchers, care packages, mobile phones, data packs, and home schooling packs donated by local businesses.

While service providers and service users are experiencing challenges dealing with COVID-19, communities are responding to ensure that increasing needs are being met in the best way possible. However, there is evidence that more support is required for groups experiencing vulnerability & those serving them.

03 — Sector impacts

3.3 Mental health and wellbeing

It has been widely reported that COVID-19 is causing detrimental impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of society. A global study has already found that since the outbreak, 67 per cent of people have increased levels of stress, 57 per cent have greater anxiety, 53 per cent feel sadness day to day and 42 per cent report overall mental health has declined.[16] An Australian study also found a majority of people registered at least mild levels of anxiety and depression, with 30 per cent registering moderate to high levels.[17]

Throughout the crisis, there has been significant uncertainty about the future, including timeframes for how long the crisis – and associated social distancing measures – will last. This is creating increased levels of anxiety as people experience a loss of control, and an inability to plan ahead.

Job losses and temporary income reductions have caused significant economic hardship for many households, creating increased financial stress. However, financial support from the Government has been easing this hardship for some of the population.

With social distancing and high levels of social isolation, there is less opportunity for colleagues and friends to check in on each other and for those suffering to ask for help. Research has found that depression levels in Australia during the crisis are elevated above the normal range, while staying connected to family and friends has helped to alleviate this.[18]

Positively, there has been a commitment from the Federal Government to ensure support is available to those in need, with $1.1 billion directed at mental health services, domestic violence support and Medicare assistance[19].

This included funding provided to Beyond Blue to offer additional support services. Beyond Blue have experienced an increase of 30 per cent in calls to their helpline since the crisis began.[20] Additionally, support systems such as the Queensland Government's Care Army, focused on supporting volunteers to assist those in need, have sought to alleviate the impacts of social isolation for our most vulnerable members of society.

Increased media attention on mental health throughout the crisis has allowed for a broader conversation about mental health and mental wellness. Increased talk of mental wellbeing on social media has also created a positive social response with more people discussing these issues openly, providing a safer space for people to ask for help, particularly for young people.

03 — Sector impacts

3.4 Justice and policing

The requirement for physical distancing to stop the spread of COVID-19 has had significant implications for the delivery of services across the justice system.

The court system is one which is underpinned by the physical meeting of the relevant parties, and is a legal requirement in many cases. With the need for physical distancing in order to stop the spread of the virus, criminal jury trials in a number of jurisdictions have been cancelled. Additionally, some states are enacting more judge-only hearings, however this is not always possible. At the peak of the outbreak in mid-March, courts across the country suspended all new jury trials, while the NSW Supreme and District courts suspended all new trials indefinitely.[21] This is leading to significant delays to hearings and trials, in a system which is already under pressure.

The impacts of these delays are felt by the accused, the victims and the witnesses. For the accused, if the seriousness of their alleged crime warrants it, they may face an extended period of time in remand, and across the board this will place a strain on the prison system. For victims, they face a longer wait before an outcome is reached. There are suggestions that some victims may abandon trials, due to the anxiety of waiting, which will lead to some offenders avoiding convictions. And for witnesses, the longer the delay, the greater potential for recollections of events to fade. Additionally, witnesses may be more reluctant to attend court when weighing up the potential health risks in doing so.

There are, however, some potential positive impacts of the changes being made to the court system. The potential for increased use of pre-recorded evidence and, in cases where remote hearings are possible, there is an opportunity to demonstrate where these technologies could be used in the future.

There is also a potential benefit for victims and witnesses when physical presence at court can result in reliving trauma.

The nature of prisons, where large populations are congregated in close proximity and using the same amenities, means that the risk of spread is high if the virus enters the prison. States and Territories have restricted access to minimising any potential impacts,[22] and a makeshift hospital has been established within Sydney's largest prison.[23] A secondary impact is the interruption to usual medical care for prisoners, which is concerning given the high prevalence of chronic disease and other health conditions.[24]

The flattening of the spread of the virus in Australia has so far meant virus spread in prisons has not occurred, however in other countries the impacts have been devastating. Some countries have released prisoners early who are deemed to be lower risk to the community, however this comes with its own complexities ensuring they have access to appropriate housing & other services & ensuring community safety.

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3.5 Education

The education sector – from early childhood all the way through to tertiary studies – has been significantly disrupted by COVID-19. Swift transitions to models of remote learning and declines in participation and engagement levels have raised concern regarding the lasting impacts of the pandemic on educational outcomes and opportunity, particularly for more disadvantaged students.

The Australian Government responded quickly to the disruption in the early childhood sector by waiving fees for childcare and providing support for wage costs to childcare centres.[25] This relief package ended in July 2020 and as the system returns to pre-COVID arrangements there is uncertainty regarding how economic shifts will impact families and services.

With many families facing increased financial pressure, it is expected that some will need to reduce their participation in childcare. This has implications for both workforce participation – especially for women who are more likely to take on additional caring responsibilities,[26] as well as for the educational outcomes of children. The impacts of reduced participation in early childhood education and care are expected to be greater on vulnerable children or children from lower socio-economic families.[27]

Going forward, if participation in childcare falls materially compared to pre-COVID levels, service viability may be threatened. This may pose risks, particularly in regional areas,[28] to the ability of families to access quality childcare. Decreased demand for childcare will also negatively impact on the sector's workforce, who are predominantly women and among Australia's lowest paid professionals.[29]

For the vast majority of Australian school students, school closures meant a move to remote learning. Research indicates that for students learning at home rather than in the classroom – educational outcomes can decline by up to 50%, and this impact is not felt equally.[30]

Students who are already facing educational disadvantage, such as those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds or those with higher learning needs, are more likely to be negatively impacted by remote learning.[31] As such, the gap in educational outcomes – as determined by socio-economic indicators, is expected to have widened over this period. One study estimates that the achievement gap widens at triple the rate in remote schooling compared to regular class.[32]

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While on balance the impact of the pandemic on schooling will result in educational loss, some students have found remote learning beneficial.[33] Anecdotally, early studies have found that small numbers of highly vulnerable students who struggled to engage with traditional schooling models found remote learning more accessible.[34] This points to future opportunities to embrace the varied pedagogical models that have emerged through the pandemic to support flexible learning options.

In post-schooling education, it is expected that the declining economic climate will impact near-term pathways into employment for Australia's young people. The Mitchell Institute estimates that new apprenticeships/traineeships will decline by 30% within two years, equating to approximately 130,000 fewer new apprentices and trainees from the start of the pandemic to June 2023.[35] Conversely, as youth unemployment rises – the opportunity cost of higher education is lowered, potentially driving increased demand for university places.[36]

The extent to which higher education supports employment outcomes across different student cohorts is influenced by a range of factors. Caps on student numbers within courses, in the context of increased domestic demand for higher education, may result in disadvantaged students having less opportunity to access limited places.[37]

The recently announced Job-ready Graduates package, which includes $400 million Commonwealth investment in supporting higher education access for regional and remote students, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students and students from lower socio-economic circumstances, may work to mitigate this risk.

Ultimately, the pandemic has caused significant and sudden disruption to the education sector. The impacts of this disruption are still emerging, with concern particularly centred on the educational opportunity and outcomes lost for children and students experiencing disadvantage. However, the response to the pandemic has also highlighted the value of our education system in supporting Australia's social and economic future. Innovations and learnings from this period hold opportunity for future reform.

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3.6 Disability

The World Health Organisation (WHO) highlights that those with a disability may be at greater risk of contracting COVID-19, have barriers to accessing information about the virus, and are disproportionately impacted by disruptions to services.[38]

Australian disability advocates have already highlighted that those with disabilities are struggling to obtain medication and affordable groceries amid recent shortages. A survey undertaken by People with Disability Australia (PWDA) found that over 91 per cent of people with a disability said their expenses had increased since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, due to factors such as delivery costs, shortages of goods, and spending on personal protective equipment[39].

There are also concerns that people with a disability are not receiving adequate care. The Disability Royal Commission has received a number of calls reporting a lack of access to care for people living with a disability during the crisis. Reduced access to services lessens the independence of individuals and increases reliance on family and friends. Additionally, the PWDA survey found that respondents received 41 per cent less NDIS support and 47 per cent less non-NDIS disability support than in the pre-pandemic period.[40]

Centre-based care programs have been greatly impacted by COVID, given the requirements for social distancing which challenges the operating model. COVID has also provided the opportunity to rethink these programs and their value, and to consider new ways of working.

Transitions to virtual care is one solution to ensure ongoing accessibility of the health care system. Research in Australia has found that virtual care can enhance quality of care and management of chronic diseases and improved timeliness of care, which leads to improved outcomes. Greater adoption of virtual care can also result in productivity benefits if implemented effectively. However, to ensure equitable outcomes, virtual care need to be accessible to all, including people with a disability, such as those with vision or hearing impairment.

In the immediate term, COVID-19 heightens the risks and challenges for those living with disability. But, there is an opportunity for virtual care to have an enduring positive impact on access and health outcomes.

Case study:
Lifestyle Solutions

Lifestyle Solutions is an organisation operating in the disability service provision space in Australia who has adapted to the current circumstances, and changed their ways of working as a result. CEO Andrew Hyland outlined that the role of clear and consistent communication was vital to moving quickly to ensure the safety of his team and clients. Lifestyle Solutions decided early on to swiftly change the way they worked, even before social distancing measures were implemented by government.

The executive team worked hand in glove with the board to make rapid and decisive moves to modify work practices to ensure safety, and develop and deliver a clear and consistent message to the organisation.

The key tenets of this strategy included:
• Making quick decisions to implement the necessary protocols with a degree of flexibility
• Establish clarity on the purpose of the organisation and the necessary nature of the changes to deliver that purpose
• Clear and frequent communication across the organisation from management, executive and the board
• Ensuring visibility of management to promote structured and deliberate messages.

By implementing these strategies, Andrew predicts that the organisation's productivity increased by 20%.

Lifestyle Solutions have been focussed on the way in which the pandemic has further highlighted the difficulties people with a disability face when attempting to enter the mainstream workforce. The current situation has provided an opportunity to rethink expectations around job prospects for people with a disability, in order to ensure there are more meaningful career pathways, rather than basic, low level, or low-pay jobs. The organisation is now in a phase of determining how to prioritise the changes they have made within their 'new normal'.

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03 — Sector impacts

3.7 Civil society

Responding to COVID-19 requires all members of society to adhere to social distancing requirements. In addition, the crisis has highlighted the vulnerability across society. In this environment Australians have largely shown willingness to put community needs before that of the individual.

The past few months have seen numerous examples of companies, government institutions and individuals banding together to support more vulnerable members of society during the COVID-19 crisis. For example, several of Australia's large food manufacturers including Arnott's, Kellogg's, PepsiCo and McCain Foods have donated hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of food to local governments and Foodbank.[41] This comes at a time where demand for Foodbank has doubled, due to increases in unemployment and financial stress of households.[42]

For older Australians who are particularly vulnerable to the virus, businesses have adapted their services. During shortages of essential household items due to panic buying, Coles and Woolworths created dedicated shopping hours at the start of the day for older people and people with a disability.[43]

Government institutions and private businesses have also stepped up to support disadvantaged school students transition to home schooling. A prison in Western Australia has rapidly made school desks and chairs for home-schooling children and, after hearing of this initiative, Western Australian police also stepped in to arrange for donations of computers for families in need.[44] Optus and their customers have also acted through their 'Donate Your Data' campaign where customers can donate data from their mobile phone plan which will be provided to disadvantaged secondary school students.[45]

Greater donations and support for those impacted by COVID-19 has also been enabled through technology. Spotify, a music streaming platform has recently launched the Spotify COVID-19 Music Relief project. The project allows Spotify users to make a financial contribution to artists themselves, their crews or a charity of the artist's choosing through the streaming app.

Generally, people have shown a sense of kindness and community spirit in response to COVID-19. There are reports of neighbourhood Facebook groups being created to share local information, people dropping notes into letter boxes offering to help with groceries, and teddy bears popping up in windows to entertain children in the neighbourhood.[46]

03 — Sector impacts

Digital trends also show a strong shift toward togetherness and community spirit during this time. A digital marketing agency reports that online conversation around community is increasing by 82 per cent in the UK.[47] People are also using social media to reinforce the need to stay at home, with billions worldwide using the **#happyathome** hashtag.[48]

04 — Disproportionate effects

The social impacts do not affect all equally. There are industries and populations which have been impacted more severely than others.

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04 — Disproportionate effects

In industries which are not deemed essential services and where working from home is not possible, job losses have been significant. This has been felt strongest in the hospitality and tourism and accommodation industry, as well as the arts and recreation industry. These industry workforces are typically characterised by younger people, many of whom work on a casual or part-time basis, and therefore may already face financial instability. Youth are also more likely to have been unemployed before the crisis, with an unemployment rate more than double of total unemployment.[49] Periods of unemployment of young can lead to further disadvantages with costs to the individuals often lasting many years.[50]

Impacts on mental health are also disproportionately felt by younger people, with 16 to 24-year old's having the highest prevalence of mental disorders of all age groups across Australia.[51] Furthermore, periods of unemployment while young also lead to increased mental health issues over time.[52]

At the other end of the age spectrum, older people have been further isolated due to social distancing, particularly as they are more vulnerable if they contract the virus. One in four older people in Australia live alone and are already at risk of social isolation.[53]

Similarly to youth, women face increasing job uncertainty due to women working in those industries hit hardest such as hospitality and tourism. It is estimated that 24 per cent of men are employed in critical occupations compared to 17 per cent of women, leaving women more vulnerable to unemployment.[54] As men continue to earn more than women across Australia and contribute to 36 per cent of unpaid work in heterosexual households, it is likely that women's jobs will be sacrificed to take on childcare responsibilities during school and childcare closures while men continue to work contributed to the widening of gender equity.[55] Women also make up 75 per cent of the health professional workforce in Australia,[56] placing them at higher risk of contracting the virus.

04 — Disproportionate effects

Not only are women affected disproportionately economically, but women are also most likely to be victims of violence within the home. While men are more likely to experience violence by a stranger, women are far more likely to experience violence by someone they know, meaning the household is not always a safe place.[57] With the heightened risk of violence within the home due to confinement and economic stress throughout the crisis, and limited interactions with strangers, women are at higher risk of experiencing an increase in violence.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are also disproportionately at risk due to their already poor health outcomes and economic disadvantage. Governments have enforced restrictions regarding entry to communities to reduce contact and contain the virus. In rural and remote communities, with decreased movement the subsequent access to health services is likely to be reduced.

05 — Where to from here?

Focus is now clearly on the future and the path to recovery. We should proceed cautiously.

05 — Where to from here?

As the Federal and State Governments continue planning the economic recovery and relaxing social distancing measures, we have an unprecedented opportunity to harness the positive effects of COVID-19 and curb the long-term negative effects. This requires two things:
1. Businesses, community and government to work together. Harnessing each other's knowledge and expertise and supporting each other in the way that is most effective.
2. Targeted decision making that leverages the positive impacts to ensure they continue so that the economy and society will thrive.

We have choices to make regarding what we want to value, and how we shape our future as we emerge from this pandemic. We know there will be debate and disagreement around what we can afford, and what should be prioritised. These are bold choices. We have the opportunity to boost productivity, while driving positive social impacts though addressing inequalities. This means investing in social infrastructure and backing new and innovative operating and delivery models that have worked during this time.

So how might we do these two things? We have provided our views on what we think government, business and community should consider. And we encourage you to think about how you and those in your network can continue ensure the positive social impacts of COVID-19.

Leverage and invest where there is momentum – this comprises two components: 1) leveraging technology, and 2) investing in social programs.
1. Technology – models of care in the health and social sector have been transformed using virtual delivery. This represents an opportunity to continue supporting and refining these models to improve access to services that traditionally have been provided face-to-face. This could include designing or extending the delivery of online trials which can have real benefits for victims of domestic and family violence and witnesses of crime. Redesign of funding models will support the continued use of technology to improve efficiency and accessibility of core services.

05 — Where to from here?

2. Programs – this paper has highlighted numerous case studies of new ways of operating, and initiatives in the social services sector. These can continue to be refined and piloted, along with investing in new approaches. For example, if there is increased motivation to change among men perpetrating domestic and family violence, this represents an opportunity to continue to invest in early intervention approaches and innovative delivery models for Men's Behaviour Change Programs.

Invest in social infrastructure – social infrastructure refers to the infrastructure (physical facilities, spaces, services and networks) that allow people to access social services and that support the quality of life and wellbeing of communities.[58] Investment in infrastructure for a social purpose can stimulate the economy, enable social cohesion, and improve access of social services. These can be both large-scale investment (for example in social housing), or for small-scale investment. For example, a 2017 Deloitte Access Economics report for the Morwell Neighbourhood House found it contributed $600,000 worth of value to the community through both financial and resilience-building support, both of which contributed to enhanced quality of life. This illustrates that low cost infrastructure can have a significant return if designed in a way that suits the needs of the community.

Investment in social infrastructure should also be targeted. It is important we do not forget those who experienced devastating impacts during the bushfires in the summer of 2020. These communities represent prime candidates for re-building.

Vertical equity – noting the disproportionate affect the pandemic has had on certain population groups, the response should similarly be unequal. That is, it should have greater focus and support for those who have been disadvantaged. We know the long-term economic consequences will more significantly impact young people. Danielle Wood of the Grattan Institute has also argued about the merits of permanently raising the child care subsidy will contribute to increases in workforce participation, particularly women.[59] We need to ensure that no one is left behind in how we respond.

05 — Where to from here?

- **Be bold by speaking to the collective** – some large-scale reforms require an understanding that some will benefit more than others. COVID-19 has built a sense of community, and understanding that sometimes individual action and sacrifice leads to collective benefit. Now is the time leverage this collective mentality to design, communicate and implement bold reforms without hesitation. While we do not want to limit ourselves on what such reforms could be, one notable candidate is tax reform. For decades economists have been arguing for a more efficient tax system.[60] Now is the time for government to re-open the tomes written on the topic and re-consider the options.

- **Recognise those who kept us going** – there are so many individuals and sectors that contributed to our response to COVID-19 who should be recognised for their efforts. This includes the health workforce (nurses, doctors, allied health workforce), cleaners, teachers, aged care workers, supermarket workers, and those in the arts who kept us entertained virtually and often voluntarily. The case studies have highlighted just some organisations that have adapted to ensure people are receiving the services and supports they need.

- **Continue to measure the impacts** – this report provides a surface level, early assessment of the social impacts of COVID-19 that we have seen to date. However, as we have seen, it is an ever-changing situation, and the full effects will not be known for some time to come. That is why it is important to undertake further research in order to monitor the impacts overtime.

Our hope is that from this crisis a new path for Australia emerges. One where the collective is prioritised, where those less off are thought of first, let's Reset not Restart.

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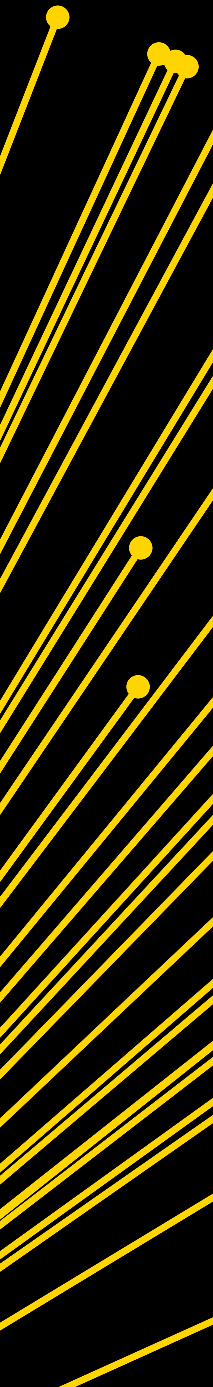
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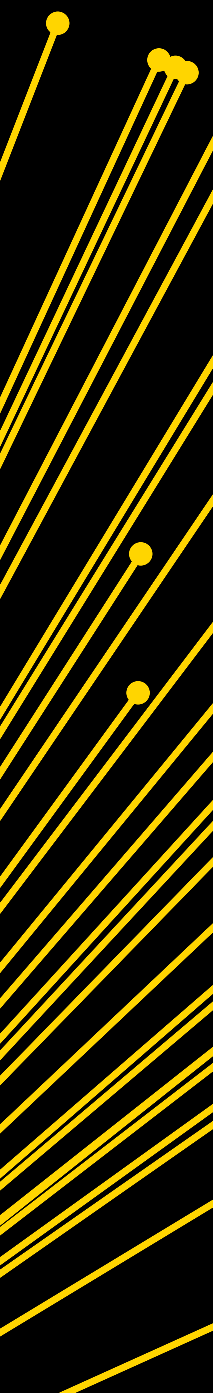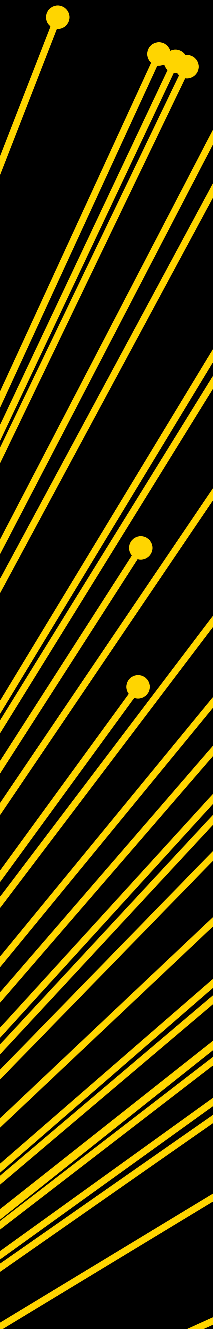
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