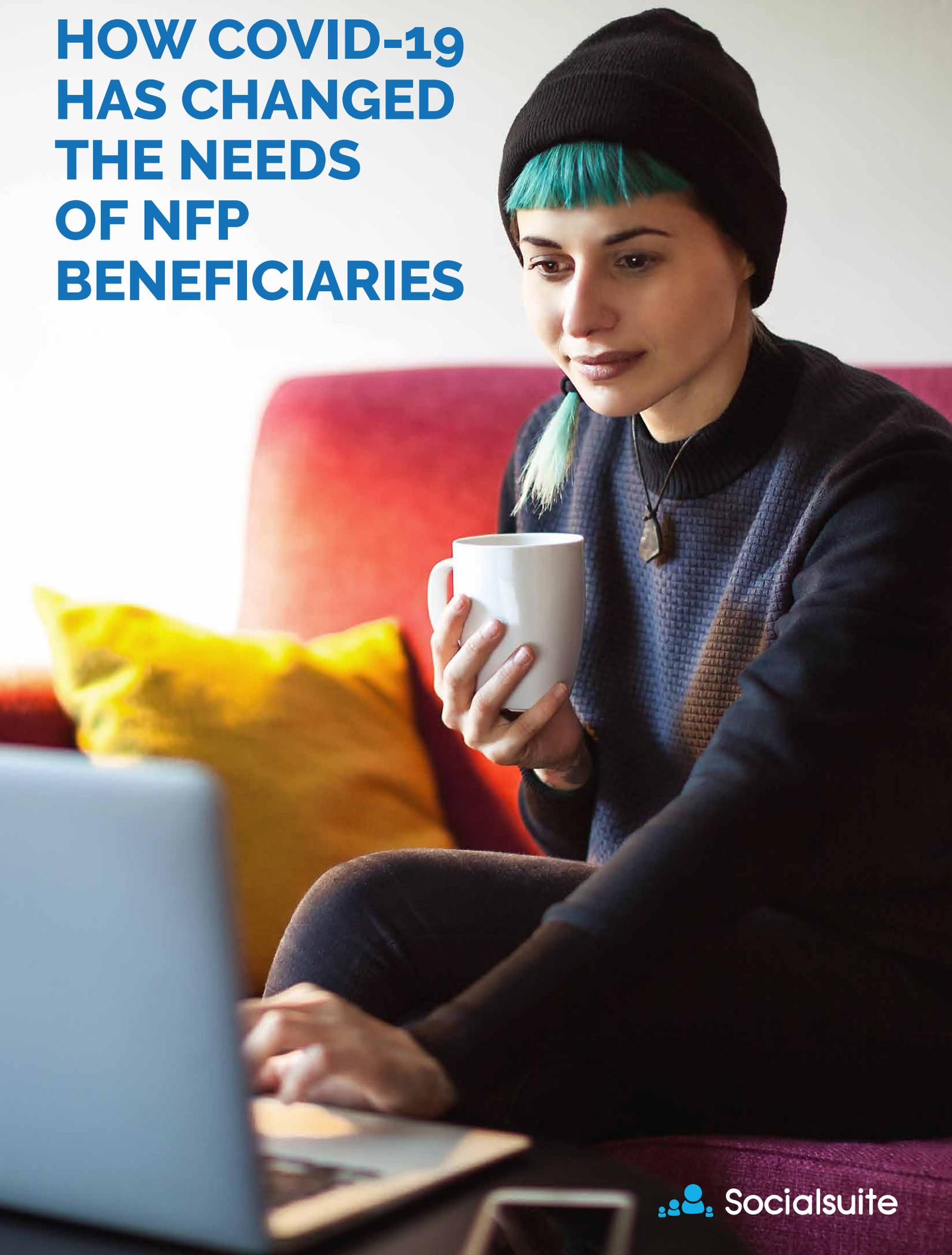


# HOW COVID-19 HAS CHANGED THE NEEDS OF NFP BENEFICIARIES



# PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

We are excited to share with you the insights from a global social impact study of COVID-19.

At Socialsuite, our goal has always been to empower social organizations to rapidly listen, understand, and act to help their people and communities in need.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented impact on people's livelihood, sense of freedom, safety, and ultimately their sense of self. This impact is even more pronounced for vulnerable populations. Now more important than ever, the social services sector needs clear insights on how to help their people navigate through COVID-19.

In April, we launched a free COVID-19 social impact assessment tool for any nonprofit organization to rapidly listen and understand how their people have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our vision is that organizations around the world will use this free tool to learn what their people's challenges and needs are, and formulate help accordingly.

As of July, over 950 organizations participated in our free initiative, with more than 9,000 nonprofit / social sector employees and beneficiaries having completed our COVID-19 social impact surveys.

This report discusses the insights we have drawn from these surveys. The key insights were:

1. Young people are feeling lonelier, and are at risk of social detachment.
2. Young people are engaging more frequently in self-development activities during the lockdown.
3. Heightened stress levels are largely due to loss of social connections with family and loved ones, and fears around contracting / not recovering from the virus.
4. Economic impacts are felt more strongly by a younger workforce.
5. Having someone to speak to, financial support, and access to essentials are key areas of support people are asking for.

We hope you find these insights meaningful, and that you can draw on them to learn how to better support your people during this time.



**Dr Clara Ong**  
*Head of Impact & Research*

# APPROACH AND DATA COLLECTION

Socialsuite designed a social impact survey to measure how beneficiaries and employees of the nonprofit / social services sector have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Nonprofit organizations would share the survey link with their employees and/or beneficiaries.

Surveys are sent automatically via email weekly for two months, and then monthly thereafter to monitor changes in people's coping behaviours and perceptions over time. Respondents can opt out at any time.

At the time of writing (July 2020)

**968**

organizations have taken part in our free initiative

**3,540**

people have completed baseline surveys

A further **5,881** people have completed follow-up surveys

# 1. YOUNG PEOPLE ARE FEELING LONELIER, AND ARE AT RISK OF SOCIAL DETACHMENT

Forty-one percent of young people aged between 18 - 24 years reported feeling lonely as a result of the COVID-19 lockdowns, compared to the 29% average. Just under 20% in this age group were also more likely to report that they did not maintain regular virtual contact with friends or family, compared to the 11% average. Notably, over 55 year-olds were most likely to maintain virtual contact with their social networks.

Loneliness is experienced when a person feels isolated and they feel a lack in communication with other people<sup>1</sup>. Loneliness is known to be a precursor for depression or other mental and physical ailments, and research shows that time plays a critical factor in determining how harmful loneliness can be.

As the feeling of loneliness is prolonged, the more time there is for a person to develop self-reinforcing loops of negative thinking and behavioural patterns<sup>2</sup>. In the context of COVID-19, an extended lockdown period could force people who are already feeling lonely into developing undesirable habits such as social withdrawal, excessive introversion, and a lack of motivation to maintain social connections.

It is a critical time for nonprofit and social service organizations to help combat the effects of loneliness. For instance, enabling people to talk about their loneliness, and providing them with the appropriate support structures, can help break the cycle before negative behaviours and psychological patterns set in.

*“I'm isolated and my depression is starting to show again. I miss my children and am worried about my elderly mother at the old age home.”*

*“Increased boredom and loneliness. Feel like time has stopped.”*

*“Miss interaction with others face to face, there are only so many zoom meetings you can cope with.”*

*“I feel like I'm more introverted than I ever was, but I am looking forward to finally catching up with friends and family.”*

<sup>1</sup> De Jong Gierveld. July 1987. *Developing and Testing a Model of Loneliness*. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology Vol 53 (1).

<sup>2</sup> 5 Cacioppo, J. T. and Patrick, W. (2008) *Loneliness: Human Nature and the Need for Social Connection* New York: W. W. Norton and Company, p.7.

## 2. YOUNG PEOPLE ARE ENGAGING MORE FREQUENTLY IN SELF-DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES DURING THE LOCKDOWN

Although there is plenty of research to suggest that prolonged loneliness can lead to mental health and other physical ailments, loneliness could also be a precursor for radical self-inquiry and introspection<sup>3</sup>. People are now spending more time alone, some with more spare time on their hands perhaps due to loss of employment or temporary cessation of education

During the earlier months of the pandemic (April - May), our study found that 15% of responses from young people aged 18 - 24 years reported "Watching Television" as one of the top 3 activities providing relief during lockdown. This declined to 6% in June, with more young people citing "self-development" as the top area providing them relief (23% of total responses in June, compared to 8% in April, and 4% in May).

Drivers that underpin a desire for self-development during the COVID-19 lockdowns may include:

- An opportunity to improve employability amidst an uncertain job market.
- Extended time spent alone may trigger self-introspection and development.
- A craving for routine may encourage some to enrol in an online course and work towards a goal.
- A desire to feel empowered and a sense of self-confidence.

However, going on a journey of self-development during lockdown is not a viable and accessible option for people who are living under vulnerable circumstances, and who do not have the means to afford online courses or even basic internet and technological infrastructure.

Nonprofits that deliver self-development initiatives to high risk populations traditionally do so face-to-face, and would have had to scale back as a result of COVID-19. A key challenge to overcome is finding innovative ways and resources to digitally deliver these initiatives across vulnerable and non-vulnerable populations, ensuring equality in access.

*“Natural routine is broke so I'll need to create new habits and routines moving forward.”*

*“Fear of being unemployable and that my skills would be stunted if I don't get the chance to put them into practice.”*

*“I am a leader with some members from my community, in a group for single parents (a male and female group) for the past couple of years, to train them in emotional healing, coping, and also in financial management (my role specifically). In this time, we continued to check in with the members, and provided online classes.”*

*“Our organisation supports students to obtain placements in businesses and develop 'work ready skills' through practical experiences. With many businesses closed and under financial stress for who knows how long, the likelihood of this support being possible is under a cloud of uncertainty.”*

<sup>3</sup> Anneli Rufus (January 2008). *Party of One: The Loners Manifesto*: Avalon Travel Publishing.

# 3. HEIGHTENED STRESS MAY BE DUE TO A LOSS OF SOCIAL CONNECTION AND FEARS AROUND CONTRACTING THE VIRUS

Our study shows that in June, 67% of people reported stress ratings of 7 or more out of 10. The areas that people have greatest concerns about, as a result of COVID-19 lockdowns, were:

- Loss of connection with social networks (13%<sup>4</sup>)
- Mental health concerns (9%)
- Loss of connection with extended family (8%)

Those aged 35 - 54 years are more likely to express concerns about their friends and family members not coping with the COVID-19 lockdowns, with many citing elderly parents living alone or overseas and not being able to visit them should they become sick. Those aged over 55 years are particularly concerned about losing connection with their extended family, such as inability to visit their grandchildren, help with childcare duties, or visit their children who live overseas.

Mental health concerns predominantly center on depression and anxiety, largely due to restricted ability to connect socially with loved ones; feelings of being stuck at home, and an overall loss of routine and freedom.

*“Not being able to spend time with grandchildren.”*

*“Not feeling safe visiting interstate family members who need care.”*

*“Not able to visit elderly family who have health concerns i.e dementia, Alzheimers.”*

*“I don't do anywhere near enough exercise. My home, where I have traditionally retreated to, is now a workplace. My workplace no longer has restricted hours. Knowing most jobs are vulnerable, I do many more hours at the computer than I would normally and generally work longer hours.”*

<sup>4</sup> Number of coded responses = 10,568 (includes Baseline and Weekly Check-In Surveys)

# 3. HEIGHTENED STRESS MAY BE DUE TO A LOSS OF SOCIAL CONNECTION AND FEARS AROUND CONTRACTING THE VIRUS

Young people aged 18 - 24 years old were most worried about catching the virus (55% compared to the average 48%); however it is the older age group (55 and over) who was less optimistic about recovering if they or their family members were to contract the virus (44% compared to the average 37%).

Financial strain on households, due to the economic impact of COVID-19, was also frequently cited as a significant source of stress and concern for many. This is discussed further in the next section.

Understanding the triggers for people's stress levels during this time can really help nonprofits and social service organizations design tailored support for their employees and/or beneficiaries.

For instance, addressing mental health concerns might involve ensuring that people have access to the appropriate support channels at all times, such as 24-hour telephone counselling; daily check-ins with the team; fostering a culture of asking "*Are you OK?*" and "*How are you coping?*".

## Case Study

A local government council in Australia used the free COVID-19 tool to listen to what their constituents challenges and needs were. When they identified that regular exercise and walking was an important coping mechanism for many, but there were not enough walking tracks to facilitate this due to social distancing requirements, that council promptly shut off a non-busy road to cars, to enable more space for people to continue exercising.

## 4. THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 IS MORE STRONGLY FELT BY A YOUNGER WORKFORCE

People aged 18 - 34 years are more likely to feel that their job is at risk as a result of COVID-19. In June, 46% of 18 - 24 year-olds and 35% of 25 - 34 year-olds reported feeling that their jobs were at risk compared to the average 27%.

This finding is not surprising, given that the younger age group of 18 - 24 years would mostly be students working part-time in industries that have been most affected by COVID-19; such as hospitality and retail.

The 25 - 34 year-old age group would largely represent a workforce with young families and dependents, with possibly a new mortgage or other financial commitments; therefore their sensitivity around job security might be heightened. Notably, this age group is more likely to report that their spending habits have changed as a result of COVID-19 (67% in June compared to the average 60%), and a larger proportion from this age group also cited an inability to continue providing for their families (18% in June compared to the average 13%).

In June, 18 - 24 year olds were most worried about not being able to afford basic essentials and supplies (26%), followed by 25 - 34 year olds (14%); compared to the average 9%.

For those reporting that they have been affected by the economic impacts of COVID-19, our study found that in June "Less social outings" (20%<sup>5</sup>) continue to be the most frequently cited impact, followed by "Financial strain on household" (18%) and "Strain on mental health" (13%). These impact areas have consistently been the most frequently cited since April.

*"No more working, as my job actually involves interaction with people. I'm now at home with nothing to do but waiting until covid19 ends up."*

*"At this stage my biggest concern is my living arrangement, as I am living by myself now I am having to provide for my rental payments. I am struggling to organise a housemate to share the cost, with so many people out of work currently/not looking to sign a new lease."*

*"I am struggling to pay off my car loan, and if I can't afford my rent then I will be kicked out!"*

<sup>5</sup> Number of coded responses = 3,707 (includes Baseline and Weekly Check-In Surveys)

## 4. THE ECONOMIC IMPACT OF COVID-19 IS MORE STRONGLY FELT BY A YOUNGER WORKFORCE

Further analysis of the survey responses suggest that a strain on mental health is largely related to an inability to maintain regular social and recreational outings with family and friends due to reduced discretionary spending and social restrictions, as well as stress associated with providing for the family, mortgage and loan repayments in the face of job loss, change in working conditions such as reduced hours and wage, and closure of owner-operated businesses.

The findings of our study indicate that the economic impacts of COVID-19 on households is not just a change in financial circumstances. Rather, the implications are multifaceted, with far reaching consequences on mental health, psychological welfare, and loss of an underlying sense of security. When and if the pandemic would end, and whether there would be further sustained impacts to the economy, are yet to be known; and this uncertainty is exacerbating people's anxiety and unsettledness.

For nonprofits and social service organizations, it is not only about helping people find and secure employment; but it is also ensuring that people are continually engaging and developing new skills so that their sense of self-confidence and self-worth is not lost. It is really about providing an underlying sense of reassurance to people - a safe space for people to communicate their concerns and worries in an otherwise volatile COVID-19 world.

*“Family members have lost their jobs and homes, we are in lockdown in a province away from our home, our ability to work productively has been impaired with homeschooling.”*

*“Salary has been cut by 20%, mortgage and living expenses are impacted.”*

*“Increased stress and anxiety within the home. Reduced spending a) not going anywhere b) saving 'just in case' No attending sport and other community connection.”*

# 5. WHERE SUPPORT IS NEEDED - HAVING SOMEONE TO SPEAK TO, FINANCIAL SUPPORT, AND ACCESS TO ESSENTIALS

While a majority of survey respondents indicated that they did not require any support getting through COVID-19, the ones that did ask for support frequently cited:

- Financial support;
- Having someone to speak to;
- A sense of security; and
- Access to essential services and supplies.

In June, 13%<sup>6</sup> of people asked for someone they can speak to, a slight uptick from 12% in April and May. Requesting a sense of security averaged at about 11% across April to June. Further analysis of the survey responses suggest that people are seeking reassurance and comradery - that they are not the only ones feeling anxious and unsettled about the lockdowns; Additionally, people are also seeking answers - when will the lockdowns be over, when will a vaccine or treatment be produced, how can they access more support and information.

Seven percent of respondents cited financial support as an area needed in June, a slight decline from April (14%) and May (12%). However a closer look at the data indicates that financial strain remains one of the top of mind concerns for our survey respondents, as discussed in the previous section.

In relation to support needed with accessing essential services and supplies, survey respondents from the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia tended to express concerns with accessing medical and specialist appointments. These respondents were concerned that they were unable to easily access medical care during this time; while others who had family member(s) with a disability cited challenges with accessing carer support.

On the other hand, survey respondents from East Africa (predominantly Tanzania) are largely requesting support to access basic supplies like hand sanitizers, masks, and personal protective equipment for healthcare workers. There was also an ask for better education on how to maintain good hygiene and sanitization practices, due to concerns that vulnerable communities were not adequately protecting themselves from the virus

*“It’s very tough, having a child who has a disability and an elderly parent who I am the primary carer for. I’m not getting the support I need.”*

*“I am worried that my elderly mother won’t get medical attention when she requires it. She is too afraid to leave the house for fear that she will catch the virus.”*

*“Encouraging them not to be on unnecessary groups and to elaborate how to protect oneself from this disease.”*

*“My life has been impacted due to economic decline to my parents. They spend a lot of money for buying to us protective gears for COVID-19.”*

<sup>6</sup> Number of coded responses = 3,743 (includes Baseline and Weekly Check-In Surveys)

# CONCLUSION

COVID-19 has created a new normal and for many, this change is unsettling. There is tremendous uncertainty of when the virus will be contained, and when it would be safe to revert to some semblance of the past.

What we have hoped to highlight in this report is that the social impact of COVID-19 is multifaceted, not only potentially affecting people's physical health but also their sense of security, safety, freedom, and self-worth.

The psychological impact of losing connection with loved ones is profound; as is the loss of routine, employment, and financial security.

Now more than ever, nonprofits need all the insights they can get to support their people in navigating the impacts of COVID-19. Nonprofits need to be constantly monitoring and listening to what their people's needs are, so that already scant resources such as funding can be strategically directed towards the areas of greatest need.

# ABOUT SOCIALSUITE

Socialsuite produces technology that helps a diverse range of organizations monitor their impact on people. It is a global leader in impact-management software.

Socialsuite's simple, easy to use technology rigorously measures the potency of social investment programs to greatly enhance accountability reporting.

Its automated data-collection, analysis and reporting tools provide accurate and timely insights for organizations that need to demonstrate evidence of their impact.

Socialsuite is a fast-growing global company based in Melbourne, Australia. It has clients across Asia Pacific, Americas and Europe.

Find out more at [socialsuitehq.com](https://socialsuitehq.com).

## How you can participate

Socialsuite's free COVID-19 Social Impact Assessment tool is available now for free to any organization interested in understanding how their employees and beneficiaries have been affected by COVID-19 .

To register, visit [socialsuitehq.com/covid-19-assessment](https://socialsuitehq.com/covid-19-assessment).