

The Equality Network

www.equalitynetwork.org.nz

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Equity of coronavirus outcomes is worth watching out for

We can be justifiably proud of our Government's approach to the COVID-19 virus crisis. It has acted quickly to recognise the WHO's recommendations. The national 'lock-down' will do much to stop the spread of the virus, and government's support for people and businesses is to be commended. This will hopefully put us in a better position to face the future and recover from the damage that the virus is doing, and will certainly continue to do. Further, most are following government instructions and people are working together in their communities to make the best of their situations by forming neighbourhood support groups.

However, some cracks are opening and even though the Government is responding with changes to the support packages, many would describe the crisis as a three way issue.

First is the virus and the damage it is doing to people. Then there is no doubt that there will be long term damage to the economy. But thirdly, many people concerned about social justice are now describing the crisis as an inequality crisis and the Government must recognise this.

Those most affected are those on basic incomes or benefits. Many cannot store food and must visit supermarkets every few days. At present they find that shelves are empty of many basic needs, owing to an excess of panic-buying by selfish hoarders. Many cannot afford to top up their cellphones, do not have IT devices for their children to access educational programmes, have no internet access, and do not have strong neighbourhood support groups.

Many of those with mental health problems feel powerless, especially if they live alone. There are still many uncertainties about what will happen, as well as the anxieties of subsisting on a very low benefit or income. And the stress levels for many young people are very high.

And what about the homeless? Those sleeping rough, couch-surfing and living in overcrowded accommodation will further struggle to self-isolate and survive.

COVID-19 is having disproportionate impacts on those most vulnerable. Those at the lower end are suffering, whereas those who are well-off have the resources to cope much better. So it is an inequality crisis and the Government must do something about it. In the Global Financial Crisis the poor suffered most and took much longer than the wealthy to get over the impact.

The Government must among other things:

- Significantly increase benefits. Implementing the recommendations of the Welfare Expert Advisory Group would be a great start
- Increase the incomes of the low paid by increasing the Working For Families Tax credits, making them available to all and not just to those in the workforce
- Ensure that there are enough well stocked food outlets so that all can get food when they need to and ensure that panic buying does not result in empty shelves

- Ensure that the homeless are well looked after. This will significantly slow the spread of the virus, and benefit us all
- Encourage the establishment of neighbourhood support groups.

With this further support from Government we can get through this together and significantly reduce inequality of outcomes for COVID-19.

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More Equal Societies Are Better For All

The Equality Network is a network of 36 New Zealand organisations such as the PHA, all of whom promote social justice. It operates under the principle that more equal societies are better for all. For more information visit: www.equalitynetwork.org.nz