

**2023**  
**AUSTRALIAN**  
**YOUTH**  
**BAROMETER**  
UNDERSTANDING  
YOUNG PEOPLE  
IN AUSTRALIA  
TODAY

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MONASH  
YOUTH POLICY  
AND EDUCATION  
PRACTICE



**MONASH**  
University

## ABOUT US

The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) is a multi-disciplinary research centre based in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. By focusing on issues that affect young people, and on developing policy and educational interventions to address youth disadvantage, CYPEP aims to identify the challenges to, and opportunities for, improved life outcomes for young people today and throughout their lives. Our vision is for education that creates lifelong and life-wide opportunities for young people and enables them to thrive. Our mission is to connect youth research to policy and practice. We do this by working with policymakers, educators and youth-focused organisations on research that addresses emerging needs, and that respects and includes young people. Working at the nexus of young people and policy, we raise awareness of the challenges faced by young people today and explore how education can harness the capacity of young people to contribute to building thriving communities.

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# 01

## INTRODUCTION

THIS INTRODUCTION IS AUTHORED  
BY MARK YIN, REBECCA WALTERS,  
ANDREW LEAP AND YUQI LIN ON BEHALF  
OF CYPEP'S YOUTH REFERENCE GROUP.

It's midnight. You've just arrived home from your closing shift at the restaurant, preceded by the Friday night dinner rush, preceded by a full day of uni. You ache.

Lying in bed, determined to have at least a half hour of your own time before the day's end, you open TikTok. You hear the first video before you see it, 'Feed your family for under \$10', followed by the cheery 'daa-da-da-daaa' jingle and the beaming face of Curtis Stone. The video then cuts to a photograph of a block of cheddar cheese at the supermarket, itself costing \$10. You laugh before you remember spending your whole pay check on groceries yesterday, and your rent is due next week. You put the phone away and go to bed. This narrative is common right across Australia and may belong to you, your friend or your child.

The 2023 Australian Youth Barometer highlights that the cost of living crisis is a salient issue. Though it has touched the lives of all Australians in some way, the Barometer demonstrates that the impacts on young people have been disproportionate and especially severe, affecting just about every aspect of our lives:

- 9 in 10 young Australians experienced some level of financial difficulties in the last year.
- 40% felt that they may not have a comfortable place to live in the next 12 months.
- 1 in 5 experienced food insecurity.
- 44% experienced unemployment in the last year.
- Young people's views of 'being healthy' no longer just relate to physical and mental health but now also include financial security and access to housing.

While these pressures are not necessarily new, they are multiplying and leaving young people in a precarious position just as we are starting to make our mark on the world. As a young woman from Queensland explained:

“

I feel like everything just rose in price, all of a sudden, quite quickly. Not just housing, even buying food and stuff. It all just rose quite quick. So I think a lot of people were taken aback by it. And I haven't seen anything about people getting pay raises. So I guess it's just people losing money at this point.

Young people are fighting tooth and nail to make their mark, though. In this year's Barometer, for example:

- More than 4 in 5 young Australians are seeking additional training or advice to improve their odds of getting a meaningful job.
- 71% have taken some form of informal online class.
- Almost 75% of young Australians are volunteering, especially in the arts, in environmental activities and care services, despite the overwhelming majority encountering barriers that make it challenging to do so.

The issue is that young people today face vastly different structural pressures compared with previous generations. The traditional notion of working hard to become successful has become diluted. When so many young people are doing 'extra stuff' to get a job, it's no longer extra – it's just a stacked system. There's a baked-in expectation that young Australians will work hard just to survive. It's a tough time to be trying to establish yourself.

The dream of owning a home has also become more and more distant. While many Australians in their 20s may have begun working towards purchasing their own home a few generations

This year's Barometer highlights how we are actively engaged with our communities, and we are interested in working together to address the challenges that society is facing.

ago, this is no longer the case. Instead, for many young people today, the priority now is just to find a secure place to live, as a young woman from South Australia said:

“

I did overhear that [the landlords] might be selling this house at the end of that lease and given that it took us so long to find one it's already stressful.

This is exacerbated by widespread encounters with financial insecurity and unemployment. Notably, these issues are particularly prevalent among more marginalised groups of young people such as those with mental health conditions, disabilities and young First Nations peoples. It is also worth considering how the current cost of living crisis could be addressed alongside longer-term concerns that were front and centre just a few years ago. Today, for example, only 31% of young Australians feel that climate change will be combated in the future.

Now is a crucial time for action, not just for an immediate response to whichever crisis is currently making headlines but to meaningfully support the plans young people are trying to make for our futures and to ensure we aren't feeling the brunt of today's various and overlapping crises in years to come. It's clear there is no panacea to resolve these issues for any demographic. However, given the precarious and high-stakes circumstances of young Australians today, demonstrated throughout this Barometer, a range of bold and innovative solutions are needed, especially in the areas of housing and personal finance.

This could include:

- **education departments, curriculum designers and schools** providing young people with appropriate transferable knowledge and skills to allow them to make informed decisions in areas such as financial planning, housing and food security. In particular, these must address the knowledge gaps that young people are raising time and time again, particularly in relation to the process of renting and purchasing houses and completing taxes.
- **local governments and community groups** providing programs that facilitate the exchange of experiences and ideas to address the unique needs and priorities of each locality, in

addition to facilitating the exchange of goods and services (i.e. community gardens, physical activity classes, young parent groups) that promote the growth of the local economy.

- **federal and state governments** legislating in support of secure housing for all – for example, through caps on rent increases – as well as secure and well-paid employment with wages that respond to inflation. This Barometer demonstrates these issues often disproportionately affect already-vulnerable groups of people. Governments should also increase payments for Australians who need additional support through Centrelink to provide an adequate standard of living while they are working towards long-term independence.

That said, the government alone cannot resolve the cost of living crisis. Rather, policymakers must work closely with the private sector, community leaders and other stakeholders to achieve solutions that address short- and long-term issues on a local and national level. The impact may not be immediate, but the longer we wait to deliver impactful initiatives, the longer young Australians will continue to struggle working towards the 'Australian Dream'.

The 2023 Australian Youth Barometer shows that for many young Australians, their sense of control over their own lives is slipping through their fingertips. In 2023, being young is no longer about just making or having choice over your future: it's also about going above and beyond just to keep up, about holding down a pay check just to afford to feed yourself, about making the next rent payment (and the next and the next ...) or facing eviction.

However, there remain opportunities to build on young people's efforts and meet us halfway. This year's Barometer highlights how we are actively engaged with our communities, and we are interested in working together to address the challenges that society is facing. We, the Youth Reference Group, therefore read this year's Barometer as an opportunity to better understand young people and our circumstances today, and consider how you might contribute to a more secure future for all of us moving forward. We especially encourage those who might not regularly interact with young people but still make decisions that affect us – economists, journalists, urban planners and so forth – to engage with the Australian Youth Barometer in this light.

# A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Like the data presented in this year's Australian Youth Barometer, the voices of our Youth Reference Group above tell a powerful story of the pressures experienced by young people today, as well as of active engagement, hope and resilience.

For this third annual Australian Youth Barometer, it seems timely to reflect on recent years. We commenced data collection and publishing the barometer during the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, amid great uncertainty, the youth labour market was upended and formal education disrupted throughout much of Australia. Some states, such as New South Wales and Victoria, experienced acute lockdowns, the effects of which we are still trying to understand on young people's education, employment prospects and wellbeing. But we know from previous economic downturns that the effects for many will be long term.

We were struck last year by the dark optimism evident in many of the young participants in the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer. Perhaps most unsettling was that some felt that they had missed out on being young. We have elaborated on our thinking about this dark optimism in our discussion paper *Young people navigating working life in and beyond the gig economy*<sup>1</sup> and continue to work with our wonderful Youth Reference Group to further unpack these findings.

This dark optimism is evident in this testimony:

“

**I'm not positive where we're going, but I'm not directly negative, because there are still a lot of good things happening here and there. And there's a lot of bad things happening ... I'm just not sure where the future will lead. Because we are ... we're at a pivot point, I feel for the next few years and that'll decide the outcome.**

MAN, 23, TAS

Meanwhile, the pandemic continues, and other factors and forces that continue to disrupt young lives have become prominent. These include the rise of the gig economy, soaring rates of mental ill health, and unaffordable accommodation. The testimonies from interviewees about these last two issues were more troubling this year. For the first time, we had interviewees who were homeless or on the brink of homelessness, or experiencing major personal health concerns.

Recently we argued that the rise of the gig economy, though not without benefits to some young people, reflects a longer-term rise of an insecure and precarious youth labour market. It might seem perverse to talk about precarious work during a period in which Australia is experiencing relatively high levels of employment, but employment figures can mask a longer-term trend towards insecure, short-term and sometimes precarious employment.

We are also seeing wider trends, such as school refusal and a persistent number of young people not completing school. Post-school, we see a decline in numbers undertaking further education and training. These trends are concerning because, despite the major disruption to the value of qualifications caused by factors such as the massification of universities and credential inflation (whereby more and higher qualifications are needed to secure a particular level of earning or type of employment), we also know that those who complete school and post-school study and training tend to fare better in life across a range of indicators. Education remains foundational to young people's futures.

This particularly applies to young people experiencing disadvantage. Research published this year by The Smith Family highlights that while many are working hard (often in precarious jobs while studying), many young Australians are forgoing education and training that could improve their life prospects in the long term.<sup>2</sup> Such challenges are intensified for young people from low-income families, who start out at a disadvantage.

As the introduction above suggests, this year's Australian Youth Barometer highlights wider concerns about the rising costs of living, housing unaffordability and the lack of stable

In the near term, cost of living pressures will likely shape young people's decisions about education, work and even what and when they eat.

and sufficient employment. Drawing on a survey of 571 young Australians and interviews with 30 more, this year's Australian Youth Barometer provides insight into the attitudes and pressures that young people are facing in 2023. Having previously refined the questions for the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer, the methodology this year is virtually identical to 2022. We can therefore begin to track trends across time. This was part of the original intention of the Australian Youth Barometer.

In 2022, 61% of young Australians identified affordable housing options as a key concern for young people. This percentage has significantly increased in 2023. In 2022, less than half (46%) thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would be able to afford a place to live during the next year. This figure decreased to 35% in 2023. Last year, half the respondents thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would be able to purchase a property or house in the future. This figure has decreased to 41% in 2023.

Affordable housing and cost of living pressures are closely related. In 2022, the vast majority of young Australians (90%) experienced financial difficulties at some point during the last 12 months, a figure that remains constant in 2023. In 2022, more than half (53%) of young Australians thought they will be financially worse off than their parents. This percentage has significantly increased in 2023.

Like last year, just over half of young Australians believed it was likely that they would achieve financial security in their future. In 2022, 47% of young Australians were often or very often able to save part of their income. This figure decreased slightly in 2023. Where 15% of young Australians reported not having any form of investment or saving product in 2022, this percentage significantly increased in 2023.

A greater percentage of young Australians nominated employment opportunities as another key issue requiring immediate action in 2023 (more than half) than in 2022. Employment pathways are becoming less linear and less secure: 45% of young Australians in 2022 experienced unemployment at some point in the past 12 months, and this trend continues in the 2023 findings.

The economic recovery from the initial outbreak of the pandemic has, in some ways, been favourable to young people. The OECD, in its *Employment Outlook 2023*,<sup>3</sup> observes that:

**Australia's recovery from the COVID-19 crisis persists, with the unemployment rate declining to 3.6% by May 2023 – below its pre-pandemic rate of 5.1%. The employment rate (for the population aged 15–64 and) [sic] was 77.6%, which is 3 percentage points above the pre-pandemic rate in December 2019. The upward trend in employment has been particularly strong among young people.**

Such positive employment trends inadvertently mask a growing labour market insecurity that disproportionately and negatively affects young people. Despite signs of economic recovery, other research suggests that the impact of the pandemic could have scarring effects of up to a decade for young Australians.<sup>4</sup>

In the near term, cost of living pressures will likely shape young people's decisions about education, work and even what and when they eat. Last year's Australian Youth Barometer found that one in five young Australians experienced food insecurity during their lives.<sup>5</sup> Other CYPEP research published earlier this year highlights how food insecurity can affect certain groups, such as international students.<sup>6</sup>

There are other wider factors at play. ChatGPT, an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot launched late last year, has signalled a widespread arrival of AI to the public consciousness. Alarm bells have been raised by some, while others have identified market potential.<sup>7</sup> Schools and universities have been navigating the unfolding terrain in different ways.<sup>8,9</sup>

In the world of work, some are speculating that AI might automate as much as 18% of work globally.<sup>10</sup> According to the OECD, highly skilled occupations are at highest risk of being

replaced by AI-driven automation – around 27% of employment across the OECD’s 38 member countries, including Australia.<sup>11</sup> Equally, AI is likely to change existing jobs, prompting a need to rethink skills development. As a researcher, I am agnostic and ambivalent. In education, for example, we see challenges to assessment on the one hand, and a call to action to think about the purposes and skills that we develop in education on the other. There are possibilities to push frontiers of communication, knowledge and understanding into realms not yet fully understood.

When personally thinking about aspects of my work that could be automated using AI, I find myself circling back to the very human aspect of employment, asking, ‘What is it that I uniquely bring to understanding and analysing youth studies in education, and how can I draw upon creativity to use these new AI tools to help my work?’ At the heart of this is a question to everyone. What do we uniquely bring as humans to our individual and collective worlds, and how can this actively be nurtured? Education plays a central role and is more than producing good consumers and workers: it is about developing people capable of actively participating in life and in the construction of shared futures. Therefore, disruptions such as AI and insecure work stimulate thought about what is important to the education of young people. I see this as a spirited challenge rather than a threat.

This challenge, like so many of the big challenges of our time, requires a collective effort. This includes finding better ways of bringing all people along on the journey – especially young people. As our Youth Reference Group powerfully suggest, ‘Now is a crucial time for action, not just for an immediate response to whichever crisis is currently making headlines, but to meaningfully support the plans young people are trying to make for our futures, and to ensure we aren’t feeling the brunt of today’s various and overlapping crises in years to come.’

Recent debates about the referendum to establish an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice have also encouraged deep thought about who Australians are as a nation and who is afforded a voice in shaping our collective future, while reckoning with our unsettled and troubled past. The need to think about this becomes apparent in relation to how young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are faring. Year on year, many young First Nations peoples are disadvantaged across a range of indicators. We have failed to close the gap in certain areas of education.<sup>12</sup> Discussion of the Voice referendum has encouraged difficult, deep reflection on how a diverse society can become more equitable and inclusive.

The need to think about inclusion is all the more striking in the context of the divisive politics that pervade society, a situation that makes our shared concerns, such as responding to climate change, more challenging. For this moment in history, the need to work together has never been more important. We are talking about the futures of young Australians and should be listening and talking with them about how to foster a world worth living in.

The 2023 Australian Youth Barometer provides a unique snapshot of a statistically representative sample of young Australians and a window into our collective presents and possible futures. The findings reflect intersecting challenges that collectively sound a clarion call to us to respond not only to the needs of disadvantaged young people described above, but also to the possibility that being young could itself be a form of disadvantage. Young people today must, for example, navigate a pandemic, climate change, lack of affordable accommodation, student debts and precarious labour markets.

Such challenges are not navigated passively. Our Youth Reference Group highlights how young people are actively engaged with their communities and are keen to work together to address the challenges that society is facing. But we must, at the very least, meet them halfway. As one 19-year-old woman from Queensland told us:

The 2023 Australian Youth Barometer provides a unique snapshot of a statistically representative sample of young Australians and a window into our collective presents and possible futures.



“

I guess the most I can do is answer questions and give my input. And hope to be heard or hope that whatever I'm answering, like this study for example, that people look at this study and realise that it is difficult for a lot of people, or not difficult for a lot of people, who knows. But yeah, I feel like just being able to answer questions helps other people be able to answer questions and get their say out.

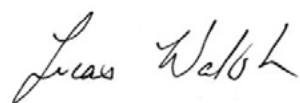
And there is hope to be seen in this testimony from a 22-year-old woman in South Australia:

“

Once, you know, a kind of equilibrium is reached that is satisfactory for most people involved, then it will be great. And I'm excited about that change to have already happened. I think ... the way there is going to be big I feel. The future in general.

In the coming years, the Australian Youth Barometer will enable us to follow trends across time, to see what is improving and what is not. But the Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice cannot continue to deliver this valuable research without funding, so we are seeking partners to help us to continue to tell the stories of young people and provide practical insights to governments, educators and the many organisations seeking to improve the life outcomes of young people. This requires money, collaboration and expertise.

I invite you to join us so that we can continue publishing the Australian Youth Barometer in the years to come.



**Professor Lucas Walsh**

Director, Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice

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# 02

## ABOUT THE 2023 AUSTRALIAN YOUTH BAROMETER

### METHOD AND APPROACH

Now in its third iteration, the method and approach of this year's Australian Youth Barometer is largely identical to the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer. We used a concurrent mixed-methods design where data were generated through interviews and an online survey. This was complemented by a review of existing data with young people themselves as respondents, published after the 2021 and 2022 Australian Youth Barometers, which reported on nationwide studies of young people's lives in Australia. We focused on data that included the experiences of young people aged 18–24 to align with the Youth Barometer data; however, because definitions of youth and the age ranges used in studies of young people vary greatly, we have also included secondary data that used age ranges that intersected with our 18–24 age category.

Across each of these data sources, we explored a range of topics including education, employment, health and wellbeing, finances, housing, civic participation, relationships and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

By analysing specific questions in relation to young people's responses as a whole, we aim to develop an interconnected understanding of young people's lives.

Ethics approval was granted by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the collection of data.

### SURVEY

The survey was completed by 571 participants aged 18–24. It contained a mix of closed, Likert-style and open-ended questions and, on average, was completed in just under 16 minutes. The analysis of survey data used probabilistic weights to make the sample representative of Australian young people in terms of age and gender.

Table 2.1 shows a comparison of survey participants' characteristics using and without using probabilistic weights. Socioeconomic status (SES) corresponds to the 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics' Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) for the participant's postcode, which has been recoded as low (deciles 1 to 3), medium (deciles 4 to 7) and high (deciles 8 to 10). These deciles are for Australia as a whole.<sup>1</sup> Remoteness is also based on the participant's postcode and according to the Remoteness Areas Structure within the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS), based on the 2021 Census of Population and Housing.<sup>2</sup> The original categories have been recoded as Metro (Major Cities of Australia), Regional (Inner Regional Australia) and Rural (Outer Regional Australia, Remote Australia and Very Remote Australia).

The survey analysis was conducted using R version 4.1.2 (2021-11-01). It is based on contingency tables and chi-square tests for group differences between the variables of interest and the demographic characteristics in Table 2.1. Both contingency tables and chi-square tests incorporate survey weights. In the report, only statistically significant differences at the 95% confidence level are reported. Consideration was also given to cell sizes when reporting these differences. For example, if statistically significant differences by educational attainment are driven by differences for those with 'other' educational attainment, which has only four participants, such differences are not reported. Results that are considered similar or consistent across demographic groups include those that are not statistically significant and those that have very small cell sizes.

**TABLE 2.1:**  
**SURVEY AND WEIGHTED SAMPLE BY**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS.**  
**SAMPLE SIZE: 571**

	NUMBER	% <sup>a</sup>	WEIGHTED NUMBER	WEIGHTED %
<b>AGE</b>				
18	81	14.2	79.9	14
19	83	14.5	81.2	14.2
20	80	14	79.5	13.9
21	77	13.5	79.3	13.9
22	83	14.5	80.9	14.2
23	82	14.4	84.5	14.8
24	85	14.9	85.9	15
<b>GENDER</b>				
Woman	289	50.6	274.6	48.1
Man	268	46.9	281.8	49.3
Non-binary/gender diverse/ agender	11	1.9	11.9	2.1
Prefer not to say	3	0.5	2.8	0.5
<b>EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT</b>				
Postgraduate degree level	30	5.3	33.4	5.8
Graduate diploma and graduate certificate level	25	4.4	26.6	4.7
Bachelor degree level	128	22.4	134.8	23.6
Advanced diploma and diploma level	27	4.7	29	5.1
Certificate level	100	17.5	90.9	15.9
Secondary education	247	43.3	242.1	42.4
Primary education	10	1.8	10.8	1.9
Other education	4	0.7	3.4	0.6
<b>STATE</b>				
ACT	17	3	15.5	2.7
NSW	157	27.5	176.7	30.9
NT	9	1.6	2.8	0.5
QLD	104	18.2	117.7	20.6
SA	51	8.9	39.7	7
TAS	45	7.9	10.6	1.9
VIC	132	23.1	149.7	26.2
WA	56	9.8	58.4	10.2

	NUMBER	% <sup>a</sup>	WEIGHTED NUMBER	WEIGHTED %
<b>LOCATION</b>				
Metro	401	70.2	451.1	79
Regional	108	18.9	77.3	13.5
Remote	62	10.9	42.6	7.5
<b>SES (POSTCODE)</b>				
Low	218	38.2	203.2	35.6
Medium	204	35.7	205.3	35.9
High	149	26.1	162.6	28.5
<b>BORN IN AUSTRALIA</b>				
Australia	493	86.3	487.9	85.4
Abroad	78	13.7	83.1	14.6
<b>FIRST NATIONS</b>				
Yes	54	9.5	49	8.6
No	504	88.3	509.6	89.2
Don't know/ prefer not to say	13	2.3	12.4	2.2
<b>DISABILITY</b>				
Mental health condition	141	24.7	142.4	24.9
Long-term illness	25	4.4	26.4	4.6
Physical disability	19	3.3	20.6	3.6
Something else	11	1.9	10.2	1.8
Multiple conditions	36	6.3	33.8	5.9
No	318	55.7	319	55.9
Prefer not to say	21	3.7	18.7	3.3

<sup>a</sup> Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

## INTERVIEWS

Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes were conducted with 30 young people aged 18–24. These interviews were conducted via Zoom and then professionally transcribed for analysis. Interviews were conducted with young people from all Australian states and territories, with the exception of the Northern Territory. (See Table 2.2.) Despite the relatively small sample size, efforts were made to engage young people from a diversity of cultural and geographic backgrounds. While several interviewees disclosed that they were a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, it should be noted that all interviewees identified with the gender binary.

Interview responses were collaboratively analysed using directed content analysis with the aid of QSR NVivo software (version 14).<sup>3</sup> As a starting point, predetermined codes were used to organise the interview responses in relation to the topics included in the Youth Barometer (education, employment, etc.). From this, a team of researchers engaged deeply with the codes to generate descriptions of common and novel perspectives offered by young people, as well as identify interconnections between topics in their interview responses.

**TABLE 2.2:**  
**INTERVIEW SAMPLE BY**  
**DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS.**  
**SAMPLE SIZE: 30**

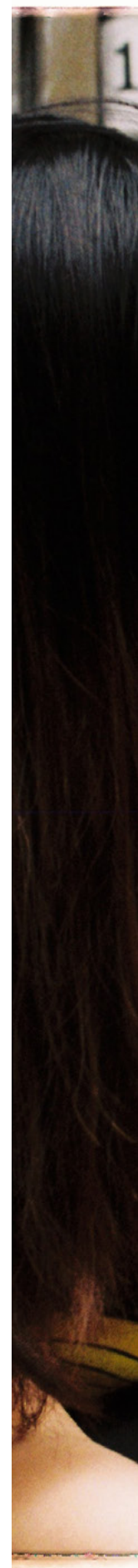
	NUMBER	%
<b>AGE</b>		
18	4	13.3
19	2	6.7
20	5	16.7
21	5	16.7
22	4	13.3
23	6	20
24	4	13.3
<b>GENDER</b>		
Woman	17	56.7
Man	13	43.3
<b>STATE</b>		
ACT	2	6.7
NSW	5	16.7
NT	0	0
QLD	8	26.7
SA	4	13.3
TAS	2	6.7
VIC	6	20
WA	3	10
<b>LOCATION</b>		
Metro	18	60
Regional or Remote	12	40
<b>LIVING ARRANGEMENT</b>		
At home with family	16	53.3
With friends or in a sharehouse	6	20
Alone or independently	5	16.7
With partner	2	6.7
Homeless	1	3.3
<b>CULTURAL BACKGROUND</b>		
Anglo Australian	20	66.7
Diverse backgrounds <sup>a</sup>	8	26.7
First Nations	2	6.7

<sup>a</sup>Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

<sup>b</sup>Due to small numbers, individual backgrounds are not listed.

## REFERENCES

1. Australian Bureau of Statistics. Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA). ABS; April 27, 2023. Accessed October 15, 2023. <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/socio-economic-indexes-areas-seifa-australia/2021>
2. Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). Census of population and housing, 2021. TableBuilder; 2023. Accessed October 6, 2023. <https://tablebuilder.abs.gov.au/>
3. Hsieh H-F, Shannon SE. Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. Qual Health Res. 2005; 15(9):1277–1288. Accessed October 6, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>





# 03

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE ECONOMY

### KEY FINDINGS

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- 1** 90% of young Australians experienced financial difficulties at some point in the past 12 months, with 32% experiencing financial difficulties often or very often.
- 2** 61% of young Australians think they will be financially worse off than their parents.
- 3** 52% of young Australians think it is likely or extremely likely that they will achieve financial security in the future.
- 4** 67% of young Australians turn to family members as the main source of financial support when faced with financial difficulties.
- 5** 43% of young Australians are often or very often able to save part of their income.
- 6** 60% of young Australians think it is likely or extremely likely that they will stay in their current accommodation in the next 12 months.
- 7** 35% of young people think it is likely or extremely likely that they will be able to afford a comfortable place to live in the next 12 months.
- 8** 41% of young Australians think it is likely or extremely likely that they will be able to purchase a property or house in the future.
- 9** Financial security is seen as having enough money for everyday necessities, while also having some left over for small indulgences, savings or emergencies. This is also linked to freedom from negative emotions such as stress or concern about money.
- 10** Young Australians are neutral to relatively positive about their ability to achieve financial security in the long-term but are less positive about their short-term financial prospects. Young people's current financial positions are often seen as precarious and unstable.
- 11** Young people's plans for achieving financial security often revolve around completing tertiary-level qualifications, finding stable employment, being frugal with spending and investing in stocks.
- 12** Young people identify a range of systemic barriers to achieving financial security, particularly in relation to affordable housing, high costs of living and precarious employment.

# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Although owning their own home is an important aspiration, many young Australians are pessimistic about their chances of buying a home.

## HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

According to Mission Australia's 2022 Youth Survey, 86.8% of young people aged 15–19 were living in a privately owned or rented house or flat, 4.6% lived in public housing, 4.4% were in boarding school, 1% were in out-of-home care and 3.2% were in some other living situation. Most young people in this age group (97.2%) reported living with their parent(s) or guardian(s), while 2.8% reported living with their relatives, friends, a partner, alone or having other living situations.<sup>1</sup>

The affordability of rental housing is a prevalent concern, with 61% of young people aged 18–25 worrying about being able to afford to pay their rent.<sup>2</sup> These pressures have also increased in recent years: a young person in April 2021 spent 64% of their income to share a two-bedroom unit, whereas in March 2023, they were paying 73% of their income. For young people on income support, this would leave just \$13 a day to cover food, transport, medicine, power and other living expenses.<sup>3</sup>

According to 2021 Australian census data, 23% of all people experiencing homelessness were young people aged 12–24. Of those experiencing homelessness, young females were more likely than males to be in supported accommodation (26.6% compared with 20.3%) and to stay temporarily with other households (9.9% compared with 8.5%). In contrast, young males experiencing homelessness were more likely than young females to be living in improvised dwellings, tents or sleeping out (2.3% compared with 2.0%), living in boarding houses (15% compared with 10.4%) and living in severely crowded dwellings (52% compared with 49.1%).<sup>4</sup>

Although owning their own home is an important aspiration, many young Australians are pessimistic about their chances of buying a home, with 72% of young people aged 18–24 believing that they will never be able to buy a home.<sup>5</sup>

## FINANCIAL SECURITY

Financial security is an important concern for young people aged 15–19, with 14.4% expressing being extremely or very concerned about financial security and 40.4% being somewhat or slightly concerned.<sup>1</sup>

Overall, young people have relatively low incomes, with 44% of young people aged 15–19 having no personal weekly income and 90.3% earning less than \$500 per week. For young people aged 20–24, the largest proportion (42.4%) earned a weekly income of \$500–\$999, with the next largest proportion (21.2%) earning between \$250 and \$499. The main source of income was employee wages and salary, at 45.1% for young people aged 15–19 and 72.5% for young people aged 20–24. This is followed by government benefits and allowances, at 9% for young people aged 15–19 and 18.8% for young people aged 20–24.<sup>6</sup>

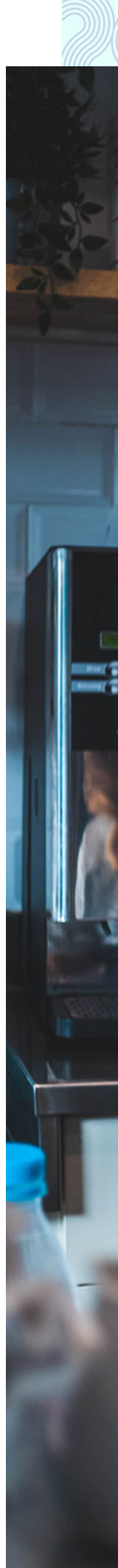
Financial stress, defined as experiencing difficulties in meeting basic financial commitments due to a shortage of money, is common among young people.<sup>7</sup> In 2023, financial stress related to the cost of living was a concern needing urgent attention for 54% of young people aged 18–25.<sup>2</sup> Common causes of financial stress for young Australians include budgeting for rising living costs (36%), savings running low or running out (34%) and not having enough savings for emergencies or unexpected expenses (33%).<sup>8</sup> These stresses can impact young people and their families in a number of ways. In 2022, 6.4% of young people aged 15–19 reported that their families sought financial help, 5.9% could not pay bills or car expenses, 4.1% were not able to pay rent or mortgage and 3.5% were not able to afford school supplies or go on school excursions.<sup>1</sup>

## FINANCIAL LITERACY AND PRODUCTS

Research points to low levels of financial literacy among Australian students aged 14–18. While students are often aware of financial concepts such as inflation, investing and superannuation, most have little or no knowledge of personal finances.<sup>9</sup> Most students learnt about finances through their family, and students whose parents ran small businesses or worked in fields related to finance have more advanced financial literacy. Overall, students expressed a desire for more formal education in financial concepts, with 72.8% wanting to learn more about taxes in school, 68.4% about investing and 66.4% about loans and debt.<sup>9</sup>

With regard to the use of financial products, most students aged 14–18 (85.1%) have used an everyday transaction account. Of these, 54.7% also had a separate savings account specifically for saving. Nearly one-quarter (23.7%) of students in this survey reported having used a credit card, either their own or one belonging to their parents, and 6.7% reported having used buy now pay later services such as Afterpay or Zip Pay.<sup>9</sup>

Some young people are also making financial investments: 9% of Australian investors in 2022 were aged 18–24 with a median portfolio size of \$45,000. Of this group, 31% held investments in cryptocurrencies. Thirty-six per cent of young Australian investors stated that their main goal was to build an income stream when selecting their investments. Younger investors were more risk-averse than their older counterparts, with 26% likely to accept moderate or higher variability in returns and 46% preferring stable returns. For young people who did not invest, the main reasons given were a lack of money and a lack of confidence that they will make the best decisions.<sup>10</sup>







# 2023 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

## CURRENT FINANCIAL SITUATION

Our survey indicated that 90% of young Australians experienced financial difficulties at some point in the last 12 months, with 32% reporting they did so often or very often. Young Australians with a disability were more likely to report experiencing financial difficulties: 94% of young Australians with a mental health condition and 92% of young people with a long-term illness reported experiencing financial difficulties in the last 12 months compared with 87% of young Australians without a disability.

Interviewees reported that finances and money were a significant day-to-day concern. Consistent with survey results, many interviewees were experiencing a degree of financial stress. They attributed this primarily to external factors such as unstable work and income, high costs of living and challenges around government support payments:



**It's not something I can do anything about because I'm on disability [pension], which means my income comes from the government, and even working on getting a degree to secure some kind of actual income, I can't do anything in the meantime. I went down to my corner store and because they're price gouging, three litres of milk cost \$7.20.**

WOMAN, 22, TAS

For 67% of young Australians, family members were the main source of financial support when faced with financial difficulties. This figure was similar across most demographic groups except for young First Nations peoples. Only 49% of young First Nations peoples reported that family members were their main source of support when running short of money, compared with 69% for all other young Australians. Similar to the survey

results, interviewees who felt they were currently doing well financially identified support from parents and other family members as a key factor:



**So like, I mean monetarily I'm quite well off. Like, I have the benefit of being able to live with my parents. Like, a lot of people don't have that and so they've given me the opportunity to, like, I work for them so it's not an entirely non-symbiotic relationship. But like, yes, I have an opportunity that's not offered to a lot of people and so I have quite a lot of ability to put away savings right now**

MAN, 23, NSW

Importantly, even for interviewees who saw themselves as financially comfortable, they sometimes understood these positions to be precarious and subject to change, especially in relation to the insecurity of their work situation:



**I would say at this point, yes [I am financially stable]. But at the same time, it's kind of volatile. I'm really resourceful at saving money, so I never feel threatened that if I get a low-pay week that it's not going to affect me that much. But it's like, sometimes, you know, I wish it was more consistent.**

MAN, 23, TAS

Interviewees reported that finances and money were a significant day-to-day concern. Consistent with survey results, many interviewees were experiencing a degree of financial stress.

Interviewees often saw financial security as an important part of being healthy.

## FINANCIAL SECURITY

Many interviewees understood financial security in terms of having enough income to be able to pay for everyday necessities, as well as having some income left over to either put into savings or to spend on small indulgences. In these descriptions, interviewees often associated financial security with not having to worry about their ability to afford necessary items or having enough money in case of emergencies:

“

Not having to worry about not paying your bills, or food at home or anything, like, you know, just be financially free, like, just tapping your card, knowing that it's always going to have money on it. Not [for] like, bougee things or, like, expensive [purchases], like, you know, something standard.

WOMAN, 18, QLD

As discussed further in chapter 6, 'Young people, health and wellbeing', it was notable that interviewees often saw financial security as an important part of being healthy. A small number of interviewees also associated financial security with material indicators, such as being able to travel, a steady income or affording a house, which were seen as indicators of 'adulthood':

“

I'd say [financial security], maybe having enough money to cover everything, and a bit more, and start investing and having all those sort of different avenues, I think. So, yes, just having enough money to sort of progress to that next stage of adulthood

MAN, 23, SA

According to our survey, 52% of young Australians thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would achieve financial security in the future.

This was consistent across demographic groups. Although interviewees were generally neutral or positive about their long-term prospects for achieving financial security, they were more ambivalent about achieving financial security in the short term:

“

I think I might be straight down the middle and feeling like, not hugely confident, not unconfident. I think, in the past, I've sort of had a couple of hiccups ... I do just need to get started again and once I get sort of up and running, studying the things that I want to study, it won't seem like as much of a problem to overcome. But yes, for the moment, it just feels a bit like a steep hill, you know?

MAN, 24, VIC

## PLANS FOR FINANCIAL SECURITY

Young people's plans for achieving financial security ranged from having clear and specific plans to, in some cases, having not given plans much thought. Most interviewees were in the middle of this spectrum. While they did not have clear goals, they expressed a sense about how they may achieve financial security, including undertaking certain forms of study or seeking specific types of employment:

“

Going to university is one [point in the plan], of course, getting a degree and hopefully getting a job in the future. I do plan to apply for jobs.

WOMAN, 18, QLD

“

I suppose my big plan there is, it's a lot of hoping and pray[ing], you know, but it's basically saving on to what I've got now and yes, seeing where I'm able to go in the future.

MAN, 21, QLD

The young people we interviewed also spoke about everyday actions, such as being frugal and not purchasing unnecessary items, as being important for saving money and developing good financial habits. Only a small number of interviewees looked to property, stocks or other forms of investment as a way to secure financial security in the long term:

“

Yes, I think on a monetary side of things I have always been very cautious with the way that I spend and ensuring that I can develop ... good habits with money and I feel like that will also translate to other parts, but you know, whether it means, 'Okay, I'm hungry. Let's ... go to the shops. Let's cook food for the next couple of days. We can eat, save money there.' It's the small things that develop habits that lead to success.

MAN, 20, NSW

## BARRIERS TO FINANCIAL SECURITY

Sixty-one per cent of young Australians surveyed thought they would be financially worse off than their parents. This was more common among young people with mental health conditions (76%) and long-term illnesses (60%) than among young people with a physical disability (31%) and young people without a disability (56%). The young people we interviewed identified several barriers to being in a stable financial position in the future, such as the long-term feasibility of study and employment opportunities that they saw as important steps towards financial security:

“

I'm just worried that it'll be harder for me to get a job from my course or whatever, or that if stuff like cost of living and everything keeps going up, no matter if I get a job, I wouldn't be able to, like, stay on top of that, as well.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

As indicated by the quotation above, these barriers were intertwined with concerns about the high costs of living and inaccessibility of housing. These concerns were often more pressing for young people who were worried about their ability to save money, especially when they had limited income, relied on government payments or felt unable to plan for future expenses:

“

The problem with saving money, especially if you're in a ... state of permanent slight crisis, is [that] you always have these fees come out of absolutely nowhere. 'Oh, okay. My phone bill's due.' 'Oh, okay. I need to get an Uber because this bus didn't turn up.' Or 'I need to go to a vet appointment.' ... You can't really plan

WOMAN, 22, TAS

Financial barriers do not appear to be understood as discrete or singular but rather as rising from a complex interplay of multiple factors.

While a small number of interviewees' responses suggested that they viewed financial security as solely an individual responsibility and viewed personal aspects, such as mental health, as a barrier to financial security, the majority of young people's responses identified systemic economic and societal barriers. Notably, external barriers such as accessing stable work, affordable housing and completing their studies were seen as interconnected, suggesting that financial barriers do not appear to be understood as discrete or singular but rather as rising from a complex interplay of multiple factors.

## USE OF FINANCIAL PRODUCTS

Despite the financial pressures young people are facing, 43% of young Australians reported that they were often or very often able to save part of their income. Young First Nations peoples were less likely to be able to do so, with only 27% often or very often able to save compared with 45% of other young Australians. Sixty-five per cent of young Australians reported having a savings account, but other forms of saving investment were less common, with 16% of young people reporting that they invested in shares, equity or stock that they managed on their own, 14% in superannuation funds and 10% in exchange traded funds (ETFs) and cryptocurrency. Twenty-two per cent of young Australians reported they did not have any savings or investment products. (See Figure 3.1.)



Figure 3.1: Adoption of savings and investment products (N = 571)

Consistent with these survey results, most interviewees had a savings account with a bank and used a debit card as either their main or sole financial product:

“

I've just got my couple of debit cards with different banks with different high savings rates at the moment. I haven't seen the need of getting [a] credit card just yet.

WOMAN, 23, VIC

Only a very small number of interviewees indicated having taken out a bank loan, and a few had invested in the stock market or were looking to invest in specific shares. These interviewees were largely guided in these investments by their parents or other family members:

“

I think one of my brothers did a lot of research and he just watched the stock market for a while, like a year and different stock places ... he was kind of teaching me a little bit and then just giving me information and understanding on what it is and the benefits of it and stuff and then the different businesses.

WOMAN, 24, WA

Our survey found that 58% of young Australians applied for some form of loan from a bank or financial institution in the last 12 months, with the most common products being buy now pay later services (31%) and credit cards (26%). (See Figure 3.2.) Among those who used buy now pay later services, the most common purchases were clothes (85%), leisure activities (73%) and entertainment (70%).

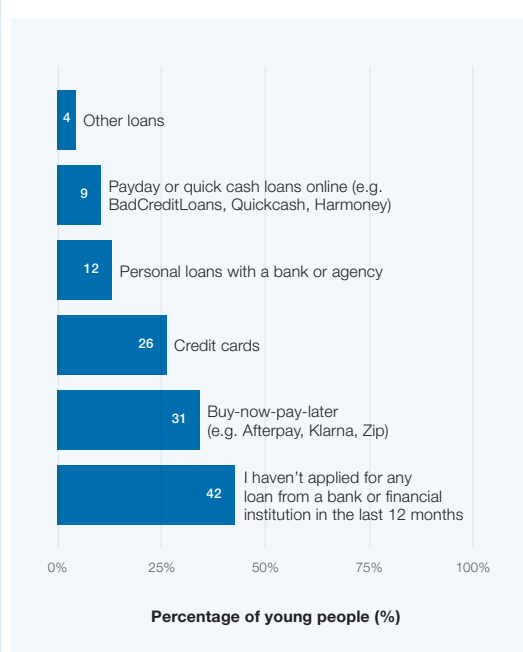


Figure 3.2: Adoption of credit products (N = 571)

Many interviewees expressed concerns about entering into debt through using such products, especially buy now pay later products. Several interviewees also felt that there was no immediate need for these products, and they would not add to their lives:

“

I try to avoid any Afterpay or anything like that. It's just a weird thing in my head that I don't want to be in debt to something to pay constantly every two weeks or whatever it is. So I just choose to, if I can't buy something out right, then I'm not buying it. It can wait.

MAN, 23, TAS

“

Oh hell no ... I don't do loans ... [if] you can't pay it back, you miss a shift or something happens at work, you don't want a bad credit record, because in the future ... I don't want a negative credit record, I don't want to default. I don't want to get in a position where [in] my future ... I can't get a place because when I was younger I took out a loan, I couldn't afford to pay it back.

MAN, 24, NSW

For those interviewees who had used buy now pay later products, the main reason given was to be able to make purchases for necessities. These were only done at times when money was not readily available and when the interviewees felt confident they could make their repayments:

“

I have used Afterpay. I will use that every now and then if I'm buying something that I don't have the funds for immediately, like, as you do with Afterpay. But like, it's never anything that's like two thousand dollars. Like, 'Oh, this was a few hundred dollars.' And I know that I can put that together in the next few weeks. So I typically pay that off sooner than it needs to be. But never anything super extravagant.

WOMAN, 22, SA

The availability and affordability of housing was a significant day-to-day concern for many of the young people we interviewed.

## HOUSING

According to our survey, 54% of young Australians lived in their family home, 17% lived in a house-sharing arrangement, 17% lived independently on their own, 11% lived independently as a family or couple and the remaining 1% lived in other

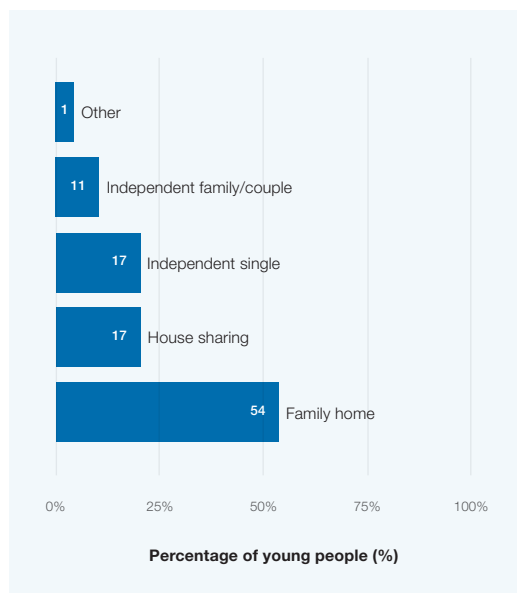


Figure 3.3: Housing arrangements (N= 571)

situations. (See Figure 3.3.) Young people from a high socioeconomic background (70%) were more likely to live in their family home compared with young people from medium (57%) and low (38%) socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, young people from metropolitan areas (56%) were more likely to live with their families than those from regional (54%) and remote (31%) areas.

Sixty per cent of young Australians thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would stay in their current accommodation in the next 12 months; 35% thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would be able to afford a comfortable place to live in the next year.

The availability and affordability of housing was a significant day-to-day concern for many of the young people we interviewed. They often shared that they were navigating precarious rental markets characterised by frequent and unmanageable rent increases, limited housing availability and short-term leases:

“

I did overhear that [the landlords] might be selling this house at the end of that lease and given that it took us so long to find one it's already stressful

WOMAN, 22, SA

“

My lease is up in the middle of the year. So just whether they're going to hit me with a rent increase ... I pay \$460, at the moment. They put it up [by] \$20 last August. [If] they put it up again, this time between \$20 a week is fine, like 20%, or whatever it is, it's reasonable. If it gets more than about \$20 a week, then I'm going to look at moving.

MAN, 24, NSW

A small number of young people also shared that they were homeless or explained how they were in between secure housing due to factors beyond their control:

“

I'd [normally] have my own room but we got stuck in the floods last year and insurance has been really slow so I've kind of had to live between sleeping in a tent in the front yard and living in the living room [of my mum's place] during winter.

MAN, 21, QLD



[My biggest concern] would have to be my housing, because it's not my caravan [that I'm living in]. I'm very lucky to have it. And if it gets taken away from me, I'm back out on the streets again ... I need to be able to shower, have a place to get ready, eat, all that. That's really the only concern in life.

WOMAN, 23, ACT

Overall, this led to a strong recognition among interviewees that young people were enduring, and would continue to endure, the impacts of an ongoing housing crisis:



I'd say the biggest worry is people actually having places for themselves. All this housing crisis stuff and you see on the news all the time about people living in their cars and stuff and a lot of the time you hear about these people, and they say they're beating the housing crisis by living in cars, but ... it sounds like they're losing to the housing crisis.

MAN, 21, QLD

Young people's concerns about their housing in the long term were also evident in their survey responses. Fifty-seven per cent of young people thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would live in a comfortable home in the future, while 41% thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would be able to purchase a property or house. These perceptions were similar across demographic groups, although young people with multiple conditions (26%) and other conditions (other than mental health conditions, long-term illnesses and physical disability; 24%) were less likely than those without disabilities (45%) to think that it was likely or extremely likely that they would be able to purchase a property in the future.



# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- A holistic approach is needed to support young people and their economic prospects, which can provide information and resources across the interconnected fields of finance, employment, education and housing. These efforts must also assist young people to manage the stress and anxiety of navigating an increasingly adverse economic environment.
- Young people across all demographics face financial struggles and are increasingly pessimistic about their financial prospects. Young people are aware of pathways to financial security through education, employment and sound financial decisions. Efforts to assist young people should be responsive to their goals and focus on removing barriers to their success.
- While many young people use a range of financial products, they are also wary about possible future consequences. More information about financial products, as well as stronger regulation of financial service providers, can assist young people to access and use such products and services to their greatest effect.
- Many young people are turning to family for support with basic necessities such as housing and food. Young people without this support can face significant difficulties. Deep structural change is needed to ensure that all young people have access to targeted assistance beyond immediate family networks, and more research is needed to identify possible gaps and ensure that such assistance is effective.
- Young Australians still aspire to home ownership and see this as a cornerstone of financial security. However, worsening economic prospects for young people makes this increasingly untenable. More research is needed to understand if this is indicative of broader economic shifts and to distinguish the specific challenges that young people face

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# 04

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND WORK

### KEY FINDINGS

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- 1** 50% of young Australians earned income from working in the gig economy at some point in the past 12 months, with 16% doing so often or very often.
- 2** 44% of young people experienced unemployment and 57% experienced underemployment at some point in the past 12 months.
- 3** 70% of young Australians rate location as important or very important when thinking about the type of work they want to undertake; the other two most important factors are high salary (68%) and long-term security (67%).
- 4** 59% of young people think it is likely or extremely likely that they will work in a job they like in the future.
- 5** 89% of young Australians report receiving some kind of career advice. The most common sources are parents or carers (40%), friends or peers (32%) and teachers at school (27%).
- 6** 83% of young Australians participate in one or more activities to improve their chances of getting a job, such as seeking advice or looking for work experience.
- 7** Workplace culture and supportive peers are key sources of job satisfaction for young people who are currently working. Common frustrations about work include maintaining a work/life balance and being given insufficient hours.
- 8** Most young Australians have a clear vision for their future employment which, for some, involves transitioning into 'real' jobs that are aligned with their personal interests or chosen field of study.
- 9** Young people see high levels of competition in their desired field and a lack of qualifications or sufficient experience as potential barriers to achieving their vision for future employment.

# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Young people felt that there needed to be more education about their rights in the workplace and how they can advocate for themselves.

## YOUTH LABOUR MARKET

In May 2022, 88.9% of young people aged 15–19 were fully engaged in work or study (working and/or studying full-time), and 5.6% were partially engaged. Among young people aged 20–24, 79% were fully engaged, and 11.4% were partially engaged.<sup>1</sup> Data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics indicate that the occupations with the youngest median ages in 2021 were fast food cooks (18 years), café workers (21 years), checkout operators and office cashiers (22 years), sports coaches, instructors and officials (22 years) and waiters (22 years). These are broadly comparable with figures for 2016.<sup>2</sup>

As of June 2022, 56% of young females and 49% of young males aged 15–19 were employed; for those aged 20–24, employment rates increased to 78% of females and 80% of males. Young people aged 15–19 were more likely to be employed part-time (less than 35 hours per week) than full-time. Forty-eight per cent of females and 34% of males in this age group worked part-time, compared with only 8% of females and 15% of males in full-time work. In contrast, young people aged 20–24, especially young males, were more likely to be in full-time employment and working more than 35 hours per week (40% of females, 53% of males) than part-time (38% of females, 27% of males).<sup>3</sup>

There is evidence that the youth labour market improved following the end of COVID-19 lockdowns. Overall, youth employment rose by 5.8% from June 2021 to June 2022, to a record high of 2,046,100 young people engaged in the labour market. In the same period, full-time youth employment rose by 12.1% and the youth unemployment rate fell from 10.3% to 7.9%, the lowest rate since August 2008. However, young people are still disproportionately affected by long-term unemployment, comprising 25.2% of those experiencing long-term unemployment despite being only 15.7% of the total labour force.<sup>4</sup>

Of the young people aged 18–24 who did not have a job in 2021, the most important incentive to encourage them to enter the labour force was finding a job that matched their skills and experience (55%), followed by having support for

training or study to improve their skills (48%). Of those who did not have a job and were not looking for work, the main reason given was studying or returning to studies (87%).<sup>5</sup>

## ENTERING EMPLOYMENT AND WORKING CONDITIONS

Young people place great importance on employment, expressing that the availability of secure and meaningful employment opportunities is crucial in ensuring long-term positive outcomes for themselves and their peers. They have called for greater preparation for employment as part of their education, through formal qualifications and youth-specific employment programs, as well as greater support during the transition from education to work.<sup>6</sup>

In 2022, flexible work hours were identified by young people as an important working condition, particularly by those who were studying while working. Young people felt that there needed to be more education about their rights in the workplace and how they can advocate for themselves. Many young people reported poor work conditions, not being fully aware of their rights in the workplace and the pressure of combining work and school.<sup>6</sup>

Data from The Smith Family indicate that 70% of young people in 2022 were working in their second year after leaving Year 12. However, this participation was unstable. Of those in work, 14% of young people were working two or more jobs, and 34% had looked for a new job in the previous month.<sup>7</sup> The data suggested that many young people were engaged in precarious, low-wage roles with unclear career progression opportunities.

Experience requirements were frequently reported as a barrier for young people looking to enter the workforce, particularly when looking for their first job.<sup>6</sup> This is also supported by evidence from the National Youth Commission which highlights that there are almost no opportunities available for young people without prior employment experience.<sup>8</sup> Other barriers to employment identified by young people include feeling overwhelmed when looking for work, a lack of support and geographic location.<sup>6</sup>

# 2023 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

## CURRENT OR RECENT EMPLOYMENT

Fifty-five per cent of young Australians were working for wages or salary, 16% had multiple work statuses and another 16% were not currently working or employed. The remaining 13% undertook volunteer work without pay, worked in a family business without pay, had a work experience position without pay or had other work arrangements. Young First Nations peoples were less likely to be working for wages or salary (26%) and more likely not to be currently working or employed (25%) or do volunteer work without pay (14%) than other young Australians (58%, 15% and 2%, respectively). Similarly, young people from a high socioeconomic background were more likely to work for wages or salary (69%) and less likely not to be working or employed (7%) than young people from medium (52% and 17%, respectively) and low (48% and 24%, respectively) socioeconomic backgrounds.

Among young people currently in work or employment, 37% were in full-time employment, 30% were in part-time employment and 22% were in casual employment. Another 5% were in multiple types of employment, and the remaining 6% were between jobs. Young First Nations peoples were less likely to be employed as casuals (9%) than other young Australians (23%).

The most common industries of employment were retail trade (19%), health care and social assistance (13%) and accommodation and food services (12%). (See Figure 4.1.)



Figure 4.1: Industry of employment (N = 458)

Notably, several interviewees who were currently employed in industries such as retail and food services did not see themselves as working in their current jobs in the long-term and aspired to different roles in the future:



There's nothing wrong with Coles, it makes money, but it's not really very, I would never have aspired to work at Coles, if that makes sense, you know?

MAN, 24, VIC

Interviewees engaged in the gig economy generally saw these roles as secondary, supplementing their main sources of income.

Half of young Australians reported earning income in the gig economy at some point in the last 12 months, with 16% stating that they did so often or very often. There is little variation in these figures for young people's participation in the gig economy over the last 6 months or last month. Our survey defined gig work as a short-term work arrangement in which self-employed workers are matched directly with customers through a digital platform, such as Uber food delivery, Airbnb or MTurk. Young First Nations peoples were more likely to report earning income in the gig economy in the last month (74%) than other young Australians (47%). Similarly, young people with a physical disability (69%) or other conditions (other than mental health conditions, long-term illnesses and physical disability; 73%) were more likely to report earning income in the gig economy than young Australians without disabilities (51%).

Several interviewees were also engaged in gig economy work on platforms such as Uber, DoorDash or Milk Run. Those interviewees engaged in the gig economy generally saw these roles as secondary, supplementing their main sources of income:

“

[It's] just a second income, in that half hour that I've got free just doing nothing after the gym, I've got an hour and a half free and like, 'Why not make an extra \$60/\$70 bucks?'

MAN, 23 VIC

Our survey shows that 44% of young people experienced unemployment at some point in the last 12 months. Young First Nations peoples (70%) were more likely to report experiencing unemployment than other young Australians (43%), as were young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (53%) compared with young Australians from medium (43%) and high (38%) socioeconomic backgrounds. Young people with physical disabilities (77%), long-term illness (63%), mental health conditions (47%) and multiple conditions (70%) were also more likely to report experiencing unemployment in the last 12 months than young Australians without disabilities (38%). Sixty-three per cent of young people who experienced unemployment did so for less than 6 months, while 25% were unemployed for between 2 and 3 months, and 19% were unemployed for 10 to 12 months.

Although most interviewees were currently employed, a small number were not. Of those who were not currently employed, some had recently left jobs and were looking for new work, while others were not looking for work because of study commitments or personal reasons:

“

So I just quit my job two weeks back, due to some personal issues, and safety concerns. But I'm currently looking for a job and should have one by the end of like, two weeks.

WOMAN, 23, SA

“

Well, I've never had a proper job but especially since I started uni, yes, I've been unemployed. I've just been a full-time student.

MAN, 21, QLD

## POSITIVE ASPECTS OF WORK

There are particular characteristics that young people saw as particularly important when thinking about getting a job. (See Figure 4.2.) The most important of these were location (70% ranked as important or very important), a high salary (68%) and long-term security (67%). These were broadly shared across demographic groups, although aspects such as a high and long-term security were less likely to be ranked as important or very important by young First Nations peoples (44% and 47%, respectively) than other young Australians (70% and 69%, respectively).

Generally, interviewees who were currently working were content with their jobs. A main source of satisfaction for young people resulted from the culture of the workplace and their colleagues. In addition to these, other sources of satisfaction included experiencing a sense of fulfilment and accomplishment, relatively good pay and the ease of the work:

“

But hospitality is just one of those things, especially when you're younger, and I consider myself quite a social person, it's a work field that, although can be quite difficult and at times even stressful, it's very rewarding as well, and, similar to, like, a team sport, hospitality crews, often a tight knit community, some of my closest friends I've met through working in these different jobs and such.

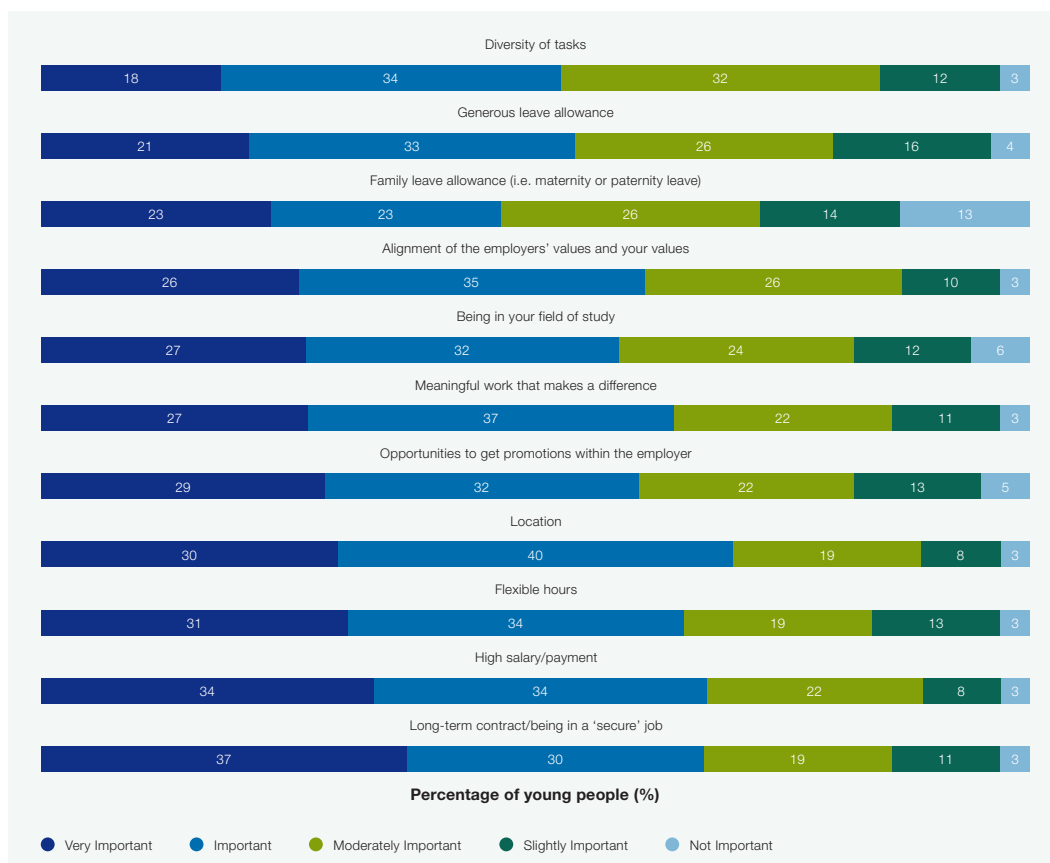
MAN, 20, NSW

“

I think probably the best part about the job ... is sort of understanding that it was all worth it, like we're doing all of this work ... was in some way not pointless. There is sort of some sort of finish line and you can say, 'Oh yes, I've achieved something.' In a way just having the job is a bit like one of the best parts of actually being able to work there.

MAN, 21, ACT

Figure 4.2: Perceived importance of characteristics of work (N = 571)



A main source of satisfaction for young people resulted from the culture of the workplace and their colleagues. Other sources of satisfaction included experiencing a sense of fulfilment and accomplishment, relatively good pay and the ease of the work.

## NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF WORK

Interviewees also expressed frustration at some aspects of their employment. One recurring frustration related to feeling overworked and finding it difficult to balance work with other aspects of other lives, including not having regular work hours:



I work the overnight [shift] ... And there was a period of time where I was doing five of those a week. That was not a good period! That shot through all of ... everything. I couldn't see friends or do anything because you would just sleep the days off and then you'd have to do your basic necessities when you wake up and then you're immediately back out to work at night.

MAN, 23, TAS

Young people also spoke about work-related challenges such as uncertainty about payments, hostile workplace cultures and concerns for personal safety:



You have no idea when you're getting paid if you're casual. Because there's no, like you're not on a payroll, you get forgotten very easily in, like, bureaucracy.

WOMAN, 22, TAS



It feels sketchy [doing DoorDash], it feels very dodgy at night time because I don't know who I might come across in the footpath ... It's that getting out [of] the car, getting the food and walking towards the person and then walking back. Who knows what could happen ... [if] anything does happen I've got a hold on [my car keys] ... in my jumper pocket.

MAN, 23, VIC

A few interviewees, particularly those who were employed in casual positions, were frustrated by not having enough work:

Yeah, it is casual. So the hours can be a bit, like, some weeks they'll, you know, not give you any and that can be a bit annoying, but for the most part, it is able to, like, support me

WOMAN, 20, QLD

This aligns with the survey findings, where 57% of young Australians experienced underemployment (i.e. wanting to work more hours but not being able to) at some point in the last 12 months. Of those who experienced underemployment, most (80%) experienced it for 6 months or less, with 40% experiencing it for 2 to 3 months. Young women (61%) were more likely to report experiencing underemployment than young men (53%) and gender-diverse young people (55%). Young people with a physical disability (79%), mental health condition (65%) and other type of disability, excluding long-term illness (85%), were more likely to report experiencing underemployment than young Australians without a disability (52%).

## FUTURE CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Our survey data indicate that 59% of young people thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would work in a job they like in the future. This was shared across demographic groups. When looking for work, 41% of young Australians preferred a full-time job, 31% preferred part-time work and 25% preferred casual work. The remaining 3% would prefer other arrangements. Younger Australians were more likely to prefer casual and part-time work. Young men were more likely to prefer full-time work (48%) than young women (34%) and gender-diverse young people (20%). Young people with a higher level of education were also more likely to prefer full-time employment. Only one-quarter of young people with a secondary education qualification preferred full-time employment, while 72% of young people with graduate diploma and graduate certificate level qualifications and 56% of those with bachelor degree level qualifications preferred full-time employment.

Most interviewees had a clear vision for their future employment. In broad terms, this often involved plans to transition from entry level work into 'real' jobs, though interviewees understood this in a number of different ways:

“

Well, I think some people typically see fast food and you know, retail as, like, kid's jobs – their first job kind of thing – and people see real jobs as government jobs or like, full-time contracted jobs and things like that.

WOMAN, 22, SA

“

I just want something that's like, kind of a bit more respected ... The idea of moving away from like, the kid job to the adult job?

WOMAN, 18, WA

For many interviewees, visions for future employment involved finding work that related to their personal interests and the fields they were currently studying or planning to study at university. Some interviewees expressed that their visions for the future had only become apparent after beginning their university studies, while others did not have plans for their future employment beyond finishing their studies:

“

It's true what they say [that when] you go to university ... that's basically where you figure out what you want to do. It's not the other way around; you don't figure out what you want to do, and then go to university. So while studying criminology, I did find that corrections was just a fascinating topic to me. So I'm planning on applying to a prison afterwards and seeing what opportunities are there for me.

MAN, 21, QLD

“

I think just at the moment, my goal for this year would be finishing uni ... Yes, I'm not too sure. I haven't, like, set goals for myself just yet. I think my main goals have always been just to finish uni, just get through uni, and I haven't really been a big goal setter.

MAN, 23, SA



When discussing their visions for the future, young people often identified the key influence of family members who served as inspirations or introduced them to certain interests or fields of work.

A small number of interviewees stated that they had no clear visions for future employment. For some, they had not previously given this much thought and expressed their future plans in broad terms, with a focus on remaining open minded and flexible. Others felt that they would only be able to envision their long-term career aspirations after having secured immediate employment first:

“

I kind of have an idea, but I don't know. It feels like I can always change on that.

WOMAN, 19, VIC

“

At this point in time, no, that's just not very realistic. I know I would like to do something else later on in the future, whether that be owning a business, whether that be like a really small business or whatnot. I'm not quite too sure.

WOMAN, 23, SA

## INFLUENCES ON FUTURE CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Our survey found that most young Australians (89%) have received some kind of career advice. The most common sources of this advice were parents or carers (40%), friends of peers (32%) and teachers at school (27%). (See Figure 4.3.) These were broadly shared among demographic groups, although young people with physical disabilities (24%) or multiple conditions (20%) were less likely to go to parents or carers compared with young people without disabilities (40%).

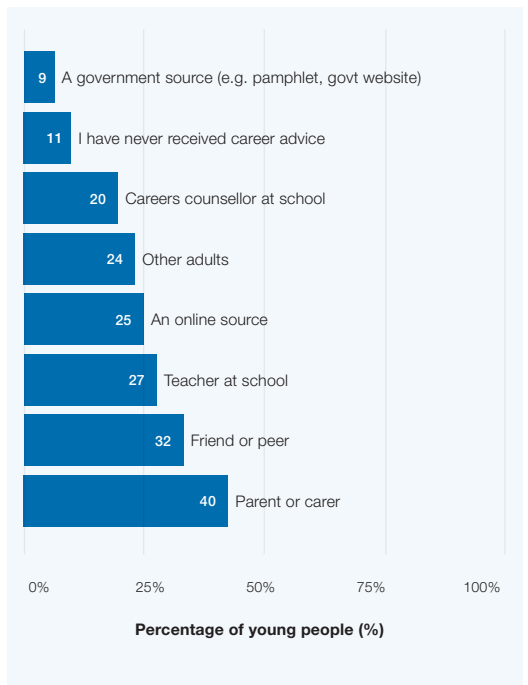


Figure 4.3: Most important source of career advice (N = 571)

Consistent with these findings, when discussing their visions for the future in interviews, young people often identified the key influence of family members who served as inspirations or introduced them to certain interests or fields of work. Outside of family members, interviewees also pointed to a range of role models, such as teachers or public figures, who did not provide direct advice but nonetheless had a significant influence on their visions for future work:

“

I had a really good Year 3 teacher. Like, my first male teacher was in Year 3, and he had a really big impact on me, and then going through school, I had a really good, like, direct reporting, and really good male teacher role models.

MAN, 23, SA

I just really love Steve Irwin and what he does, and I did some work placement with the office [for the Department of Parks and Wildlife Services], and I really enjoyed it and I was like, ‘Ah this is great you get to go out and hike and ... the genetic[s] side of things, that’s really cool.’

WOMAN, 24, WA

Many interviewees spoke about being motivated by a desire to help others. This was both specifically in terms of helping those who are in similar situations to themselves and generally making the world a better place:

“

I had a lot of friends that were very mentally ill and would self-harm and ... I just found an enjoyment of caring for that. And having a care factor of, ‘I can change someone’s life by just being there with them and helping them.’ So that’s where I just found an enjoyment. I was like, ‘I can probably do more of that if I went into nursing.’

MAN, 23, TAS

“

[I went into my job because of] the fact that society sucked a lot. The mental health system sucked even more, and I thought it could suck less.

WOMAN, 22, TAS

## ENABLERS OF SUCCESS

Our survey data show that the majority (83%) of young Australians participated in one or more activities with the intention of improving their chances of getting a job. The most popular activities were seeking advice from parents, carers or friends (40%), looking for work experience related to their intended career pathways (36%) and developing job application skills (34%). The least common activity, declared by only 15% of young Australians, was seeking advice from a career counsellor. (See Figure 4.4.)

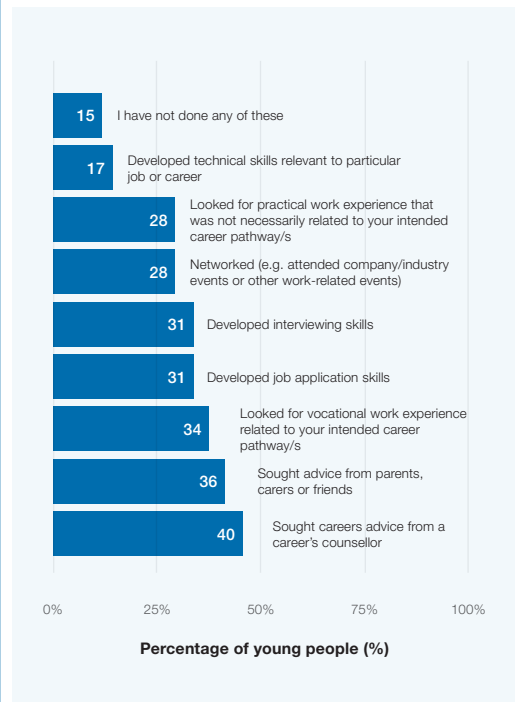


Figure 4.4: Participation in activities to improve employability (N = 571)

Forty-four per cent of young people reported that they gained a formal qualification with the intention of getting a job, and 41% said they chose specific subjects in their final years of high school with the same intention. Completing a short certificate and volunteering were other activities to improve employability chosen by 25% and 20% of young Australians, respectively. This aligned with the views of interviewees who saw education, particularly at the university level, as a key enabler in achieving their visions for future employment.

Many emphasised that completing the relevant qualifications could put them on the right path, while others emphasised how placement experiences as part of their education were seen as helping them build first hand skills, connections and experience in the field:

“

I would say my enabler would be my university because I think you need to have a qualification to be eligible for a number of economics jobs.

I actually don't know any econ[omics] jobs that you can get without going to university. Even if you don't use the skills I think directly there are critical thinking skills that you get from university which they sort of require.

MAN, 21, ACT

In interviews, young people also emphasised the importance of family and peer support for achieving their visions for future employment. This included both direct material support and emotional support and encouragement:

“

My partner just mentally motivated me. Just 'Yes, it's fine. You'll be fine, you can do it.' I'm a little bit scared but yes.

MAN, 23, VIC

A few interviewees were also confident that they would be able to find work in their chosen fields as these jobs were in demand and seeking skilled workers:

“

Well I mean, there's always going to be someone in prison, yes. As unfortunate as that is to say.

MAN, 21, QLD

“

I did my research project in year 11 on what goes into being an occupational therapist. And the more I read into it, the more I was like, 'Wow, this is a really ... huge field with a lot of need.'

WOMAN, 22, SA

## BARRIERS TO ACHIEVEMENT

Interviewees also identified a number of barriers to achieving their future career aspirations. Given the importance of education as an enabler for their future vision, many interviewees felt that poor educational achievement was a possible barrier. This included not having the correct qualifications for their preferred future jobs, as well as poor academic achievement and low grades in their current studies:

“

I could say my performance ... I've only started uni this year and my performance for [the] first semester wasn't good. So like, I'm worrying that it's going to be harder ... in future years, I'm really going to struggle and I don't know if I can do it.

WOMAN, 19, VIC

“

To be an actual clinical psychologist, you have to do masters and stuff. But I'm not sure I really want to do that ... I just want to work, but then it's like, what work can you do with just a bachelor of psychology?

WOMAN, 21, QLD

Some interviewees also pointed to a lack of experience as a potential barrier. They were worried that prospective employers would prefer candidates with more experience in the field or that they did not have enough experience to know if their vision for the future was appropriate:

““

Currently, I would say it's mostly down to experience. I just don't have enough experience to get, like, anything more than an entry level job at the moment.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

““

Getting experience in the field will, like, let me know if I want to do it ... experience will only help me, kind of thing. But I think to some degree, maybe I am just telling myself to do that because I'm worried like, if I try to get in, and then I don't get in, I'll feel bad, then.

WOMAN, 21, QLD

In general, uncertainty was seen as a barrier to young people achieving their future employment plans, especially because this uncertainty could make it difficult to effectively plan. Despite this, some interviewees also understood that such uncertainty was, perhaps, inevitable and would need to be navigated:

““

There will always be things that sort of get in the way ... [that] might throw a spanner in the works ... Obviously, in agri[culture], there are always challenges coming up with new rules, new laws, new issues on farms. So there's always going to be things that sort of get in between us, but you [have] just got to be proactive about it.

MAN, 21, SA

Interviewees also expressed concerns that high levels of job competition in their field and the limited availability of jobs in their local area would make it difficult to achieve their career aspirations. This is perhaps unsurprising given that our survey findings point to location as being a key factor when young people think about getting a job:

““

I think maybe that the competitiveness of journalism is probably something that is quite, yeah, a bit of a barrier, because everyone obviously wants a good job and there's not many of them. So I think yeah, that's probably one of the biggest barriers.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

A small number of interviewees expressed personal concerns or perceived personal shortcomings as a barrier to achieving their vision for future employment. In contrast with the majority of interviewees who discussed systemic barriers, this suggests that these young people understood achieving their career aspiration as an individual responsibility:

““

I think my anxiety sometimes will be a barrier. Like I did try [to] get like a proper job. And ... I really got set back by being declined ... So I think that's probably going to be the barrier that I'm going to have to overcome myself and say, 'It's not because you're failing, it's just because you're not the right fit right now.'

WOMAN, 21, QLD

# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Young people from marginalised groups, such as those living with chronic illness or disability, were more likely to participate in the gig economy.

- Young people are engaged in a diverse range of employment types, reflecting the diverse needs of young people in balancing work with other life aspects. It is important that work and employment conditions adjust to the individual needs young people might have – for example, while completing their education, doing domestic work or caring for others.
- Similar to previous years, young people from marginalised groups, such as those living with chronic illness or disability, were more likely to participate in the gig economy. This may be linked to the flexibility of gig work and lower barriers of entry, allowing young people to tailor their work schedule to suit their needs. This highlights that workplaces outside the gig economy need to do more to incorporate these characteristics and to better support the needs of young people. Further, stronger employee protections and workplace standards are needed to address the often precarious and unsafe working conditions of those in the gig economy.
- Many young people have difficulty finding employment and face barriers related to education, experience and highly competitive labour markets. Further, many young people express negative work experiences such as underwork and overwork. While addressing this will require broader structural changes, more immediate individualised actions from employers are needed to help young people navigate the work environment and to ensure that young people can be meaningfully engaged in work that is suited to their needs.
- Although many young people are currently working, they also seek to transition to 'real' jobs and fulfil their career ambitions. More research is needed to understand young people's experiences as they transition from temporary work towards their desired career goals, and more support is needed both to ensure that such transitions can happen smoothly and to ensure that young people receive adequate support at all stages of their career pathways.

- Young people's career aspirations are shaped by a number of influences such as families, schools and teachers, other role models and personal interests. Often, young people arrive at such aspirations through complex and informal means. Formal support structures, such as careers education and guidance, need to recognise the interconnectedness of influences on young people's aspirations so that young people can receive the advice and support that best suits their career goals and needs.

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# 05

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION

### KEY FINDINGS

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- 1** 45% of young people are studying full-time, 24% are studying part-time and 29% are not studying.

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- 2** 25% of those who are currently studying are doing so exclusively face-to-face, 23% are studying fully online and 48% are studying both face-to-face and online.

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- 3** 46% of young Australians have participated in a micro-credential, micro-degree or micro-master's degree.

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- 4** 71% of young Australians have taken some form of online informal classes.

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- 5** 52% of young people feel that their education has prepared them for the future.

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- 6** Young people often speak about struggling to access advice about the progression of their studies. They often feel that the curriculum is not relevant to their lives and that education institutions are dismissive of diversity.

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- 7** When reflecting on changes they would make to their education, young people often share feeling pressured to take specific courses, and some wish they had finished their studies quicker.

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- 8** Young people engage in informal learning through a combination of sources, including family, friends and online sources, as well as through volunteering. They often discuss learning about topics related to their passions, general life skills and interpersonal skills.

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- 9** Young people believe that it is important to ensure the information they access is trustworthy and reliable. They often consider whether a source is credible based on the source references, the online platforms they use or whether it is from people they trust. A small number of young people feel unable to assess the information they access, which appears to be a result of lacking both time and skills.

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# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

## ENGAGEMENT AND QUALIFICATIONS

In May 2022, 63% of young Australians aged 15–24 were currently studying, although participation rates declined as young people got older within this age bracket. For example, while 82.8% of those aged 15–19 (compulsory schooling age) were studying, only 43.4% of those aged 20–24 were studying. Involvement in study was slightly higher for young females across both age groups, with 82.8% of females aged 15–19 and 43.4% of females aged 20–24 currently studying compared to 81.9% and 41% of males respectively.<sup>1</sup>

For young people who had finished Year 12 in 2021, 58% were studying for a non-school qualification, with the majority being enrolled in bachelor's degrees. In 2022, 90% of young people aged 20–24 had completed Year 12 or attained a Certificate III level qualification or higher. As may be expected, completion of non-school qualifications was higher for young males (43.4%) and females (51%) aged 20–24 than those aged 15–19 (8.2% and 9.2%, respectively).<sup>1</sup> By age 25, 46% of young people reported having completed a bachelor's or postgraduate degree, 38% had completed vocational education and training (VET) and 16% reported not completing any post-secondary qualification.<sup>2</sup>

For young people still in school, 97.3% stated that they intended to finish Year 12. Upon completion of secondary schooling, 71.9% of young people planned to go to university, 46.3% planned to get a job and 31.4% indicated plans to travel or take a gap year.<sup>3</sup> The Smith Family's Pathways, Engagement and Transition report suggests that young people are becoming more likely to be working and less likely to be studying in the second year after finishing Year 12. In 2022, 70% of young people were working in their second year after finishing Year 12 compared with 55% in 2021. Similarly, in 2022, 48% of young people were studying, compared with 52% in 2021.<sup>4</sup>

## SATISFACTION WITH EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Young people aged 15–19 who were currently studying were generally satisfied with their studies, with 62.6% being either very satisfied or satisfied. Females (65%) were more likely to be satisfied than males (60.9%). Ten per cent of young people in this same age group reported being dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with their studies, with a higher proportion of young males (10.7%) than females (9%) reporting feelings of dissatisfaction.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, undergraduate university students, many of whom are young people aged under 25, were satisfied with their educational experiences. Based on the 2022 Student Experience survey, student satisfaction ratings of the quality of their entire educational experience rose from 73.1% in 2021 to 75.9% in 2022. This continues a generally positive upwards trend in the levels of undergraduate student satisfaction. However, student satisfaction has yet to reach the 80% level observed prior to 2020 and the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

In 2022, many young people still feel the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their education. Young people interviewed by The Smith Family found the shift to online learning challenging and were still feeling the effects of this transition. Many young people affected by the lockdowns felt that the restrictions had negatively impacted their motivation to study. For some young people, online study continued to be the primary form of learning, which they felt had negative impacts on the quality of their education and their educational progress.<sup>4</sup>

# 2023 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

## STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Our survey indicates that 55% of young Australians had completed a post-secondary qualification. Half of young people gained an educational qualification after attending a mixture of online and face-to-face classes, 14% did so only through online classes and 20% did so only through face-to-face classes. Another 2% obtained a qualification through some other arrangement, and 14% had not gained any form of educational qualification.

Forty-five per cent were currently studying full-time, 24% were studying part-time, 2% were studying both full-time and part-time and 29% were not studying. Among those who were currently studying, 25% were doing so exclusively face-to-face, 23% were studying fully online and 48% were studying both face-to-face and online. Young First Nations peoples were more likely to study fully online (42%) than other young Australians (22%), as were young people from remote (46%) and regional (33%) areas compared with young people living in metropolitan areas (21%). Similarly, young people with long-term illnesses (65%) and other disabilities (besides mental health conditions and physical disabilities) (65%) were more likely to study face-to-face than young people without a disability (21%).

Our survey also asked young Australians about their participation in micro-certifications, defined as short courses offered by a university or technical and further education (TAFE) institute that certify those who complete them as having a particular skill. Forty-six per cent of young Australians declared that they participated in a micro-credential, micro-degree or micro-master's, 20% of survey respondents said they participated in a micro-credential through online classes only, 18% did so through face-to-face classes only and 15% had a mix of face-to-face and online classes. Young First Nations peoples were more likely to have participated in a micro-credential (64%) than other young Australians (44%). Similarly, young people with physical disability (63%), a long-term illness (57%) or multiple conditions (53%) were more likely to participate in a micro-credential than young people without disabilities (42%).

In terms of formal education, 68% of young Australians were satisfied (i.e. somewhat satisfied or very satisfied) with the development of critical thinking skills, 68% were satisfied with the development of problem-solving skills and 66% were satisfied with the development of group work and collaboration skills. (See Figure 5.1.) Young people tended to be less satisfied with their learning relating to environmental issues, with less than half (49%) being somewhat or very satisfied with this area. Just over half (52%) of young people felt that their education had prepared them for the future. Young First Nations peoples were less likely to feel this way (44%) than other young Australians (54%).

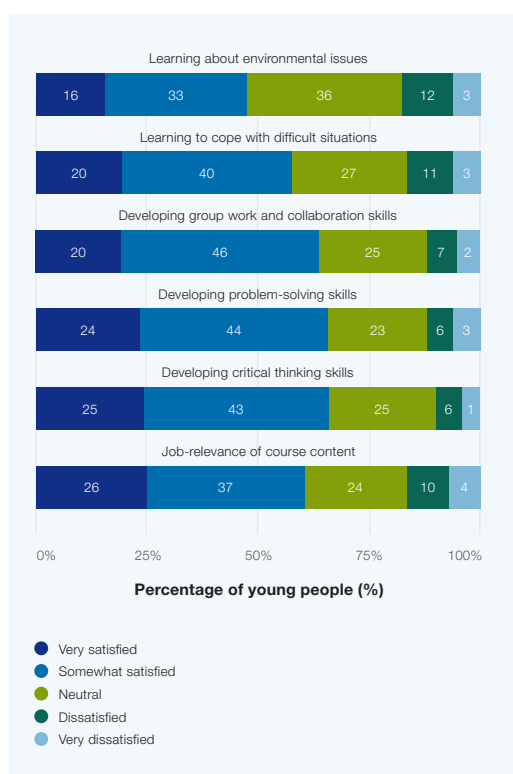


Figure 5.1: Satisfaction with aspects of formal education (N = 571)



## CHANGES TO EDUCATION

When discussing the changes they would like to see in their education, many interviewees currently studying at university reflected on challenges around accessing timely and targeted advice about the progression of their studies. For some, the changes in university processes due to the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges:

“

[The university] would have things like orientations and that kind of thing and they're useless. They don't help you out half the time. And a lot of unis are structured in a very weird way ... So it's fairly inaccessible, just in terms of knowing what you're even doing. Or, like the website's not working. I think most people have some issue with that. Admin is kind of insufferable.

WOMAN, 22, TAS

Many interviewees also indicated that they would make changes to the curriculum of their past and present studies, which were seen as repetitive, not offering vocational or work-integrated learning opportunities, not being relevant to their lives or not aligning with their values:

“

The sort of general patriotism ... I don't like the idea of people being taught like our country is number one, yadda, yadda, that sort of crap. Just being fed sort of Australia-centric things. It's a very confining worldview and it sort of reduces the ability of people to think with empathy.

MAN, 23, NSW

“

I find a lot of the studies they had in high school just wouldn't work with what I wanted to do in life ... I didn't care for what they were teaching, most of the time, because it was just things I have no interest in.

MAN, 23, TAS

Connected to this, many of the young people we interviewed saw their education institutions as being dismissive of the diversity of young people's lives and being unable to provide differentiated support. Notably, in a small number of cases young people specifically discussed instances of discrimination and homophobia:

“

The learning system in Australia is absolutely appalling is what I have to say about it. It is so behind, it is so backdated, it has not kept up with the times, their learning ways are just inaccurate, and a waste of everyone's time ... It wasn't catered to what would be best for learning in the classroom, it was just, 'This is what the system is, that's what we're doing.'

WOMAN, 23, SA

“

I went to high school in, like, a small town ... people are very, like, close-minded to like, your differences and things like that ... there were some ... homophobic comments from staff and even students.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

Many young people saw their education institutions as being dismissive of the diversity of young people's lives and unable to provide differentiated support.

The young people we interviewed also spoke about feeling pressured in their educational journeys to make the ‘right’ choices, select certain courses and take on high workloads. For those studying at university, the cost of their degrees exacerbated these concerns:

““

I wouldn’t have done so many ATAR courses. But ... that wasn’t my choice. The school made me do that and I was quite pissed off and I kind of was very stubborn about it ... [I wish] I’d put my foot down and gone, ‘No, I don’t want to do this.’

WOMAN, 24, WA

““

[In] realising how much work there was to be done ... I was really nervous because there’s so much money [at stake] ... I would be in debt for a long while because of going into this degree ... and that was very nerve racking for me, and the work that you have to do has to be just really high standard.

WOMAN, 22, ACT

Finally, a small number of young people reflected on individual choices they had made about the pace of their study and taking periods of leave. While some were happy with the choices they had made and the progression of their education, others wished they had finished their studies quicker:

““

I think taking that year off was really important for me ... I think had I not done it, then I may not have been able to do as well this semester or be a good person, really. I think it was what I needed. And it’s what I did, and I got myself through it. And I don’t think I will change it at all.

WOMAN, 22, SA

““

Oh, my gosh, if I could go back, I would just finish my degree earlier ... That’s what I would do and prepare for the graduate programs ... I could have been a grad at this time, could have been [in] a graduate [role] this year. It didn’t happen.

MAN, 24, NSW

## INFORMAL LEARNING

According to our survey, 71% of young Australians have taken some form of online informal classes. This was most commonly undertaken through an online platform such as Udemy, Coursera or Skillshare (34%), social media platforms such as YouTube, TikTok, Facebook or Instagram (30%) or via a training company’s own online platform (27%). (See Figure 5.2.) The rates of participation in online informal learning were similar across demographic groups.

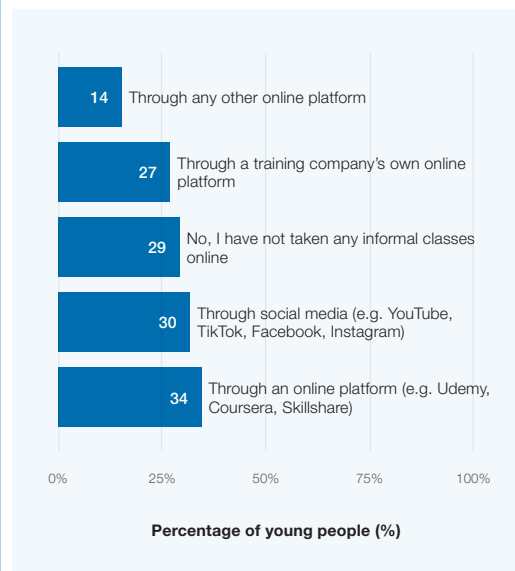


Figure 5.2: Participation in informal online learning (N = 571)

Young people recognised the importance of identifying trustworthy information and the need to evaluate and validate the information they engaged with.

When discussing their experiences of informal learning, the majority of interviewees spoke about developing life skills that they felt were overlooked in their formal education, such as taxes, civic participation and household maintenance:

“

I feel like I maybe have learned more important things outside of school than I did inside of school. I didn't know how to do taxes and all that stuff at school, but I learnt that afterwards.

WOMAN, 19, QLD

“

I suppose most aspects of adult life I suppose ... just the general adult stuff: applying for a job, paying your taxes, that sort of thing.

MAN, 21, QLD

It was also common for young people to speak about how they pursued informal learning related to their passions or how they had learned interpersonal skills that were seen as valuable in the workplace. With respect to developing their interpersonal skills, interviewees often emphasised that these learning experiences were not specifically sought but were encountered as part of their daily lives and work:

“

One thing that I've really learned outside of school is the value that other people can bring into your life. I do a lot of work with my tennis club. I'm their treasurer. I did a lot of work with the Red Cross ... and I've really come to understand that you can't do things alone a lot of the time. You need support systems in place ... You need people that you can ask questions in a professional setting that can be mentors to you.

MAN, 21, ACT

In line with the survey findings, a few interviewees mentioned how they engaged in informal learning through online sources such as Google, social media and podcasts. It was more common, though, for interviewees to mention how they had learned from family, friends, personal networks or a combination of both personal and online sources. Notably, several young people also described how they learned through engaging in volunteering:

“

I learned stuff by just doing it. So volunteering is a good way to learn some skills. But mostly either looking it up, just Googling, 'Hey, how do I fix this speaker?' or asking somebody, like calling my dad on how to use his power drill.

WOMAN, 22, TAS

## EVALUATING INFORMATION

The young people we interviewed recognised the importance of identifying trustworthy information and the need to evaluate and validate the information they engaged with. Most commonly, young people indicated that they sought trustworthy information by only accessing sources they deemed credible, such as academics and expert sources:

“

I'd try and find evidence that is backed by credible sources, in terms of that kind of thing ... So if I can find, say, an article on that kind of thing, that is resourced and I can trace it back to the studies or something that have this information in it, then I think that I find that helpful.

MAN, 24, VIC

Young people established trust in sources over time by engaging with information directly, looking at references and conducting their own investigations to compare against other sources of information:



[When I] listen to a few episodes of a podcast when I'm first starting out, I'll check their sources. Like, I'll like follow along in show notes and look at the sources and make sure that, like, the sources that they use are firsthand, like, primary sources or they're, like, they're using reliable information and so once I've seen a couple of episodes of that I just have like a baseline trust set in them. There is definitely a possibility that I could be misled because I'm not constantly checking up on them. But through initial checking, they do seem very trustworthy and I try to keep it to things that are.

MAN, 23, TAS

Given that many young people access information online, it is unsurprising that their assessments of reliable information were mediated by the online platforms they used. This included the use of comments, trusting 'verified' accounts and using platform misinformation regulations and algorithms. However, young people also recognised the limitations with such approaches:



You do see misinformation on TikTok and you can't report it ... I sit on there trying to report misinformation ... and it's like, 'We didn't find any violation' ... Sometimes you get like stuff that's anti-trans, for example ... that's one example where the algorithm would miss [misinformation].

MAN, 24, NSW

Despite these actions, young people were aware of the difficulty in determining reliable information and conceded that, in some cases, they may not be able to trust their own assessments. Consequently, a small number of young people spoke about how they sought support from others in validating information:



[It is] very hard to validate the source, which is why I think a lot of things get lost in translation, because you may hear something but may not believe it's [the] truth, just because you're unsure about how reliable it is.

WOMAN, 18, QLD



Definitely, there's a lot of things that are very biased on the internet. That's why I do ask my family, or like my partner, or my friends, and I just get different perspectives from everyone else, and yes, [then] just make the ultimate decision.

WOMAN, 18, QLD

A small number of the young people we interviewed indicated that they felt unable to determine the reliability and trustworthiness of the information they accessed. Their accounts suggest that they rely on hope or trial and error to navigate misinformation, a situation that appeared to be a result of lacking both the time and skills to assess information:



You've got to be able to navigate [people sharing information] ... and hope you don't get taken advantage of, and if you do, you learn that you can't trust those people.

MAN, 23, TAS

# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

Some young people we interviewed indicated that they felt unable to determine the reliability and trustworthiness of the information they accessed.

- Young people express dissatisfaction with their educational experience and often describe it as rigid and outdated, especially at secondary level. Further, young people are feeling pressured to undertake specific courses or subjects as part of their educational pathways and often face challenges in accessing timely support about the progression of their studies. More proactive and differentiated support is needed from educational institutions to assist young people through their educational journeys and to guide them as they transition from education to employment.
- Online learning continues to be a key component of many young people's educational experience, even beyond the responses to the COVID-19 lockdowns. Further research is needed to identify and monitor the long-term impacts of online learning, and policy is needed to identify and foster high-quality teaching practices for engaging young people in online learning.
- Young people are dissatisfied with various aspects of their educational experiences, including a lack of support and the curriculum not being relevant to their lives. More research is needed to identify what young people wish to gain from their education and to identify how these needs might best be addressed.
- Informal learning continues to be common among young Australians, who access information from a wide range of sources. Different from previous years, young people also identify on-the-job learning and volunteering as important sources of informal learning. Guidance is needed to allow young people to assess the quality and trustworthiness of the information they access, and structures are needed to recognise the skills and knowledge that young people gain through informal learning.

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# 06

## YOUNG PEOPLE, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### KEY FINDINGS

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- 1** 26% of young Australians rate their mental health as poor or very poor, and 36% rate it as good or excellent.
- 2** 24% of young Australians received mental health care in the past 12 months, while 13% sought but did not receive such care.
- 3** 97% of young Australians reported feelings of worry, anxiety or pessimism in the past 12 months.
- 4** 21% of young Australians experienced food insecurity at some point in the past 12 months. For those who had experienced food insecurity, the main reasons were being unable to afford food, lack of access to healthy food or food being unavailable in their area.
- 5** 75% of young Australians could not go out to eat with friends or family due to lack of money in the past 12 months.
- 6** Young people understand health holistically, involving not only physical and mental health but also aspects such as financial security, access to housing and general life satisfaction.
- 7** Being physically healthy is associated with being able to perform various everyday activities without undue effort or becoming too tired. Being mentally healthy is associated with stability and resilience and a general sense of contentment.
- 8** Young people see general exercise, diet and sleep as key ways to maintain physical health. Certain forms of exercise such as working out and going to the gym are more often expressed as a way to maintain mental health. Other ways to maintain mental health include seeking support services, maintaining support networks and engaging in self-care.

# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Recent data from Mission Australia indicates that young people's concerns about mental health often surpass their worries about physical health, with 39% of young Australians aged 15–19 being very or extremely concerned about their mental health compared with 21% feeling the same way about their physical health.<sup>1</sup> Worries about mental health were more prevalent among young females (46%) and gender-diverse young people (66%) than young males (22%). While differences in concern about physical health were less extreme, they were still more prevalent among young females (23%) and gender-diverse young people (31%) than among young males (16%).<sup>1</sup>

These concerns are unsurprising given that mental health conditions are one of the leading factors contributing to years of healthy life lost among Australians aged 15–24.<sup>2</sup> Census data indicate that the most common long-term health conditions are mental health conditions, followed by asthma. According to the 2021 Australian Census, a higher proportion of females aged 15–19 (23%) reported one or more long-term health conditions than males of the same age (18%), and this gap increases among young people aged 20–24 (27% of females, 19% of males).<sup>3</sup> This gap may be explained by males being less likely to identify, report or seek help regarding their health.<sup>4</sup> For instance, young males aged 15–19 were less likely to report that they needed support with their mental health (35% ever needing support) compared with females (62%) or gender-diverse young people (77%).<sup>1</sup>

Levels of psychological distress have increased since 2017 among young Australians aged 18–24.<sup>5</sup> Although levels of psychological distress among some older age groups have largely returned to levels similar to those prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this reduction in levels of psychological distress has been slower for those aged 18–24. Whether this is solely due to the pandemic and associated social changes is unclear, but pandemic effects may be long lasting and continue to shape mental health and health behaviours more generally.<sup>5</sup> Social media may also have an influence: more than half of young people (57%) aged 12–25 believed that their mental health was declining, with 42% nominating social media as the main reason.<sup>6</sup>

Although recent data are limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare estimated that 27% of young people aged 15–17 are overweight or obese, with this figure increasing to 45% for those aged 18–24.<sup>7</sup> There has been an increase in the number of young people who avoid smoking, with the proportion of young people aged 14–17 having never smoked increasing from 82% in 2001 to 97% in 2019, and the proportion of those aged 18–24 who have never smoked increasing from 58% in 2001 to 80% in 2010.<sup>8,9</sup> Although the number of young people aged 14–17 consuming five or more drinks at least monthly declined significantly between 2001 and 2016 (from 30% to 8%), there was a very slight increase between 2016 and 2019 (to 8.9%). Consumption of alcohol becomes more prevalent as young people get older and complete secondary schooling. In 2019, 66% of young people aged 14–17 had never had a full serve of alcohol, compared with only 15% of those aged 18–24.<sup>7,8</sup>

## ACCESS TO SUPPORT

Among young people aged 15–19 who reported needing support with mental health, only 58% had sought help, leaving 42% who did not seek help.<sup>1</sup> When accessing support, young people were most likely to seek help from a health professional (68%), followed by family (55%) and friends (47%).<sup>1</sup> The most common self-reported barriers to accessing professional help were stigma or shame associated with mental illness (44%), concerns about confidentiality (43%) and that young people did not know where to seek support (34%).<sup>1</sup> This highlights the importance of societal responses to address these barriers, such as education, awareness and resourcing of support services.

Young people's access to support for health concerns can also be restricted by the limited resources available to health services. For instance, for all clients, including young people, headspace centres reported an average wait of 10.5 days for intake, 25.5 days for the first therapy session and a further 12.2 days for the second therapy session.<sup>10</sup> Although federal funding was increased in 2021, funding has not kept up with increasing demand.<sup>11</sup> Further, although online tools and telehealth were flexible and responsive and were widely adopted during the pandemic, young people still showed considerable preference for face-to-face interaction when seeking health services.<sup>12,13</sup>

# 2023 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

## MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

According to our survey, just over one-quarter (26%) of young Australians rated their mental health as poor or very poor, and 36% rated it as good or excellent. None of the gender-diverse survey participants rated their mental health as good or excellent. Twenty-four per cent of young people received mental health care, another 13% sought but did not receive such care and 59% did not receive mental health care. The remaining 4% preferred not to say anything about access to mental health care. Gender-diverse young people were more likely to report receiving mental health care (85%) than young women (29%) and young men (18%). People with mental health conditions (52%), long-term illness (23%) and multiple conditions (49%) were also more likely to report receiving mental health care compared with young people without disabilities (12%). Young First Nations peoples were less likely to report receiving mental health care (15%) than other young Australians (25%) but more likely to report seeking but not receiving this type of care (26% compared with 12%, respectively).

Ninety-seven per cent of young Australians reported having at least one feeling of anxiety or pessimism in the last 12 months. Most commonly, young people reported they often or very often felt like they were missing out on being young (42%), worried about their ability to live a happy and healthy life in the future (41%), worried about

their ability to cope with everyday tasks in the future (41%) or felt like they had 'lost' a year of their lives (40%). (See Figure 6.1.) Although these feelings were broadly shared among demographic groups, young people with disabilities were more likely to report having these feelings. Women and gender-diverse people were more likely than men to report feeling anxious about their safety, their ability to live a happy life, and their ability to cope with everyday tasks in the future.

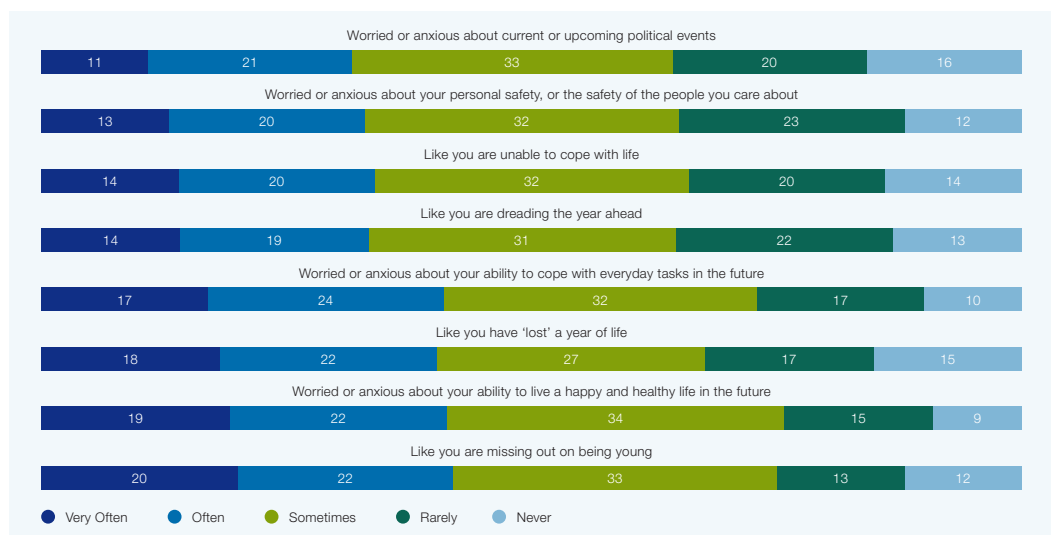
In interviews, many young people felt that their state of health could be better, with some seeing themselves as being in relatively poor health. Broadly, few were as healthy as they would have liked, and several faced a range of physical and mental health challenges:



**For someone who's quite young, I do have a few issues, physical issues. I have scoliosis and arthritis in my spine. I have overactive thyroid issues ... health issues but I mean, [I'm] just trying to at least know them and can do things to fix them or stop them from getting bad I guess.**

WOMAN, 19, QLD

Figure 6.1: Feelings of pessimism and anxiety among young people (N = 571)





Young people expressed that being healthy not only involved physical and mental health, but was a holistic concept that intersected across many aspects of their lives.

“

I've been diagnosed with complex trauma and depression ... that can cause issues with work and other things like schooling.

MAN, 23, TAS

Interviewees identified a number of key barriers to maintaining their idea of good health, including cost, lack of time, stresses in everyday life and difficulties receiving diagnoses and support for health concerns – particularly mental health concerns. While support services were generally seen to be beneficial, such services could be difficult or costly to access. Those who had positive experiences with health services viewed themselves as lucky, reflecting that this may not be the common experience for many young people:

“

The whole system of getting in to see a psychologist is like, so painful. It took me four months to get to see a psychologist in Brisbane, which ... [is] a capital city. You would think that, you know, it would not take that long.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

“

I was really lucky to have found a doctor near me who was supportive and willing to get me on track really quickly. I did have one interaction with a psychiatrist who was just awful. But outside of that I had another psychiatrist who was great. I had a psychologist who I love, like, I was really lucky. It was all system-funded, so it didn't cost me out of pocket. It was just a wild string of luck that I had.

WOMAN, 22, NSW

Some interviewees pointed to a social stigma around being unwell and felt pressured to maintain their health:

“

Because health is, like, you're morally obligated to somehow be healthy and not like, obligated to just try and attempt to be a person. Like, so there's a lot of judgements on what your health is.

WOMAN, 22, TAS

## A HOLISTIC VIEW OF BEING HEALTHY

When asked what being healthy meant to them, young people expressed that it not only involved physical and mental health, but was a holistic concept that intersected across many aspects of their lives. (See Figure 6.2.)

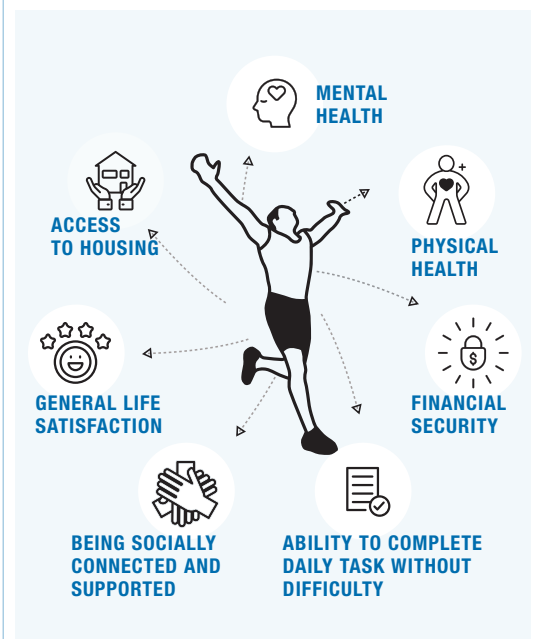


Figure 6.2: Young people's holistic view of being healthy

For many young people, this holistic view of health extended to aspects of their lives such as financial security and access to housing:



For me it's being financially independent. That's one thing, financial independence is kind of a healthy thing. I think that knowing that you could afford your rent, knowing that you can afford food ... if you need to go into the office [knowing] you can afford to go get a coffee and lunch ... knowing that you have a roof over your head is something that I measure for healthiness.

MAN, 24, NSW

In terms of physical health, interviewees understood being healthy to mean being able to follow a general routine, exercise and access necessities such as food. Some interviewees also linked health to their physical appearance:



I suppose it means being fit, being able to run, being able to swim, being able to play tennis and not being fat, not being visibly fat.

MAN, 22, NSW



Having a balanced diet, consuming a lot of water, getting your daily exercises in ... it's more about you know, feeling healthy. Waking up energised. Looking good.

WOMAN, 18, QLD

When articulating the mental aspects of being healthy, interviewees often spoke in terms of stability and resilience. Good mental health meant being able to face various challenges in life and cope with negative emotions while still maintaining a positive outlook. For a few young people, this was also about not being overly critical of themselves:



I guess having good resilience for things that kind of happen to you, not letting the small things affect you as much, and just having, like, a positive outlook, I think, yes.

WOMAN, 20, NSW



Not having that toxic mindset about yourself, and not being critical and cynical, and rude to yourself and others ... put yourself into perspective, don't minimise your own problems, because they are yours. It's still your world right now. But without yourself, you can't make it through.

WOMAN, 22, SA

Related to these aspects was being socially connected and having strong networks of support:



Having people in your life that you can talk to, having friends that you can sort of use like we were talking about before with that support system, those, that's really key I believe to both your physical and your mental health.

MAN, 21, ACT

Young people often associated being in a state of good health with having the capacity to undertake daily activities and tasks without difficulty, and they recognised that this capacity was subjective and that different individuals were healthy in different ways:

“

For me it's just the ability to live a day-to-day life without overexerting yourself. Like, on an average day, you can expect yourself to have to, like, lift a mild weight or walk or jog a certain different distance, and I can do that so I consider myself physically healthy in that regard ... as long as you can get through your day-to-day life without feeling over exerted then I think that's healthy enough.

MAN, 23, NSW

“

And to me, it could be, 'Yes, I can get up and I can shower myself and I can go to work and go shopping and things.' But some people will be like, 'Well, I woke up today, and that's enough.' But then there's, you know, athletes, they're like, 'Well, I only ran 52 kilometres today, that'll do.' But to me, it's 'I can do the things that I want.'

WOMAN, 22, SA

Connected to this, young people often understood being healthy in relation to feeling content and satisfied, particularly in relation to feeling confident and happy with themselves:

“

I think being healthy means that you're like, you're eating right, you're exercising right, and you feel happy in your own skin, sort of thing. Like, you're doing all the things right. So you know that what you're doing is, at that moment in time, like, the best that you can be, sort of thing, and you just know that you're going to keep on improving.

MAN, 23, SA

## WAYS OF STAYING HEALTHY

Interviewees identified a number of strategies for maintaining their health. Related to the holistic view of health above, many interviewees expressed general ways of maintaining overall health, including maintaining strong support networks, seeking out enjoyable activities and staying on top of small everyday tasks:

“

I do enjoy ... spending time with friends and family. I think when I can sort of bounce my thoughts back off people as well, I think that's something that I value quite a bit so yes, being around people, enjoying life, having people to bounce my thoughts back off of and yes, enjoying life with other people, I think is what [I] really like.

MAN, 23, VIC

“

It can be as small as, like, the dishes, or as big as enrolling in new topics or getting a new job and stuff like that ... If you don't at least do some of the dishes, then they're just going to keep stacking up.

WOMAN, 22, SA

For their physical health, interviewees identified eating well, getting enough sleep and different forms of exercise, from walking to formalised sports activities, as ways of staying healthy:

“

I do try to walk ... so where I live, it's about a four-kilometre walk to the nearest shopping centre. And I do that walk there and back after shopping. On a good week, three to four times a week.

MAN, 23, TAS

“

Yes, so I do swimming ... I'm in a squad. I train a couple times a week. And I also go to the gym, again, only a couple times a week ... Another aspect of physical health is eating well, which is something I try and do, but it's something that I need to probably focus a bit more on being more like, conscious of what I'm eating, I guess.

WOMAN, 18, WA

Interestingly, while young people recognised the physical benefits of certain forms of exercise such as working out and going to the gym, they were more often expressed as a way to maintain their mental health:

“

Yes, gym, exercise. I feel like it's got a pretty strong correlation. Like, doing all that exercise, getting your endorphins and stuff.

MAN, 23, SA

“

For mental health [it] is the gym. Yes, if I've had a bad day at work, take it out at the gym.

MAN, 23, VIC

For some interviewees, maintaining their mental health involved accessing mental health services, such as psychologists or therapy sessions. These services were generally seen as positive and gave interviewees a range of strategies for fostering good mental health. More generally, young people valued strategies such as meditation, creating a healthy environment and being conscious of themselves and their needs:

“

I went to therapy for a few years. I used to have anger management issues. And I learned some breathing techniques and how to calm myself down through that.

WOMAN, 19, QLD

As with general health and wellbeing, interviewees identified having strong friendship groups and social networks as key aspects of staying mentally healthy. They also expressed the importance of self-care and finding time for themselves as strategies for maintaining good mental health:

“

But if you are having a bad day, just call a friend and ... they could be having a bad day as well and then you kind of talk about your problem together and that's, yes, lean on my friends or sister as a support network.

WOMAN, 24, WA

While young people recognised the physical benefits of certain forms of exercise such as working out and going to the gym, they were more often expressed as a way to maintain their mental health.

The majority of interviewees had experienced food insecurity at some point in their lives.

“Self-care is quite high on my list, and, like, doing things for yourself. I think sometimes I get quite caught up in doing other things ... [so] taking time out for yourself [is important].”

WOMAN, 20, NSW

## FOOD INSECURITY

In the past 12 months, one in five young Australians (21%) experienced food insecurity, defined as being unable to access nutritious and culturally appropriate food. Young First Nations peoples were more likely to experience food insecurity (37%) than other young Australians (19%), as were young people with long-term illness (27%), young people with a physical disability (28%) and young people with multiple conditions (53%) compared with young Australians without a disability (16%). Young people living in regional (32%) and remote (32%) areas were also more likely to report experiencing food insecurity than young people in metropolitan areas (18%).

Young people face barriers when it comes to accessing food. (See Figure 6.3.) In the last 12 months, 71% of young Australians ate only a few kinds of food, 69% ate less than they thought they should, 64% were hungry but did not eat, 63% were unable to eat healthy and nutritious food, 58% had to skip meals, 57% worried they would not have enough food to eat, 49% went without eating for a whole day and 49% lived in a household that ran out of food. Young people with disabilities and young First Nations peoples were more likely to experience all these situations.

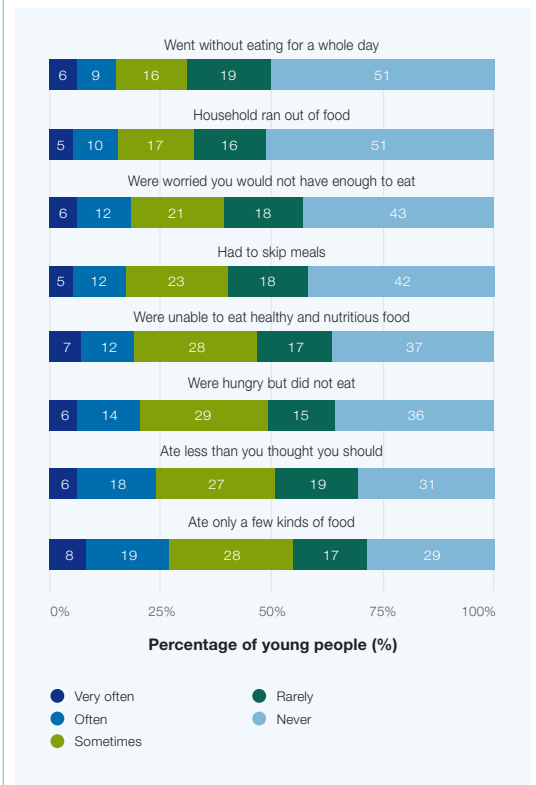


Figure 6.3: Problems with accessing food (N = 571)

Lack of money prevented 75% of young Australians from going out to eat with friends or family. More than half (52%) of young Australians shopped for food more than an hour away from home, and for 62%, the food that they wanted to buy was not available in the suburb or town where they lived. Again, young First Nations peoples and young people with disabilities were more likely to be in all these situations.

The majority of interviewees had experienced food insecurity at some point in their lives. Similar to the survey data, not being able to afford food was identified as the main reason that interviewees experienced food insecurity. This could mean not being able to afford food at all or having to purchase cheaper and less healthy options:

“When it’s, like, at the end of pay day, you just simply have no money. You can’t go and get anything ... It’s like, I think most people I know probably skip some amount of their meals because it’s just like, eating all the time is expensive.”

WOMAN, 22, TAS

“

Like, yes, cost of living and stuff like that. Yes, just, it's cheaper to eat shit food.

MAN, 23, VIC

Interviewees' experiences of food insecurity were also related to a general lack of food options in their local area or not being able to eat certain foods due to dietary or health challenges:

“

Oh yes, there's no food in my town. If I want to go shopping, I've got to travel at least 45 minutes to go to the next [town], the biggest town to do an actual food shop.

WOMAN, 24, WA

“

But my doctor also diagnosed me with an eating disorder, but they think it's also linked, the eating disorder is linked to my health, and so it's not something that can really be fixed if my health is not sorted out.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

When discussing their experiences of food insecurity, a few young people emphasised that they had not sought assistance from food support services. This was most often because young people felt embarrassed to ask for help or thought that these support services would be unable to assist. In these cases, some young people relied on their peer networks:

“

I honestly haven't bothered reaching out to [food support services] lately, because they're just so underfunded and ... a lot of people are really struggling [in] Adelaide.

WOMAN, 23, SA

“

Whether funds were low and I was too embarrassed or didn't want to ask for more money or whatever it may be ... There have [also] been times when I didn't want to rely on the family. I[d] look to my friends and I'd say, 'Hey look, I'm struggling a bit at the moment, can you help me out here?' and knowing that they have that trust as well that they can help me out and they know that I'm going to get them back and all of that.

MAN, 20, NSW

Among the interviewees who had never experienced food insecurity and were generally able to access the food they wanted to eat, it was common for many to acknowledge the role of parental support:

“

I'm quite lucky that my parents do chip in when I need it. In saying that, there have been a few times where I have had to ask them for money. Like, just for food, like to just get groceries and things like that.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Young people have a holistic understanding of what it means to be healthy, which interconnects across fields such as employment, education and social relationships. This calls for holistic research and policy responses, which can account for the complex and interconnected ways young people experience health and wellbeing.
- Mental health is a particular concern for young people, many of whom face a number of mental health challenges. Young people are broadly aware of strategies for maintaining their mental health and are actively seeking support. However, mental health services can be difficult to access, particularly for young people from marginalised communities. More must be done to ensure that timely, affordable and culturally affirming mental health services are available to all young people in their local communities.
- Large numbers of young people express feelings of stress and anxiety, pessimism about the future and low levels of life satisfaction. Research is needed to identify whether these factors are specific to young people or if they reflect broader social trends. From this, tailored support may be needed to address the particular health challenges facing young Australians.
- Food insecurity continues to be a challenge for many young Australians, particularly those who do not have access to support from their families. This connects to increased costs of living and the scarcity of healthy food options in certain areas. Although multiple organisations work hard to supply food to those who struggle to access it, these services may be difficult to access in a timely manner, and young people may be reluctant to reach out for help. Structural solutions are needed to raise the living conditions of young Australians and to mitigate the prevalence of food insecurity.

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# 07

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

### KEY FINDINGS

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- 1** 56% of young Australians are single, 35% are in a relationship and 7% are casually dating.

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- 2** 47% of young people think it is likely or extremely likely that they will have children in the future.

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- 3** 56% of young Australians often or very often felt like they belonged when they spent time with family and 52% when they spent time with friends in the past 12 months.

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- 4** 50% of all young Australians report feeling like they belong when they are at work; 56% of young people feel that it is quite or very important for them to feel like they belong at work.

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- 5** 53% believe gender determines who does household repairs; however, a majority of young Australians believe who does most household chores is not determined by gender.

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- 6** 62% of young Australians think the type of career pathway young people choose is somewhat or completely determined by gender, 58% believe that gender determines the opportunities to progress and advance career pathways and 56% believe that gender determines the ways junior workers are treated by senior staff in the workplace.

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- 7** Young people's sense of belonging often revolves around feelings of happiness, joy, being able to connect with other young people with shared interests and supporting each other.

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- 8** Feelings of not belonging are related to a lack of connection, which could develop over time and could involve differences in values or worldview.

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- 9** Young people discuss feelings of not belonging in educational institutions, workplaces and social institutions. Some young people also feel they do not belong in certain public spaces, and some face overt discrimination.

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- 10** Young people are ambivalent about the role of social media in fostering feelings of belonging and acknowledge that social media connections are not an adequate substitute for in-person relationships.

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# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Young people are seeking to build positive and inclusive online relationships to connect with people, find support and combat the negative and often anonymous voices.

## IMPORTANCE OF RELATIONSHIPS

Eighty-three per cent of young Australians aged 15–19 considered their relationships with friends to be extremely or very important, with 79% placing the same importance on their relationships with family.<sup>1</sup> The value placed on these relationships was also reflected in who young people aged 15–19 went to for help with important issues: 80% went to friends, 71% went to parents or guardians, 57% went to relatives or family friends, 50% went to their siblings and 48% went to their partner or significant other.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for some, these relationships were also a challenge. Interpersonal relationship challenges were the third most common personal challenge faced by 20% of young people, behind school-related challenges (42%) and mental health challenges (28%).<sup>2</sup>

## LIVING ARRANGEMENTS AND FORMAL RELATIONSHIPS

Remaining in the family home has become more common among young Australians aged 18–29, increasing from 47% of men and 37% of women in 2001 to 55% of men and 48% of women in 2020.<sup>3</sup> In 2022, 97% of young people aged 15–19 were living with their parent or guardian.<sup>2</sup> This was influenced by lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic, with young adults returning home for familial support.<sup>4</sup>

According to the 2021 Census, just 2% of young people aged 18–24 were in a registered marriage, while 10% were in a de facto marriage.<sup>5</sup>

## LONELINESS

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictive periods was a significant disruptor for young people's relationships and their feelings of loneliness. The number of young people aged 20–21 experiencing loneliness rapidly increased in early 2020 (39% of females and 23% of males) and had improved slightly by the end of 2020 (30% of females and 17% of males).<sup>4</sup> However,

concerns about young people's loneliness remained widespread in 2022, with Mission Australia indicating that 24% of young people aged 15–19 reported feeling lonely most or all of the time.<sup>2</sup> Gender-diverse young people are much more likely to report feeling lonely most or all of the time (44%) compared with males (16%) and females (26%).<sup>2</sup> The prevalence of loneliness among young people in Australia is important to address, particularly in light of the global interconnectedness of contemporary society and pervasiveness of social media.<sup>6</sup>

## INTERCONNECTION AND THE ONLINE WORLD

Social media and associated avenues of connection online are central to the lives of many young Australians.<sup>7</sup> Although there are many benefits to the level of connectivity and the access to unprecedented levels of information, there are inherent risks associated with the online space. For example, 31% of young people aged 18–24 were sent or came across unwanted sexual content, 15% were sent or came across violent content, 10% were ridiculed or made fun of online and 9% were called offensive names online. There is evidence that these forms of online harm may be more prevalent among those from marginalised communities, including LGBTIQ+ people, 34% of whom came across unwanted sexual content, and those with a disability, 10% of whom were called offensive names.<sup>8</sup> Despite these risks, there is evidence that young people on the whole are seeking to build positive and inclusive online relationships to connect with people, find support and combat the negative and often anonymous voices.<sup>7</sup>

# 2023 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

## IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS

Fifty-six per cent of young Australians were single, 35% were in a relationship and 7% were casually dating. The remaining 2% were divorced or had another relationship status. When thinking about the future, 56% of young people thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would have a supportive social network, 54% thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would live in a long-term relationship with someone and 47% thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would have children. These perceptions were broadly shared across demographic groups.

## BELONGING

In the last 12 months, 56% of young Australians often or very often felt like they belonged when they spent time with family and 52% when they spent time with friends. (See Figure 7.1.) Forty-seven per cent of young people agreed that resolving problems with others helped them feel like they belonged, and 39% said facing challenges with others helped provide a sense of belonging. Half of all young Australians (50%) reported often or very often feeling like they belonged when they were at work. Forty per cent of men reported often or very often feeling like they belonged from their involvement in organised sports compared with 24% of women and only 9% of gender-diverse young people.

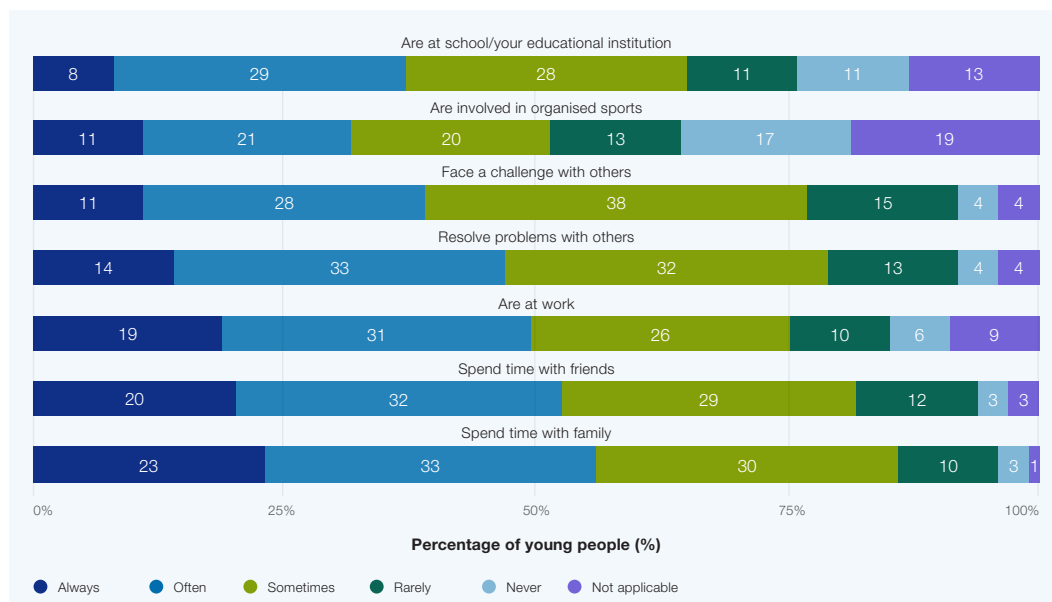
Figure 7.1: Young people's sense of belonging in different scenarios (N = 571)

Of those young Australians who were currently studying, 69% agreed or strongly agreed that they felt like they belonged at their educational organisation. This perception was broadly shared across demographic groups.

Seventy per cent of young Australians declared that it was quite or very important for them to feel like they belonged to their family, 64% felt this way about belonging to their friendship group and 56% felt this way about their work. Only 24% of young Australians reported it was quite or very important for them to feel like they belonged to a religious community, and only 27% felt the same way about belonging to their neighbourhood. (See Figure 7.2.) These feelings were broadly shared across demographic groups, although a sense of belonging to family, friendship group and work was less important for young First Nations peoples compared with other Australians.

Unlike the survey results, it was not common for interviewees to discuss feeling a sense of belonging with family. Rather, they most commonly felt a sense of belonging among friends, work colleagues and members of their school communities. Groups where young people could come together over shared interests were also an important source of belonging, such as sports clubs, arts spaces and gyms, as well as groups for First Nations and LGBTIQ+ young people. Young people often described how feelings of belonging were also associated with feelings of happiness, joy, safety and self-improvement:

Interviewees most commonly felt a sense of belonging among friends, work colleagues and members of their school communities.



Being able to make a positive difference in others' lives was important for young people's belonging.

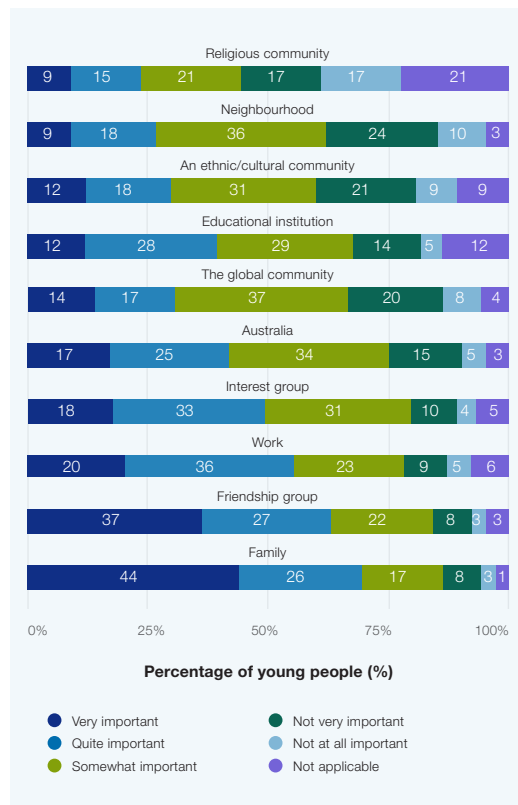


Figure 7.2: Importance of belonging to different groups (N = 571)

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I think it's just because [at the gym,] you're in a public space and nobody can hurt you. You're okay. And you can just enjoy some laughs with some friends and hit some PRs [personal records] and ... completely forget about the whole real world outside those doors. And everyone belongs in this community and just enjoy[s] ... improving on themselves.

WOMAN, 23, SA

Key to these feelings of belonging was connecting with other young people with shared interests, lived experiences and pathways in life. Even if they were not necessarily positive shared experiences, these connections instilled feelings of support:

“

One night, my friend said, 'Let's go to some music.' ... We were seeing these two bands and ... one band ... [was fronted by someone who was] non-binary ... and the other one was a really out there, open lesbian performer ... I was sitting in that room and everyone around me ... looked like me as well ... That was just a really good experience for me.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

“

It was when I joined the workforce and I got to interact with a variety of different people, and I got to hear their story, and I realised everyone doesn't feel like they belong, and I guess that kind of made me feel like I belonged.

WOMAN, 22, ACT

Several young people described feelings of support as reciprocal – that they could be relied upon for support and, in turn, rely upon others. Similarly, being able to make a positive difference in others' lives was important for young people's belonging:

“

I think the way I would look at it is in a sense of reliability ... These people, they're going to be there.

MAN, 20, NSW

“

I could say when I'm volunteering. I volunteer sometimes at events, and I just get such a good feeling. It just makes you feel like you belong there, like you're doing a good thing. You're helping out a charity, [and] just, like, makes you feel like you belong there, helping out.

WOMAN, 21, QLD

Across each of these descriptions, young people's feelings of belonging were supported by 'things being simple'. Notably, for a small number of interviewees, these feelings of simplicity and belonging were most common when at home alone:

“

I enjoy staying home. I enjoy watching Netflix, I enjoy watching the Prime Minister question time on YouTube ... I just like [that]. Do I want to go out? No. But that's just me. I like belonging at home, but that's that.

MAN, 24, NSW

## NON-BELONGING AND EXCLUSION

When discussing instances where they did not feel like they belonged, many young people spoke about their educational institutions, workplaces and social situations that they struggled to navigate. A few young people also spoke about feeling a lack of belonging in the street or in public spaces such as shops, sports grounds and churches. The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact young people's feelings of not belonging by making it difficult to form connections with others:

“

I've been at [uni] for two years now and I haven't really felt like I belonged there. I think it – COVID – didn't help. Because it was online and now coming back in [to campus] it's hard to make new friends to be honest, when you're only there for an hour for a class, then you go home and that kind of thing.

MAN, 20, VIC

The young people we interviewed often characterised feelings of not belonging as being disconnected, where other people did not show interest in their lives, were seen as untrustworthy or did not share similar interests:

“

They were a different crowd ... none of the people really asked ... me, 'How you doing?' No one was interested in other aspects of your life.

WOMAN, 24, WA

“

I think when you develop close relationships you always risk the possibility of distrust or dishonesty ... I've had a few experiences, personally, where I felt like that has been betrayed. That's often some of the hardest times because you put yourself around the people that you want to be around and if you feel like that trust is being misused it can be a very big stab in the back.

MAN, 20, NSW

Additionally, feelings of non-belonging were not necessarily immediate. Rather, young people indicated that they could develop over time, either as connections lost their value or were not actively fostered:

“

I was very big into the footy club and it's sort of like, if you're not playing, then you're not really cared about, and I've just come back from ... [time away and thought everyone would be] like, 'Yes, it's great to have you here' ... but then I sort of got there and like, no one really seemed to care. I was walking out from that, and I was like, 'Oh, do I even really belong here?'

MAN, 23, SA

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to impact young people's feelings of not belonging by making it difficult to form connections with others.

“

My hometown, I feel like I've grown out of it a lot. The people there, I don't have anything to offer to them. They don't really have anything to offer to me. There's not really anything beneficial about being there for anyone involved.

WOMAN, 22, SA

A few young people also discussed how their feelings of belonging were hindered when they compared themselves to others, particularly when they engaged with others who held vastly different worldviews. Some also expressed how self-criticism or feeling like others were judging them hindered their sense of belonging:

“

It's very easy ... to be very self-criticising ... I feel for a lot of people nowadays, [that is] a source for a lot of discomfort for a lot of people. Especially because we see so much of everyone's lives. We tend to compare what's going on with other people to what's going on with ourselves and that can create a very negative pit of whatever it is energies, feelings, which can be very destructive.

MAN, 20, NSW

“

I mean, when I go in public, I get very anxious. I feel like everyone's staring at me, you know? So, going out to, like, [the] shops and stuff like that I don't feel like I belong there, I guess, in a sense.

WOMAN, 19, QLD

Finally, a small number of young people shared how instances of overt discrimination or harassment had a negative impact on their sense of belonging:

“

In high school. It was horrific. God, did I not belong there. Honestly, I think primary school might have been worse because me and my brother ... nearly got expelled from our primary school because the very racist principal [didn't support Aboriginal culture] ... I immediately felt very unwelcome in that environment. Plus, when you're [a] neurodivergent kid, you realise every day of your life, 'Ah, I am not like these people and also they do not like me.'

WOMAN, 22, TAS

“

It was very sexist. It was also a very toxic environment towards all staff members. That's all I can really say ... [There was] erratic behaviour ... [I was also] scared of the sexual harassment ... [that occurred] before I'd entered the workplace, but then I have had the boss get touchy with me and thankfully, that's the extent it got to.

WOMAN, 22, ACT

## RELATING WITH OTHERS ONLINE

The young people we interviewed had mixed feelings about the role of social media for fostering belonging. Social media was acknowledged as a powerful tool for connecting with others but one that brought with it many potential harms:



**It has absolutely helped in allowing people to connect to each other. It's just that the harm that [it] has inflicted greatly outweighs that.**

MAN, 24, NSW

These mixed perceptions of social media were also evident in our survey. (See Figure 7.3.) Half of young Australians pictured the other person in their mind when they read their emails or messages online, 43% felt that online they could communicate on the same level with others and another 43% thought it was easier to connect with others online than talking in person. However, 20% of young Australians thought that writing insulting things online was not bullying, and 21% thought that there were no rules online so they could do whatever they wanted. Young people with multiple health conditions (73%), mental health conditions (67%) and other conditions (other than long-term illness and physical disability) (67%) were more likely to feel that writing insulting things online was bullying compared with young people without disabilities (57%).

Interviewees mainly discussed a positive use of social media as being to maintain already existing connections and relationships, such as with friends or family, rather than to develop new ones:

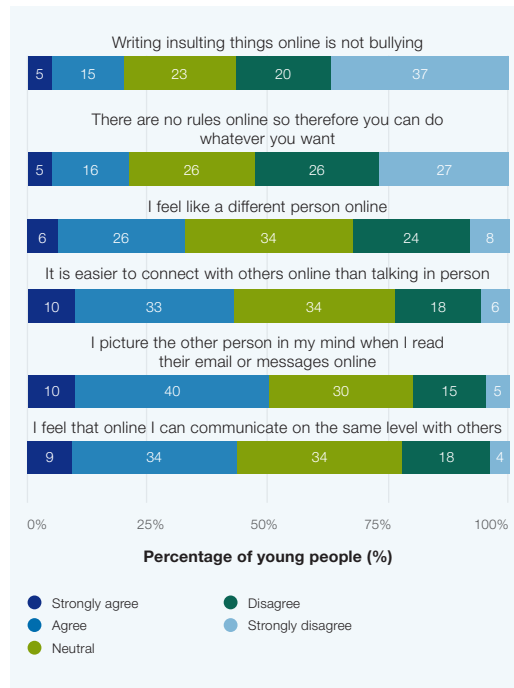


Figure 7.3: Perceptions of social media (N = 571)



**I live in a different town so I'm not really around family, but that's where social media is good because you can keep in contact and stuff and phone calls and stuff.**

WOMAN, 24, WA

Although interviewees acknowledged the role of social media in maintaining connections, they emphasised that online connections alone were not adequate for forming a sense of belonging and were not a perfect substitute for other relationships:

Social media was acknowledged as a powerful tool for connecting with others but one that brought with it many potential harms.

“

I find people, like, think that online friends is everything. That's all you need. You need physical interaction with actual friends and doing things with them, I feel, occasionally, or more often than with your online friends because you lose touch with what it's like to be around another human being essentially.

MAN, 23, TAS

Others were more hesitant about using social media to develop a sense of belonging. These concerns were related to the ambiguous nature of online relationships, with interviewees expressing doubts about how authentic and trustworthy such relationships were. This made it difficult to form genuine connections and develop a sense of belonging:

“

I mean, like, through online social media you only see like a very small fraction of who they are. It's like, if the other person chooses to be authentic with you, then yes, you know more about them. But, if they don't choose to show anything then ... you're not really connecting even if you talk.

WOMAN, 19, VIC

Interestingly, some of the young people interviewed raised concerns that social media forced certain ideas about and conditions for belonging onto them, including where young people had to disregard their data security or act in certain ways:

“

So you've got this weird environment where to interact with it, you just kind of have to throw your privacy and security out the window to actually use it. You just know like, 'Okay, they have my data.' This just happened. I don't have any choice in that. I've just grown up into it.

WOMAN, 22, TAS

“

You know, brainwashing body ideas, what you should be doing, what you should be eating, how you should be living your life ... It's very, 'this is how it should be run, and this is what you're going to do, because everybody else is doing it' and you want to fit in, and that's the part that I absolutely hate and despise with social media.

MAN, 23, TAS

## GENDER RELATIONS

For more than half of young Australians, the distribution of household tasks, such as washing the dishes (55%), organising the household money (53%), paying bills (52%), teaching children discipline (52%) and household shopping (52%), was not determined by gender. (See Figure 7.4.) However, 53% thought who did household repairs was determined by gender. Young First Nations peoples were more likely to believe that the distribution of these tasks was determined by gender, but otherwise these perceptions were shared across demographic groups.

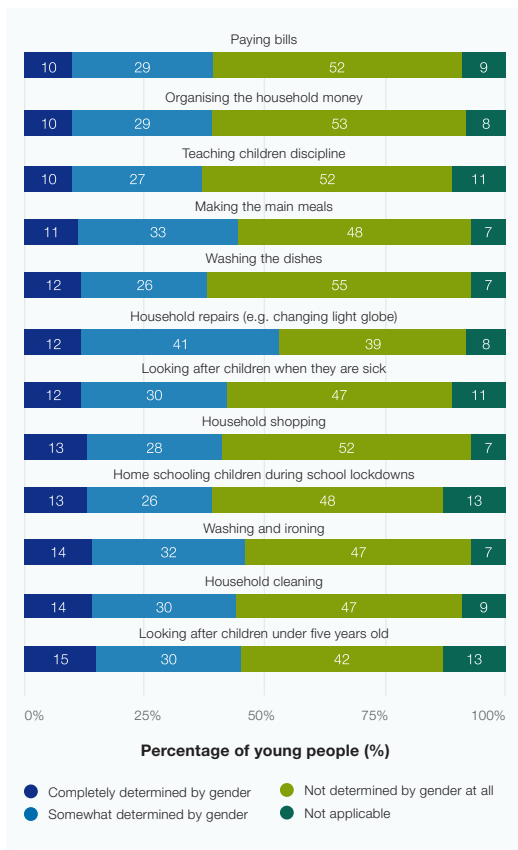


Figure 7.4: Perceptions of gendered tasks (N = 571)

The majority of young Australians thought that other aspects of their lives were somewhat or completely determined by gender, particularly aspects of their working lives such as the type of career pathway young people choose (62%), the opportunities to progress and advance career pathways (58%) and the ways junior workers are treated by senior staff in the workplace (57%). These perceptions were shared across demographic groups.

Comparing gender relationships in their and their parents' generation, the majority of young people thought that gender relationships had become more or much more equal at work or in employment (58%), in peer relationships or friendships (57%), education contexts (57%), intimate or romantic relationships (55%), the household (54%), mental and physical care (53%) and in finance (52%). (See Figure 7.5.) This trend was not as strong for politics, where only 48% of young people believed that gender relationships had become more or much more equal. Although these perceptions were generally shared across demographic groups, young First Nations peoples were more likely to perceive that gender relationships had not changed.

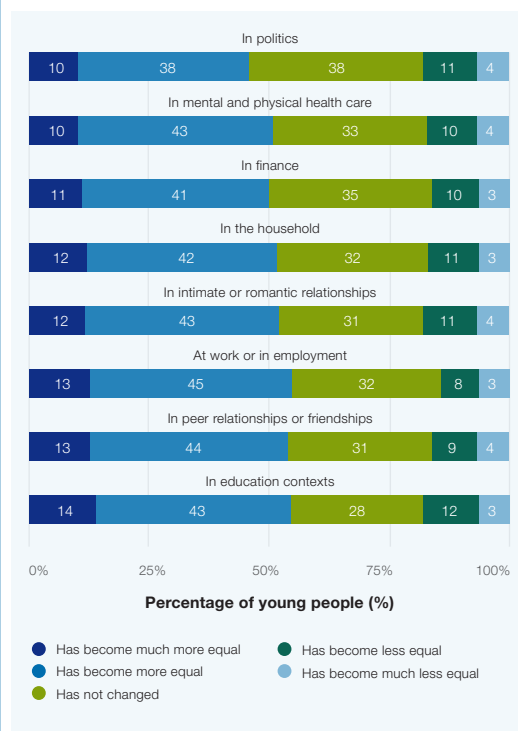


Figure 7.5: Perceived generational changes in gender relations (N = 571)



# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Many young people rely on friends and family for support. While this is positive, the converse is that young people who do not have access to such support networks may face disproportionate challenges in reaching out for assistance. Therefore, greater attention is needed to building social support networks, particularly at the local level, bolstered by services such as Kids Helpline, Beyond Blue and headspace, to ensure that all young people can access the support they need.
- Young people feel like they belong in personal settings, such as with family or friends. However, young people feel less comfortable in more formal social settings, such as school, work or in public. An unacceptable number of young people continue to face discrimination and harassment, particularly women and those from disadvantaged and minoritised communities. Policy initiatives and collective social action must be taken to ensure that young Australians feel safe and welcome in all areas of social life.
- Young people express a complex relationship with social media, which can facilitate connections but is not a substitute for developing relationships. More research is needed to better understand how young people mediate the spaces of online and offline relationships and to better understand how to support their socio-emotional development as they navigate these.
- Young Australians believe progress has been made towards more equal gender relations compared with previous generations, especially in the household, but see work, politics and careers as areas that remain more unequal. Schools can play a key role in ensuring that young people can access information about future careers and that young students are supported in their career pathways regardless of gender. Government and workplaces must adopt higher standards of conduct, transparency and accountability to foster more equitable and just institutions.

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# 08

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY

### KEY FINDINGS

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- 1** 70% of young Australians believe affordable housing is an issue that needs immediate action, and 51% believe that employment opportunities for young people is an issue that needs immediate action.
- 2** 73% of young Australians volunteered in organised activities at least once in the past 12 months; 86% of young Australians feel there is something preventing them from being involved in organised activities on issues that are important to them.
- 3** 31% of young Australians believe it is likely or extremely likely that climate change will be combated in the future.
- 4** 47% of young Australians said they have used their social media profiles in an attempt to create social change.
- 5** 36% of young people think there is not enough government support for housing, 27% think there is not enough government support in finance and 23% think there is not enough government support for mental health.
- 6** Young people generally see themselves as civically and politically involved, although they favour more personal forms of participation rather than traditional forms. Barriers to becoming more politically involved include a lack of time or opportunity.
- 7** Young people feel that they can effect change through actions such as protesting and awareness raising. Others express uncertainty about being able to achieve change, especially in the short term.
- 8** Young people sometimes convey a general animosity towards older generations, although many interviewees feel that greater connection between generations, as well as between young people, is needed for change to be enacted.
- 9** Young people indicate ambivalence towards the role of digital media in civic participation, discussing how it has some positive aspects but is also limited in its effects.
- 10** Young people generally feel they are not heard or represented in civic and political discussions, although some interviewees see signs of improvement. They often describe being young as a key reason for this lack of representation and that political consultation with young people is tokenistic or politically motivated for some people.

# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

In addition to the environment being an important national issue for young people, it is also a source of personal stress.

## TOP NATIONAL ISSUES

As society recovers from the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, there is evidence of young people's attention turning to other pressing issues. In 2021, 45.7% of young people aged 15–19 considered COVID-19 to be the top issue Australia needed to address.<sup>1</sup> However, in 2022, 51% of young people identified the environment as the most important issue, an increase of 13% from the previous year.<sup>2</sup> The next most important concerns for young people were addressing equity and discrimination (36%) and mental health (34%), with COVID-19 moving to the fourth position on this list (24%). Young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples identified the environment (34%), mental health (30%) and equity and discrimination (28%) as the top three issues in Australia.

## ENVIRONMENTAL EFFORTS

In addition to the environment being an important national issue for young people, it is also a source of personal stress, with 26% of young people reporting that they were very or extremely concerned about climate change.<sup>2</sup> This concern is echoed in the Our World, Our Say survey conducted in 2020, which reported that 78% of young people aged 10–24 were concerned about climate change, with 67% believing Australia was not doing enough to reduce carbon emissions.<sup>3</sup> Despite the strong sentiment young people had towards environmental issues, only 13% reported feeling like they were listened to by government leaders.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, research indicates that there are correlations between climate change concern, mental health and negative outlooks about the future.<sup>4</sup> This highlights not only the need to include young people in broader discussions about climate change, but also the need to acknowledge and respond to young people's environmental concerns in the mental health support they receive.<sup>4</sup>

## VOLUNTEERING

According to Volunteering Australia, there was a substantial decrease in volunteering during the COVID-19 pandemic. Among young people aged 18–24, the proportion of those who had volunteered in the previous 12 months decreased from 37% in late 2019 to 26% in April 2021.<sup>5,6</sup> This decline has been recognised by the national parliament with plans to boost young people's engagement with volunteering opportunities.<sup>7</sup>

## POLITICS, NATIONAL PRIDE AND SOCIAL COHESION

In 2022, only 10% of young Australians aged 15–19 identified politics as the most important national issue.<sup>2</sup> Only 8% of young people reported involvement in political groups or activities, and this was minimal compared with participation in other organisations or community groups.<sup>2</sup> Among young people aged 18–24, the proportion of having a great sense of national belonging has been in decline, falling from 60% in 2009 to 34% in 2022.<sup>8</sup> This corresponds to a propensity for young people to express much lower levels of sense of belonging in Australia compared with older Australians. Young people aged 18–24 report social cohesion scores (a measure that takes into account the domains of belonging, social inclusion, sense of worth, civic participation and acceptance of difference) below the national average.<sup>8</sup>

# 2023 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

## FORMS OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION

While many interviewees considered themselves to be politically involved, they understood this involvement to be different from what they perceived as 'traditional' forms of civic participation. Young people were less interested in government or formal politics, favouring political engagement in more personal terms and engaging with broader social issues:

“

The way I think of it is in more of a modern way. Politics less in the sense of governments and world leaders and everything and more about the politics of how the world's population is running.

MAN, 20, NSW

Additionally, some interviewees, while generally interested in social and political issues, remarked that they did not follow governmental politics:

“

Look, I am interested. But do I keep up to date and follow it? Absolutely not. I completely admit, I don't know anything ... I don't even know who's actually running this place right now. Who's our prime minister? No idea. Last time, he was Scott Morrison and God, I wanted him out ... I have not kept up to date. I don't watch TV. I don't follow the news. The news is all just a whole heap of rubbish.

WOMAN, 23, SA

Others expressed wanting to be more engaged but felt unable to do so because of a lack of opportunities, lack of understanding, clashes with other life commitments or because they felt disregarded due to being young:

“

I would like to be quite a bit more politically involved. I spend way too much time working and I don't have the effort to truly put in as much as I would like ... Yes I consider myself reasonably politically involved. I'd like to be more so but there's not much opportunity to [do so] where I am.

MAN, 23, NSW

“

And I think being a young person as well, kind of makes me not want to participate in some of those conversations sometimes because, yeah ... And they say to me, 'Oh, you'll change your mind. You know, when you get older, you'll change your mind.' It's always that sort of thing. Like, just because of your age, you're discredited in a way.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

Young people were less interested in government or formal politics, favouring political engagement in more personal terms and engaging with broader social issues.

Young Australians identified affordable housing options for young people as an issue that needed immediate action.

Some interviewees also saw civic participation as something that would happen later in life, once their personal situations had become more stable:



I would, but I would need to wait until I'm a little bit more stable. Like financially and in terms of accommodation as well. But I would definitely get more involved once those goals of mine have been completed.

WOMAN, 22, ACT

### ACHIEVING CHANGE

Seventy per cent of young Australians identified affordable housing options for young people as an issue that needed immediate action. Employment opportunities for young people was the second most urgent issue, nominated by 51% of young people. Other issues that were considered a priority were climate change (42%), race relations and racial inequality (28%), gender inequality at work and in public places (24%), LGBTQIA+ discrimination (21%) and gender inequality at home (17%). (See Figure 8.1.) Young First Nations peoples were less likely to consider climate change and affordable housing options for young people as urgent issues (nominated by 27% and 52%, respectively) than other young Australians (44% and 72%, respectively). Issues about gender inequality at home, gender inequality at work and LGBTQIA+ discrimination were more urgent issues for young women (22%, 32% and 25%, respectively) and gender-diverse young people (45%, 45% and 61%, respectively) than young men (11%, 15% and 16%, respectively).

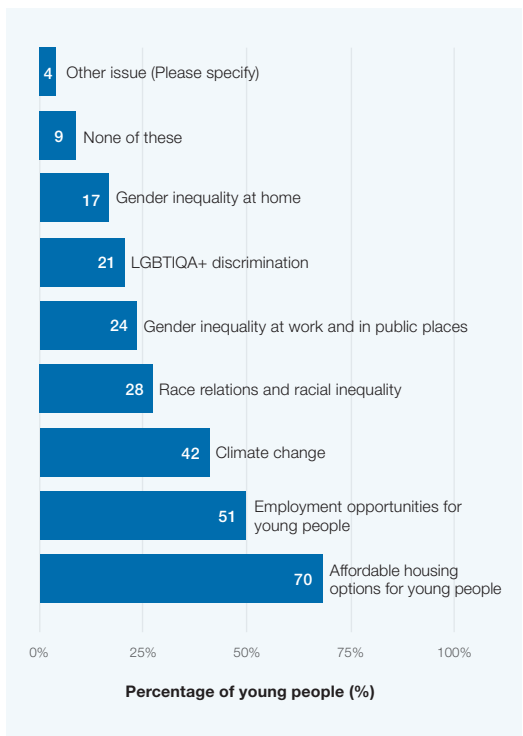


Figure 8.1: Problems that need immediate action (N = 571)

Although climate change was seen as a pressing issue, less than one-third (31%) of young Australians believed it was likely or extremely likely that climate change would be combated in the future. This perception was generally shared at a similar rate among most demographic groups except for young people with physical disabilities, 71% of whom believed it was likely or extremely likely that climate change would be combated in the future.

Interviewees pointed to a number of key ways that young people could affect change, including formalised political action such as protesting. Education and raising awareness about social and political issues was also seen as a key way that change could be enacted, whether this be via formal education settings or informally, such as through social media:



Yes, protests. That's one thing, protesting, I think protesting and, protesting is one thing, and political activism is one thing. That's one way people can make change.

MAN, 24, NSW



I feel like change for like, like, poverty and like things like domestic violence and such, that's kind of just like, if people are educated on it, and they've been taught like, what's right and wrong and how to help people and they're not afraid to, like, speak up and come to somebody's defence or come and help somebody.

MAN, 18, VIC

Volunteering was seen as another way to affect change. According to our survey, 73% of young Australians volunteered in organised activities at least once in the last year. Ninety-five per cent of young First Nations peoples volunteered compared with 70% of other young people. Among all young people, the most common volunteering activities were arts and cultural services (52%), environmental-related activities (51%) and welfare-related care and services (50%). (See Figure 8.2.) The least common activities were volunteering for heritage/conservation groups (42%), political parties or organisations (42%) and student government (44%).

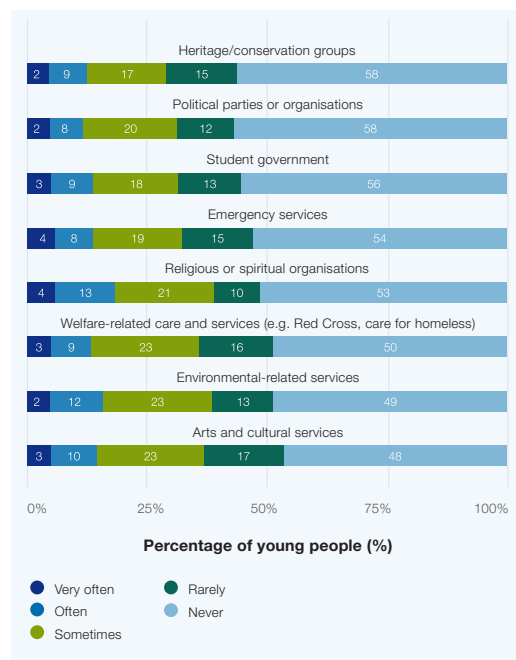


Figure 8.2: Volunteering in organised activities (N = 571)

Participation in organised activities was not without barriers. In our survey, 86% of young Australians felt there was something preventing them from being involved in organised activities on issues that were important to them. The most commonly cited reasons were how expensive (33%) and how time consuming (33%) the activities were. Just over one-quarter (28%) of young people reported that a lack of interest prevented them from being involved in volunteering. Sixteen per cent of young people said they did not participate in organised activities because they did not think they could make a difference by being involved.

Education and raising awareness about social and political issues was seen as a key way that change could be enacted.

This may reflect the diverse range of views that young people held about the possibility of enacting change at an individual or social level. For example, some interviewees were positive, believing that individual young people could take responsibility and enact effective change:

“

I think for me, young people need to realise that that is an avenue with which they can actually create change. You don't have to just sit on the sidelines, you can do something about it, you do have an agency. You can get involved with charity and even if you only do a little bit it does matter. Individual bricks make up a house right? That's my perspective.

MAN, 21, ACT

Others were more uncertain and expressed a general distrust of political engagement along with a sense of helplessness:

“

I don't think we [young people] can ... The people in power can change it but they don't and that's the problem ... They want to stay in power. They just ... don't do anything radical because they don't want to piss off [their supporters].

MAN, 22, NSW

“

I feel powerless [and that] is where the frustration comes from, where I'm just one person ... I can't force taxation of the rich or higher taxing margins for those earning way more than they realistically need. And it just frustrates me.

MAN, 23, TAS

Interviewees were generally positive that change would eventually happen; however, while they were positive about long-term change, they were less positive about the short term:

“

With the way the population is ageing, there's a lot of old people

who are really apathetic so it's going to take a long time for young people to actually be able to effect the change they want.

MAN, 23, NSW

“

Those old people, they've only got like, another maybe 10 to 20 years left, we're gonna be here for a lot longer.

WOMAN, 20, WLD

Interviewees also expressed antagonism against older generations, who were sometimes portrayed as a barrier to young people being able to enact change:

“

I feel like it's the older people that are crying about what the younger generation is like, and how we're going to ruin everything, but they're the ones that, the old people are the ones that keep changing everything and making everything ... worse ... So I think we don't really have a lot of choices at the moment, but we are taking a lot of the hits.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

However, many interviewees highlighted the need for younger and older generations to work together for change to be possible. Young people working together was also seen as important for achieving collective change:

“

There needs to be less separation in generations. There needs to be less grouping of young people versus older generations. And I don't think that that's something that can really happen until people in my age group or, you know, the ones above me start getting into higher positions of authority, like into politics and things like that until that change, can really happen.

WOMAN, 22, SA

## ROLE OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Forty-seven per cent of young Australians said they had used their social media profiles to participate in social change. (See Figure 8.3.) Twenty-three per cent used their profiles to encourage others to take action on issues that were important to them, 18% participated in an online group related to an issue or cause and 16% updated or amended their profile pictures to indicate support for a particular cause. These actions were more common among young First Nations peoples and young people with disabilities. For example, young First Nations peoples (31%) and young people with disabilities such as physical disabilities (26%) were less likely to declare that they had not done any of these actions in an attempt to create social change compared with other Australians (55%) and those without disabilities (60%).

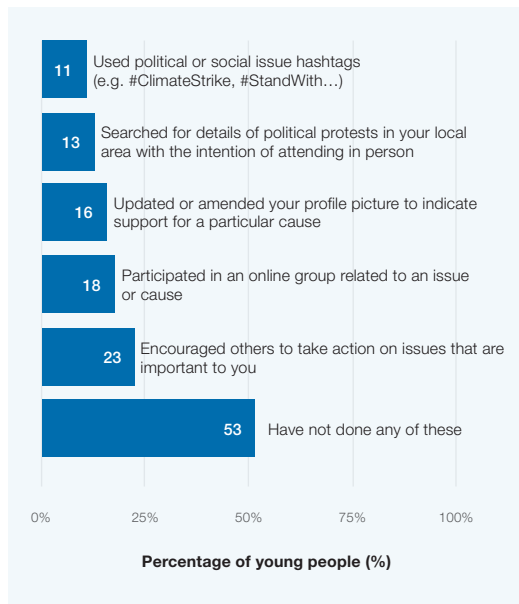


Figure 8.3: Actions on social media for change (N = 571)

At the same time, young people were ambivalent about social media: 56% thought that people became side-tracked from important issues because of social media, and 52% believed that people who thought they were making a difference using social media were not always doing so. (See Figure 8.4.) Despite this, 55% of young people thought that social media helped underrepresented groups amplify their voice, and 53% thought that social media meant that important issues received attention they might not get otherwise.

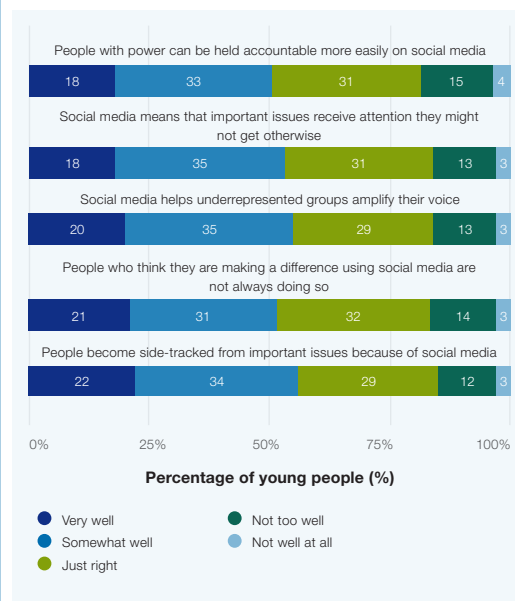


Figure 8.4: Perceptions of social media for change (N = 571)

Young people expressed a similar ambivalence in interviews. Although many saw social media as having a positive influence, they recognised that it had faults and could be limited in its effectiveness:

“

I think on a scale of sort of one to five, it's still a four: quite important because as I said, people are still talking, people are able to organise things and there are still ways to sort of facilitate these good talking points and have open conversation with even just your peers over these social media [platforms].

MAN, 24, VIC



Negative aspects of digital media revolved around the ease with which misinformation could spread and the damage it could do.

One strong positive aspect of digital media was the ability to more easily connect with peers and other like-minded individuals, which could assist in creating networks of participation and for organising collective political action, such as protesting. Other positive aspects identified by interviewees included spreading information and educating themselves about social and political issues:

“

I guess really like uniting groups of people and like, the ease of being able to share information, and I guess how easy it is to come across some important information or stuff about social issues, and then it's like the click of a button to share it to your group of people, and then has quite a big flow-on effect.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

“

Social media is good in the fact that besides staying connected, you can actually learn about politics and social policy and economic policy, like TikTok, I see explains legislation, explains bills, it explains things that are happening in real events that I don't always follow. So it's good to keep up to date.

MAN, 24, NSW

Digital media was also seen in some cases to provide a safer space for civic participation, especially for interviewees who came from marginalised backgrounds:

“

I know, for the LGBT community, promoting LGBT safe programs was easy to do through online platforms, and it was a lot safer.

WOMAN, 22, ACT

Negative aspects of digital media revolved around the ease with which misinformation could spread and the damage it could do. Some interviewees were also uncertain about the effects that online action could have on real-world issues:

“

Instead of misinformation being peddled at street corners by people who look crazy, it appears on Facebook promoted to you.

MAN, 23, NSW

“

When a big thing starts on social media, everyone's sharing that kind of thing ... I suppose it makes people more aware, but it might also make people think they're making more of a change than they are [by just] changing their profile picture. Is that really helping at all? Or is it just making people feel like they're doing more so then they [don't] actually do more?

WOMAN, 21, QLD

Based on this, some interviewees also acknowledged that while digital media could be useful in promoting civic participation, it needed to be used alongside other forms of action:

“

Obviously, online activism is great. It's great to inform people, but there's certain limits, because like, if you're only doing it in [an] online space, is it making change in the real world? So you've obviously got to do that in conjunction with other forms of activism.

WOMAN, 18, WA

## YOUTH REPRESENTATION IN PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS

Thirty-six per cent of young people thought that there was not enough government support for housing, 27% thought there was not enough government support with finances and 23% thought that there was not enough government support for mental health. (See Figure 8.5.) Other areas commonly seen as not receiving enough support were education (13%), emergency services (13%) and community (14%). Gender-diverse young people were more likely to think there was not enough government support for mental health (61%) than young women (27%) and young men (17%), as were young people with mental health conditions (35%) compared with young Australians without a disability (18%).

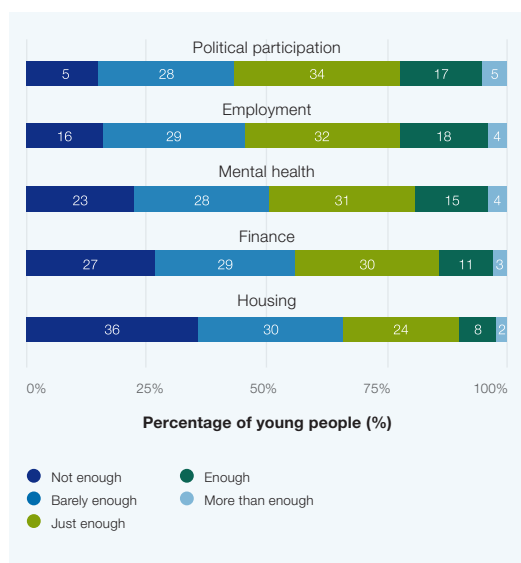


Figure 8.5: Perceptions of government support for young people in different areas (N = 571)

Overall, interviewees did not believe that young people were well represented in Australian civic life and did not believe that young people and their voices were adequately listened to:

“

We just get drowned out, even though we know there are legitimate issues, and we have ideas on how to try and solve that. But the people in power just kind of, you know, ignore us. And we can't do much about it like that.

MAN, 23, TAS

“

Our opinion isn't respected within the community and we're just extremely underheard. I would not say that there's been best efforts put towards listening and trying to figure out what our opinion is and what we're actually trying to say to them. I feel like it is extremely neglected and ignored.

WOMAN, 23, SA

This frustrated some interviewees who believed that young people were not listened to precisely because they were young. However, some interviewees qualified this lack of consultation, suggesting that some young people lacked the interest, awareness or experience to participate in certain issues:

“

I feel like a lot of people don't take young people as serious[ly]. Yeah, I just, I just think young people aren't listened to as much because they're classed as young. So like, we're young, we don't know what we're doing yet. Or we don't have as much knowledge as the older people.

WOMAN, 19, QLD

Interviewees did not believe that young people were well represented in Australian civic life and did not believe that young people and their voices were adequately listened to.

“

I think it also does go a little bit both ways as well that young people don't know everything. And I know that's, that might be a bit controversial to say, but it is true. Because like, there's many issues that I think some people my age don't see two sides of.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

Interviewees also believed that young people were occasionally listened to and represented but that these efforts were tokenistic and aimed at political gain rather than genuine engagement:

“

I believe that there's politicians, in my opinion, [who] will often say we care about young people but I think it's sometimes used as a political football like in the context of populism

MAN, 21, ACT

“

I know, they talk about how, 'Oh, young people are the new generation, and they have all these opportunities and choices', but [we] really don't ... From stuff I have seen, we kind of get blocked out a lot and like treated as if we don't know anything but then if we don't know anything, then we get treated as if we should know everything.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

Some interviewees were more positive and thought that representation for young people was improving. This was connected to the increasing prevalence of digital media as a form of civic participation, more young people entering into positions of power and general shifts in social attitude to align with the beliefs of young people. Others were confident that individual young people could be heard, even if they were less positive about the collective representation of young people:

“

I think there is [an] opportunity for young people to be heard, and I think they're increasingly being heard. I think, as my generation grows slightly older and older, we're sort of, you know, being heard more and more ... I think generally people can be heard and I think there are places people of my age can be heard and I think people are listening, finally.

MAN, 24, VIC

“

Yes, I do feel my voice is being heard, I feel like if you want your voice to be heard, you can definitely make it heard.

WOMAN, 18, QLD

One interviewee expressed that young people were being better heard and represented, but this was in part due to the current cohort of young people themselves becoming older. In the future, a new group of young people will feel that they are not represented, possibly positioning being unheard as a part of being young:

“

Yes, [representation is] sort of buggy till ... you're in your 30s. I mean, by the time young people my age are in their 30s, I'll be in my 30s. I won't be a young person anymore. Then the young people who are around then will also think that they're not being represented.

MAN, 22, NSW

# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Young Australians do not feel that their voices are heard in public discussion and political debates and that their inclusion is often tokenistic. More effort is needed to genuinely include young people in discussions and decisions that affect them and are important to them, and to give young people a platform to express their views. Policymakers should actively seek to include a broad range of perspectives that recognises the diversity of young people's lives and leverages existing community-level forums where young people seek to have their voices heard.
- Young Australians take an individual and personal approach to politics and may not engage in traditional forms of civic participation. Research is needed to better understand the way that young people participate in society and how this may change over time, with policy needing to reflect and support these forms of engagement.
- Many young Australians seek to be more actively engaged in civic and political life but feel discouraged from doing so. More research is needed to identify and address the barriers that young people may face, particularly in relation to volunteering and being involved in their local communities. Policy initiatives are also needed to alleviate the potential barriers to the participation of young people from a diverse range of backgrounds, including gender, age, culture, sexual orientation and socioeconomic status.
- Accessible, affordable and appropriate housing continues to be a key area of concern for young people, particularly for the majority of young people who rent their properties. Policy solutions to address increasing rent prices, unsafe and unsustainable housing conditions, and insecure rights for tenants is a priority for policy development. Addressing this will also aid young people to feel safe and secure and more able to fully participate in civic and political life.

- Young people are aware of the opportunities and threats afforded by the use of social media for social change and are ambivalent about its ability to effect change. Further, many young people express a need and desire to connect their engagement with social media to more tangible forms of political action. A greater understanding of how young people engage with social media for political change, how this engagement is influenced by the governance of social media platforms, and the connections between social media and civic participation more broadly is needed.

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