

Australian report finds COVID-19 worsened migrants and refugees' access to justice services

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Melbourne housing tower. Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated and magnified migrant and refugee communities' difficulties in accessing social and legal services in

Victoria, a new report has found.

The pandemic made long-standing obstacles to accessing justice worse, as migrants and refugee communities suffered specific injustices and harms such as housing tower lockdowns, racism, changes to migration rules and asylum seeker rights, [social isolation](#), [language barriers](#), an inaccessible court system, and reduced access to social and legal services.

The [report](#), "'Under the radar with no support': Access to justice for newly arrived, migrant and refugee communities during COVID-19 in Victoria," produced by researchers from the University of Melbourne and RMIT University in partnership with Foundation House, Victoria Legal Aid and Afri-Aus Care, is based on interviews and focus groups with a range of legal and social service providers, community organizations and community organizers. Community participants predominantly originated from Middle Eastern and African communities.

Author of the report, Professor Jennifer Balint from the University of Melbourne, said existing barriers could be compounded by [past experiences](#), either in Australia or in migrants and refugees' countries of origin.

"Some fear that contact with the [legal system](#) may jeopardize legal residency or citizenship applications," Professor Balint said.

"In many cultures, there's shame or stigma surrounding accessing legal or [social support](#). In our research, we discovered that Victoria's legal and social services often don't provide a culturally safe environment for those who need help."

The researchers found that historical and structural issues such as [racial](#)

[profiling](#) were exacerbated by the pandemic. Community legal services observed increased requests for support with police encounters, and also highlighted targeted policing of suburbs with larger Muslim populations—which were perceived as "hotspots" for lockdown violations.

Lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions also worsened access to support, particularly for women and children in family violence situations.

A lawyer from a community legal service in Melbourne (who wished to remain anonymous) said the pandemic also increased the impact of family violence.

"Those experiencing family violence had fewer opportunities to access [support services](#) and were often unable to leave the home where the perpetrator of the violence was—and this had a significant impact on women and children," they said.

Professor Balint said barriers were further compounded by a lack of meaningful partnership and collaboration between communities and service providers.

"The Victorian Government's decision to put lockdowns in place across Melbourne's public housing system at short notice made visible many of the underlying structural barriers that communities face," Professor Balint said.

"These communities were isolated from social services, the government failed to use translators, and, at least initially, there was a failure to consult community in decisions that affected them."

The report has also highlighted opportunities for services to rethink approaches in working with and delivering services to communities.

"During the pandemic, communities saw real benefit when services asked them what resources they needed, rather than deciding for them, and allowed community members to drive solutions to problems they were facing," Professor Balint said.

"We found support for co-design with community in both the services sector and from within the communities themselves.

"Governments have now recognized the invaluable role community leaders play in being able to communicate with their communities. It's time to value that appropriately and we recommend that governments create paid community roles going forward."

The report emphasizes that partnership and collaboration are critical to developing and maintaining access to justice for communities and recommends legal and [social services](#) be co-designed with community to ensure they are relevant to and meeting community needs.

More information: 'Under the radar with no support': Access to justice for newly arrived, migrant and refugee communities during COVID-19 in Victoria. [events.unimelb.edu.au/live/fil ...
-reportfinal9-octpdf](https://events.unimelb.edu.au/live/fil...-reportfinal9-octpdf)

Provided by University of Melbourne

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