



DEMAND FOR COMMUNITY SERVICES SNAPSHOT

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Locked Bag 4777
Strawberry Hills, NSW 2012
Australia

Email: info@acoss.org.au
Website: www.acoss.org.au

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Introduction

A joint initiative of ACOSS, the COSS Network and Community Sector Banking.

This **Demand for Community Services Snapshot 2019** is a report of demand for community services in 2019 based on information derived from the forthcoming *Australian Community Sector Survey (ACSS) 2019*. This research was conducted by the Social Policy Research Centre at UNSW Sydney in collaboration with the Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS) and the network of Councils of Social Service of Australia (COSS Network), supported by Community Sector Banking.

The survey was completed by 1,454 community sector staff, including 406 organisational leaders, in October 2019. In the 2019 ACSS, several survey questions were asked to capture how community sector organisations were positioned to deal with the demand for their services. Survey questions captured community sector staff and leaders' experiences of service demand, how demand for their services is changing, and how unmet demand is impacting the community. The responses were clear.

Key Findings

- There is **significant unmet demand** for community services in Australia
- Demand for services is **increasing**.
- Unmet demand is **impacting people** accessing services, their families and their communities.
- The vast majority of community sector workers (**82 per cent** in total) reported that in the last year, levels of demand in the community either **'increased'** (50 per cent) or **'increased significantly'** (a further 32 per cent).
- Three in five community sector workers (60 per cent) reported an increase in the numbers of clients their service was **unable to support** during 2019.
- Around a **quarter** of respondents (24 per cent) described their main service as **'rarely' or 'never' able to meet demand**, and only five per cent said their service was 'completely' able to meet demand.
- Staff involved in **housing and homelessness, financial counselling, and legal services** were most likely to report demand pressures. In addition, high levels of unmet need were observed in **regional and rural areas**.
- Community sector **staff** described how unmet demand for services was generating **stress, undermining wellbeing**, and contributing to cascading crises relating to **housing, poverty, debt, violence, physical and mental health, and the law**. Unmet need also impacts workers, impeding their capacity to work effectively with people with the most complex needs, and to undertake advocacy work.



1. Capacity to meet demand

Data indicates significant unmet demand for community services during 2019.

- Only five per cent of survey respondents said the main service they were involved in was 'completely' able to meet demand, and a further 30 per cent said they were 'mostly' able to meet demand (Figure 1).
- While around two in five said their service was 'somewhat' able to meet demand (41 per cent), 15 per cent were 'rarely' able to meet demand, and nine per cent were 'never' able to.

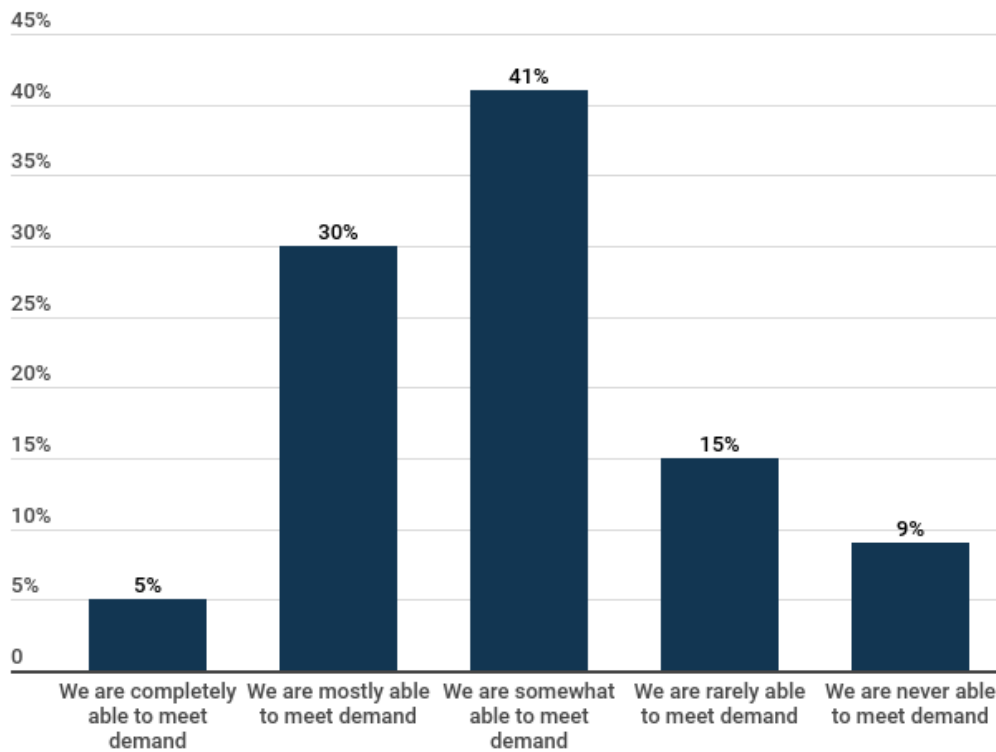
While capacity to meet demand did not differ significantly according to organisational size, regional location or main funding source, some differences among service types and jurisdictions were evident.

Figure 2 shows that capacity to meet demand differed according to the main service the respondent was involved in.

- Of those involved in responding to homelessness or providing housing services, a relatively high proportion (36 per cent) said they were either rarely or never able to meet demand. This was also the case for those delivering financial counselling and support (35 per cent) and legal services (33 per cent).
- By contrast, relatively high proportions were mostly or fully able to meet demand in employment, education and training (51 per cent) and in ageing, disability and carer services (46 per cent).

Figure 1 shows that compared with the national figure (35 per cent), the proportion of services who were either 'completely' or 'mostly' able to meet demand was relatively high in South Australia (43 per cent) and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) (41 per cent), and relatively low in New South Wales (NSW) (29 per cent). The proportion of staff who reported that the main service they were involved with was 'rarely' or 'never' able to meet demand ranged from 28 per cent in NSW to 15 per cent in the ACT.

FIGURE 1: PROPORTION OF RESPONDENTS WHO PERCEIVED THEIR MAIN SERVICE OR PROGRAM WAS ABLE TO MEET DEMAND (NUMBER OF RESPONSES =1,433)



Note: Respondents were asked about capacity to meet demand in relation to the main service, program or activity they were involved in.

FIGURE 2: RESPONDENTS' PERCEPTION OF CAPACITY TO MEET DEMAND, BY MAIN SERVICE SYSTEM (NUMBER OF RESPONSES =1,433)

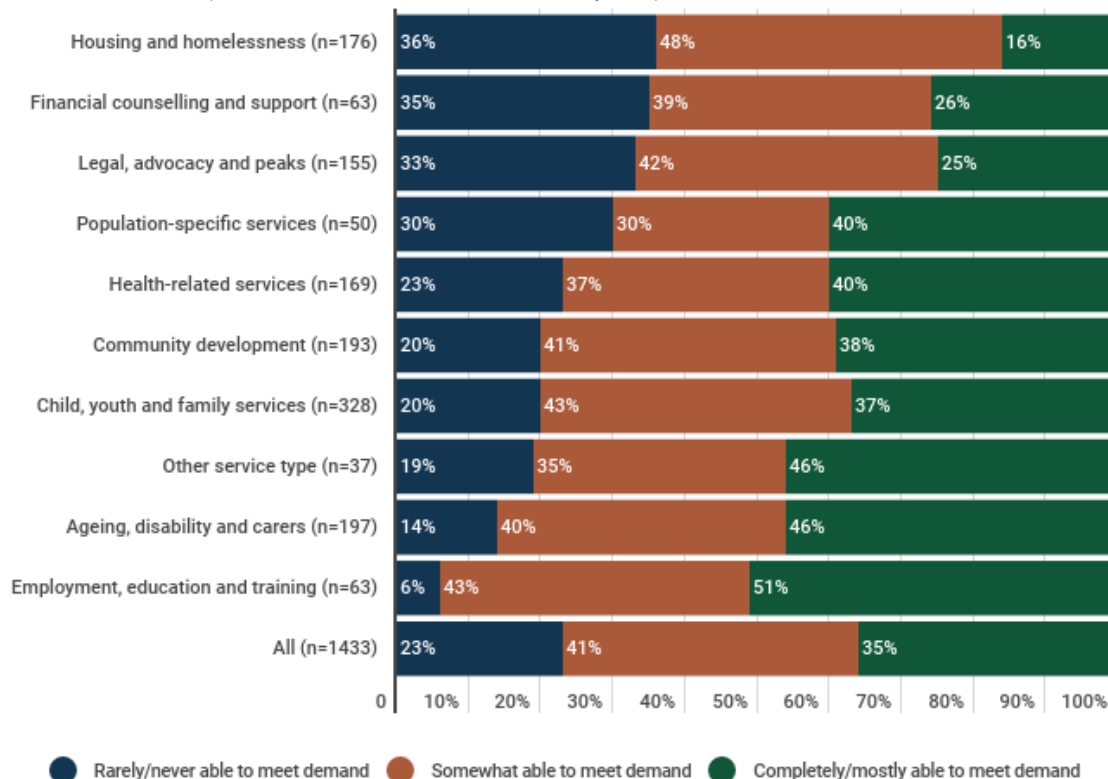
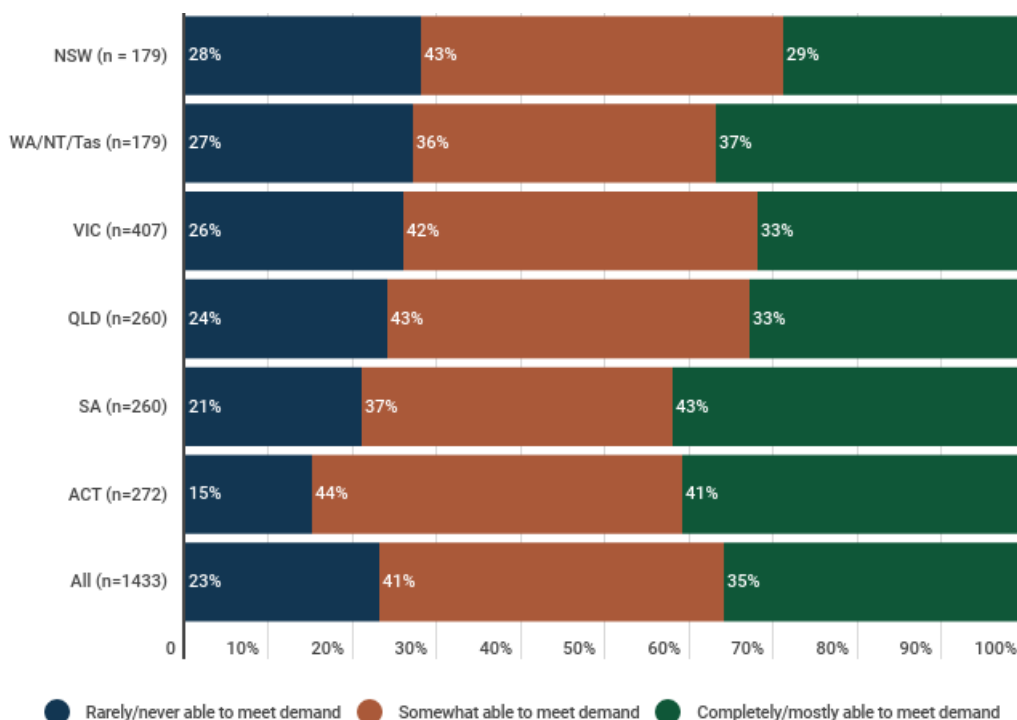


FIGURE 3: STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF CAPACITY TO MEET DEMAND, BY JURISDICTION (NUMBER OF RESPONSES: 1,433)



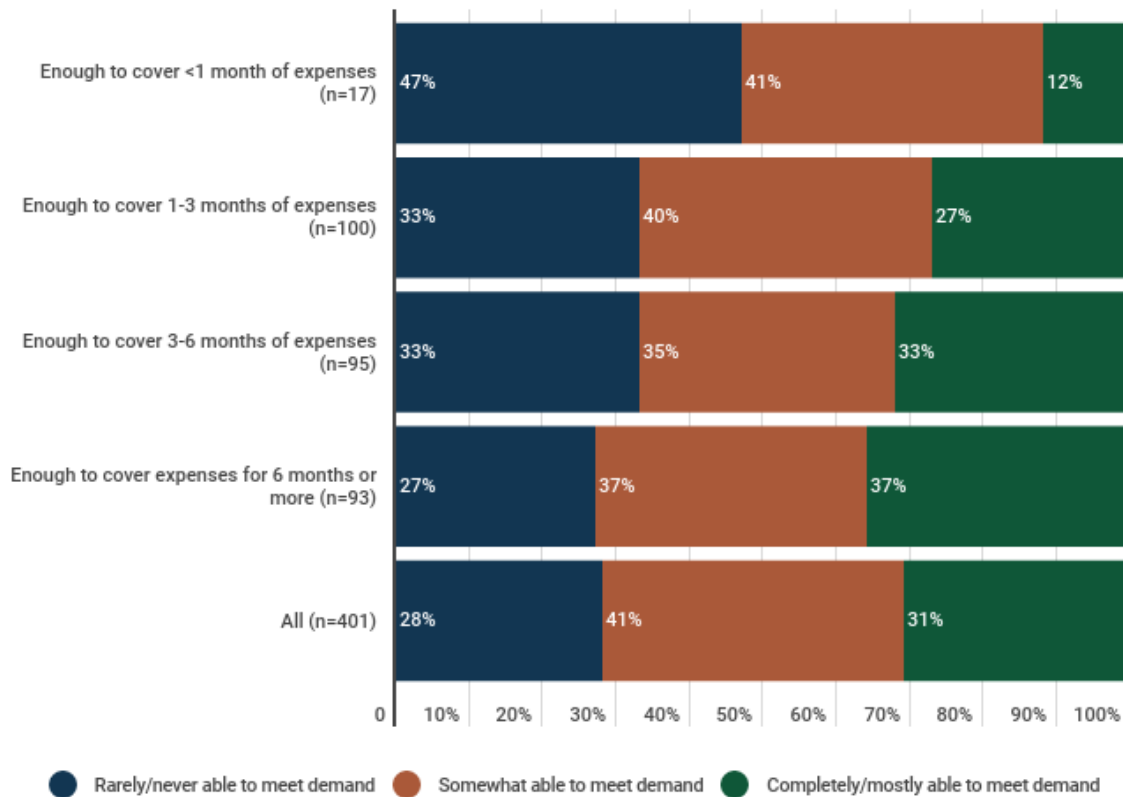
1.1 Differences by financial status

Data from organisational leaders demonstrates that organisations are better placed to meet demand when they have higher financial capacity.

- Where financial reserves were very low (i.e. organisations had capacity to cover less than one month of expenses) only 12 per cent said they were completely or mostly able to meet demand (see Figure 4).
- However, higher proportions of organisations with one to three months of expenses said they were completely or mostly able to meet demand (27 per cent), as did 33 per cent of those with three to six months of expenses in reserve, and 37 per cent of those with over six months of expenses in reserve.

This underlines the importance of ensuring organisations are financially strong and sustainable.

FIGURE 4: ORGANISATIONAL LEADERS' PERCEPTION OF CAPACITY TO MEET DEMAND, BY FINANCIAL STATUS OF ORGANISATION (NUMBER OF RESPONSES = 401)



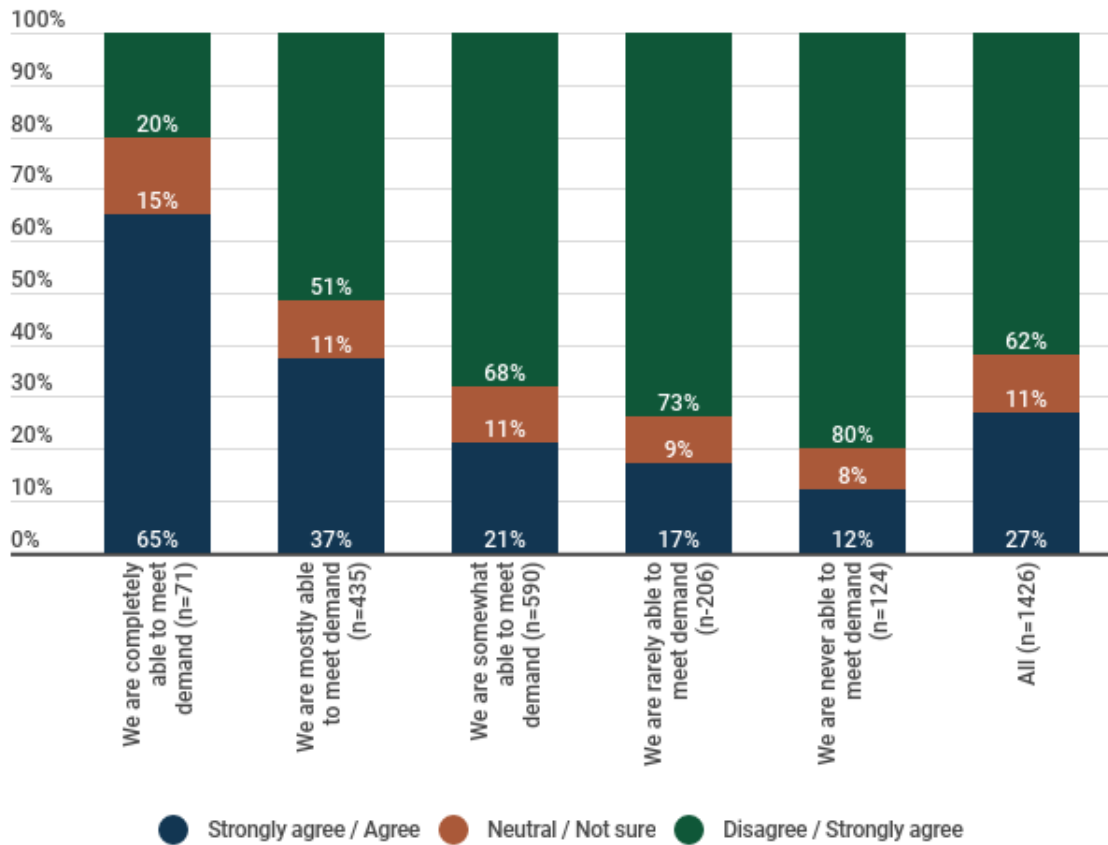
Note: 96 organisations which were unsure about their level of expense coverage are included in 'all', but not separately reported. Data about financial reserves was collected from organisational leaders only.

1.2 Differences by staffing levels

Capacity to meet demand also differed according to staff perceptions of the adequacy of staffing levels. This is shown in Figure 5.

- Among those who said their main service was 'completely' able to meet demand, 65 per cent agreed (or strongly agreed) there were enough staff to get the work done.
- By contrast, among those 'never' able to meet demand, only 12 per cent agreed they had enough staff to get the work done, and 80 per cent disagreed.

FIGURE 5: CAPACITY TO MEET DEMAND, BY WHETHER RESPONDENT AGREED OR DISAGREED WITH THE STATEMENT “THERE ARE ENOUGH STAFF IN MY SERVICE TO GET THE WORK DONE” (NUMBER OF RESPONSES = 1,426)



2. Changes in demand over the last year

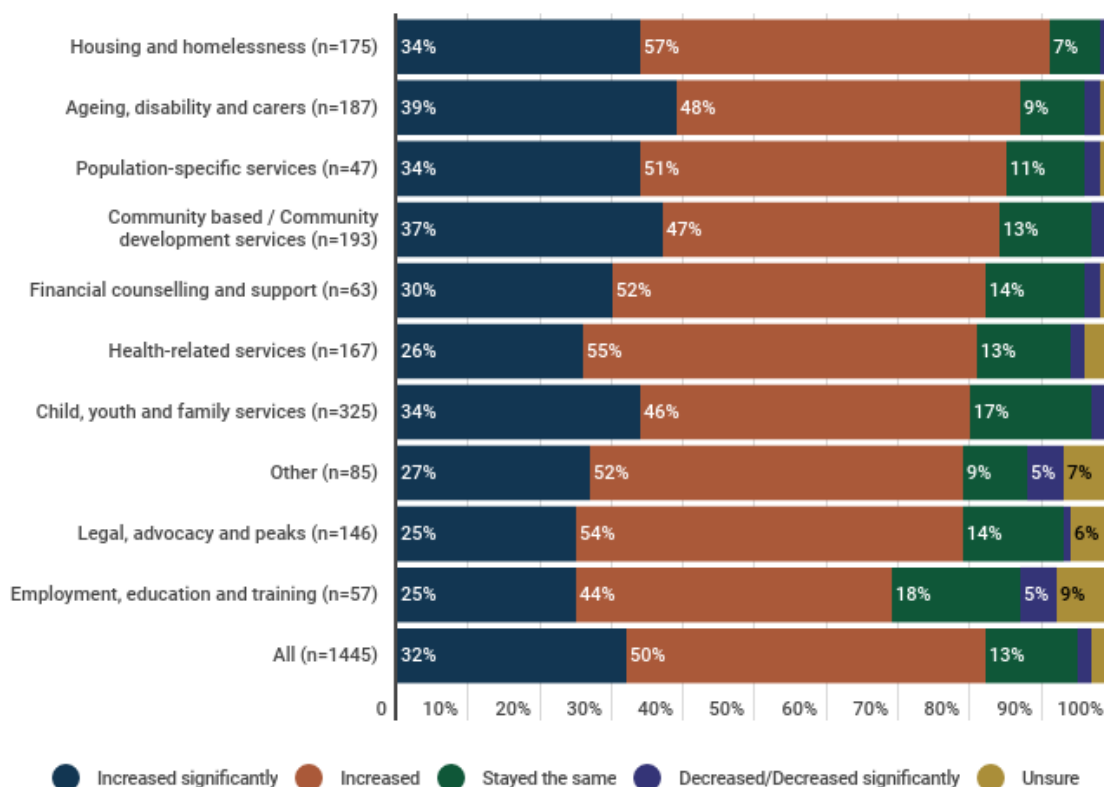
During 2019, staff were working in a context of increasing demand.

- As shown in Figure 6, the vast majority of staff reported that levels of demand in the community for their services had either increased (50 per cent) or increased significantly (a further 32 per cent).
- While 13 per cent said demand had stayed the same, only two per cent said demand had either decreased or decreased significantly, and three per cent were unsure.

These figures varied according to the main service type respondents were involved with. However, for each service category, respondents overwhelmingly reported that demand had increased.

- Those focussed on housing and homelessness services were under particular pressure: 91 per cent said demand had either increased or increased significantly.

FIGURE 6: PERCEPTIONS OF WHETHER DEMAND HAD INCREASED, STAYED THE SAME, OR DECREASED (NUMBER OF RESPONSES = 1,445)

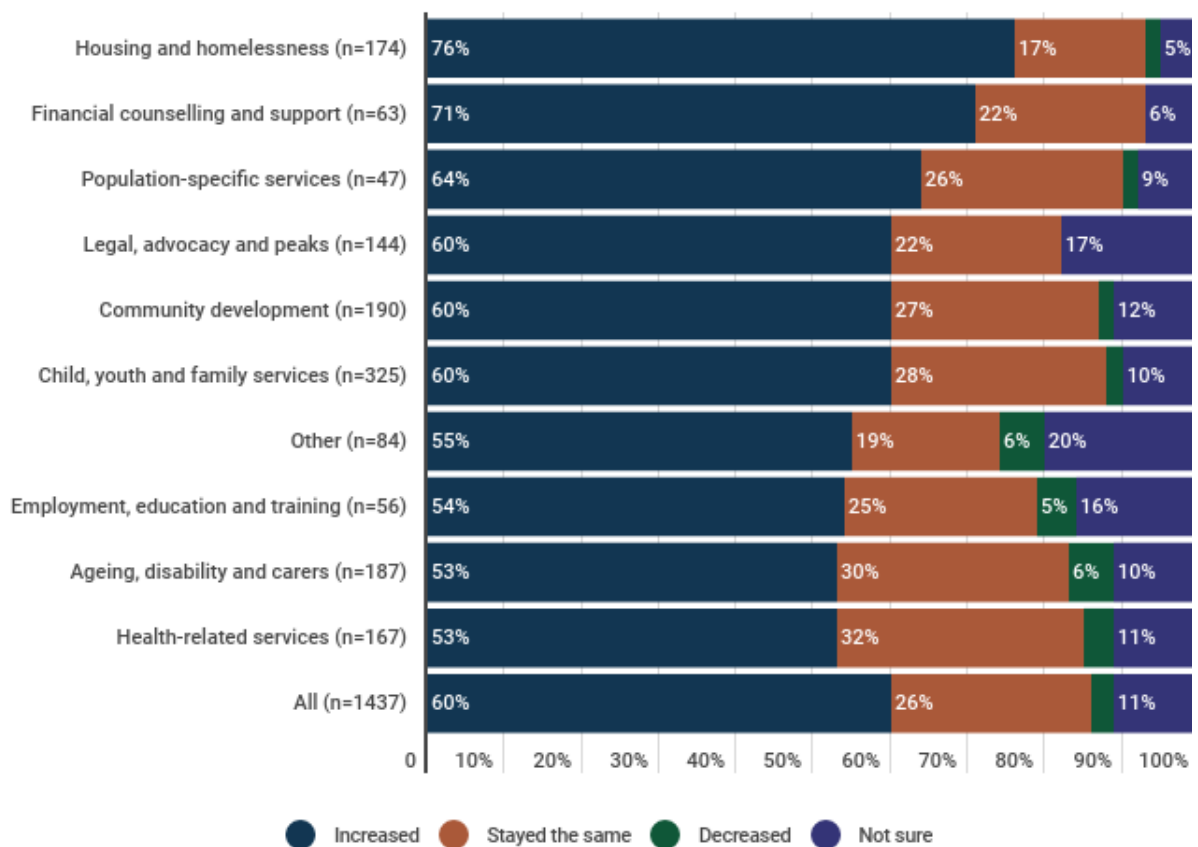


Note: The question was asked in relation to the main service or program they were involved in. .

3. Unmet need

To explore any dynamics in the unmet demand for services, the survey asked for an indication of whether there had been changes in numbers of clients that services were unable to support. Corresponding with their experiences of rising demand, a relatively high proportion of staff in housing and homelessness services (76 per cent) reported the numbers of clients their service was unable to support had increased, while a further 17 per cent reported numbers had stayed the same (see Figure 7). A high proportion of respondents focussed on financial counselling and support services also reported being unable to support a rising number of clients (see Figure 7).

FIGURE 7: WHETHER NUMBERS OF CLIENTS THE SERVICE WAS UNABLE TO SUPPORT INCREASED, STAYED THE SAME, OR DECREASED (NUMBER OF RESPONSES = 1,437)



4. Impacts of unmet demand

Respondents were given an opportunity to answer an open-ended question, 'Would you like to make any brief comments about the impacts on individuals or communities when you are unable to meet demand?' Around half of respondents used the opportunity to provide a response. In addressing the question, most discussed adverse impacts on service users and their families. Often they noted that failure to receive a service at times of need led to other more difficult problems and, at times, cascading crises. For example, a coordinator at a Victorian service observed that unmet demand led to:

Continued homelessness, continued trauma, the cycle of poverty, violence, trauma, intergenerational trauma and poverty continues for disadvantaged people, despair, hopelessness, worker burnout, children become less visible to agencies and therefore are at greater risk of abuse and neglect.

A South Australian service made a similar comment, adding that failure to receive help the first time they approach a service for support can deter people from seeking assistance to resolve their problems in the future:

The impact on individuals, if they cannot see a financial counsellor, include utility disconnection, eviction, increased mental health issues, and the inability to feed and appropriately clothe and medicate themselves and their families. Not being able to get help when they first build the courage to ask, then they are less likely to try again.

Respondents noted that if their service could not meet demand, some service users might turn to or be referred to other services that do not meet their needs so well or might miss out on support entirely.

No connection to other services in remote community - all referrals for more complex issues go to [the nearest urban centre], which is often inadequate because service users need immediate/acute care. (Coordinator, Northern Territory (NT) service)

Victims then have to have over the phone support which does not make their lives easier in coping with the violence from abusers. (Practitioner, Western Australian (WA) service)

Not enough funding and services for the people that require support. They go from service to service with no luck in [being] supported. (Administrator, NT service)

As the sole provider of this service, when we cannot meet demand, people go without. (Coordinator, NSW service)

Without support, or with limited support, respondents said that community members might find themselves facing housing stress or homelessness; poverty, debt and other financial issues; experience continuing family violence or children being at risk; physical or mental ill health; and escalating legal problems among other challenges. For example:

People fall through the cracks and end up in hospitals, homelessness or the justice system. (Senior manager, ACT service)

There are people missing out on support to access community or get better outcomes as advocates are not available. For some this might mean putting up with sub-standard living, missing support or equipment from NDIS while waiting for reviews, staying in hospital longer, putting up with discrimination or poor services, higher risk of homelessness. (CEO, WA service)

If they cannot get into the services, it does contribute to the stress of the person and often they get themselves into more debt to try to get out, so it does cost them money. It

also can contribute to arguments and separation, homelessness, hopelessness, continued addictive behaviour, illegal behaviours and day-to-day survival thinking. (Practitioner, SA service)

Many respondents said these experiences combined to negatively affect service users' emotional wellbeing, particularly in terms of frustration, stress and distress.

Frustration, distress, anger, disappointment. (CEO, SA service)

Clients seem more stressed, and with financial difficulties most of the time. (Coordinator, ACT service)

Distressing for both those who cannot be serviced, and on the staff who feel helpless in the face of demand. (CEO, NSW service)

The reflections of the service provider above are reflected by many other respondents, around a quarter of whom discussed the impact on their organisation of not being able to meet demand. The impact on staff was the issue most often of concern. They raised increased workloads, burnout, frustration and stress.

Deleterious effect on worker's health with increasing anger of clients. (Management committee member, Queensland (QLD) service)

Demand for our services is increasing, however our core funding for administrative costs is not, which is placing strain on us. Our project-based funding is increasing, but we cannot use this to meet the organisations day-to-day costs like rent, bookkeeping, utilities, etc. (CEO, ACT service)

A number of respondents said they were decreasingly able to participate effectively in individual or system advocacy because of the demands on their time or funding constraints.

Voices go unheard when we can't respond to the need for advocacy and the voices least heard are the most vulnerable. (Senior manager, ACT service)

Our organisation has limited capacity to do systemic advocacy and empowerment of affected communities. (Management committee member, QLD service)

The complexity of the NDIS, combined with the withdrawal of disability advocacy funding is having a huge impact on people with disability. Project, instead of core funding, means we don't have money for our organisation to run, but only for short term projects. All of this means that far too many people with disability don't get the assistance or representation that they need and deserve. (Senior manager, NSW, service)

Others said that it was increasingly difficult to meet the needs of the most complex cases. A coordinator at a Western Australian service provider made this point most clearly:

One of the worst ways in which we are unable to meet demand is that we assess many clients whose needs are too complex for our services to support. This is frustrating for service deliverers, but much worse for the clients. It's borne of two parallel developments - people have increasingly complex needs, and our funding is getting leaner and leaner, meaning that as an organisation, it is very difficult to make the choice to lean in to help the most complex clients. There's just no 'extra' in any of the systems to make that possible. (Team leader, WA service)

Feelings of frustration on the part of services and an inability to help potential service users was made more difficult when they could not be confident that any other services could be of assistance either. A practitioner at a service in Western Australia summed up, "We refer them to other agencies and cross our fingers."

5. Unmet need in rural and regional areas

Respondents located in regional and rural areas noted that it was difficult for residents to access the support they needed locally. Often they go without necessary supports because in regional areas, if a service provider is unable to meet demand, then there are very limited alternative options for that same service.

Individuals and communities (especially remote ones) are left without legal representation for complex matters and ones that have a significant impact on their lives, such as Child Protection. (Practitioner, NT service)

Often we are the last line of support so if we can't provide our services, no support is given to our clients. This is particularly so for our remote clients of which we have many. (Practitioner, NT service)

Some of the required services are not here in rural areas. (Administrator, NT service)

There are significant gaps in the services provided to remote communities. (Practitioner, NT service)

Instead, they said community members often travelled large distances, accessed telephone services, or went without.

There are not enough people on the ground in regional areas to adequately support people in the way they need. People in this community want and need local face-to-face services, not phone or online services which is what the government want everyone to use. (Practitioner, SA service)

Limited resources locally can mean people have to look outside of the region we work in. (Coordinator, WA service)

Unmet demand and a high level of need placed services and staff under great pressure.

In the remote and very remote communities we work within, often there are no other referral options available, which increases the pressure on us to meet these needs where higher risks are evident. It can be really stressful for our team members and hard for the organisation to resource. (CEO, QLD service)

Limited access to services led to similar cascading crises as described by other services above, but one service additionally noted that the consequences for community members could be devastating.

It's horrendous and heartbreaking! So many people of all ages are being hurt and placed into challenging predicaments. Desperate people tend to do desperate things. Sadly suicide is very high in our region. Life is so stressful. (Senior manager, QLD service)

