



# Social Justice STOCKTAKE



## Mental Health

Attributable To General Manager, Policy & Advocacy, Policy Research & Social Justice, Jennifer Kirkaldy

### Were you surprised mental health was the country's main concern?

Mental health being the most commonly identified hardship in Australia did not surprise us – we see the impact of mental ill-health across all our services and community activities. I was surprised by how consistently mental health appeared at the local level, irrespective of any other factor such as poverty or the impact of COVID. Mental health appears in every single electorate report except the Northern Territory (where it ranked sixth) demonstrating that this really is a national issue.

### Would you consider mental health issues to be the main issue for The Salvation Army in its work as well?

Mental ill-health is a factor in every service The Salvation Army provides. In our social services we have seen that mental health issues are both a driver, and result, of other forms of disadvantage such as homelessness and poverty. We often see mental ill-health go hand in hand with social isolation and loneliness. In everything The Salvation Army does we are sensitive to the effects of mental ill-health and aim to create a community that empowers people to thrive.

### What do you see as the main drivers of mental health issues in this country, and do they reflect the survey participants' perceptions?

Hardship and lack of community are the largest causes of mental ill-health in our service areas. Community members who are isolated from community support, or are experiencing poverty, domestic violence, homelessness or substance use disorders often suffer from mental ill-health.

### Is there a strategy The Salvation Army uses when serving clients with mental health issues?

The Salvation Army always treats community members as whole people, and our role is to deliver holistic, wrap-around care. In developing a connection/relationship, and delivering a range of support, our staff are always alert to a community member's mental health. We have also worked for years to develop connections with mental healthcare services for when hardship support would be best coupled with professional, clinical support.

### Do you believe there is dissatisfaction amongst the public with current levels of mental health assistance?

We can certainly see from the Stocktake that mental health is an all-pervasive issue and that more needs to be done but mental health is a complex issue. We all have a role to play in addressing the



# Social Justice STOCKTAKE



stigma of mental ill-health and ensuring that those who are experiencing mental ill health can access the supports they need.

## Did you see a difference between areas that did and did not experience lockdowns regarding mental health concerns in the Stocktake?

Surprisingly we did not see a meaningful correlation between areas that identified mental health as a major issue and areas that were in lockdown during the survey period. Mental Health was consistently identified as a social injustice issue and hardship in every community in Australia.

## Do you believe the results would be the same, now lockdown restrictions have been lifted and borders re-opened, if the participants were questioned now?

It is difficult to predict what the results would be over time. Given how prevalent mental health was in the results, I would expect that it would remain amongst the top issues now that lockdown and border restrictions have changed.

## What do you believe are the first steps in addressing mental health concerns in this country?

Like any illness, we need to address the environment that is contributing to mental ill-health. As a nation, this means tackling the systems and processes that contribute to hardship and injustice – starting with income adequacy and housing affordability. When a person does not have stable housing or is in financial distress it is extremely difficult to manage or recover from a mental illness.

As a community, we all need to develop a better understanding of mental health to lessen the stigma people feel in disclosing a mental health concern and asking for help. We need to inform ourselves about how to respond in a supportive way when we think someone may not be feeling mentally well or when they ask for help.

## If you could do anything within reason to arrest this issue, what would it be?

We all have a role to play in addressing mental health. From a government perspective the single biggest thing the Commonwealth could do, in my view, to address mental health is to address the welfare system. When you add in the unsustainably low level of the Jobseeker payment, it becomes even more difficult for people who are unemployed to manage their mental health while also looking for work.

The single biggest thing the community can do is address the stigma associated with mental ill-health and seeking help. Mental illness does not discriminate. Some of the strongest people you know will have experienced mental ill-health at some time in their life and we all need to normalise seeking help when we need it. This is particularly important for men experiencing mental ill-health for whom there is additional, unnecessary and harmful stigma to talking about it.