



OUR LIVES

The First Ten Years

2006 – 2016



**Social Futures & Life Pathways
of Young People in Queensland**

A Longitudinal Project



MONASH
University

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Project Overview

The Social Futures and Life Pathways of Young People in Queensland ('Our Lives') Project is a longitudinal cohort study of young Queenslanders who began secondary school (Year 8) in 2006. The aim of the study is to track how young people's values, attitudes, aspirations and life pathways develop over time from adolescence and into early adulthood. To date, five survey waves have been conducted and additional waves are scheduled for 2017 and 2019. Qualitative interviews are also regularly being undertaken with selected Our Lives participants, exploring a range of topics including aspirations for the future, technology use, and politics.

Research Aims

1. To track young people's experiences of major life events, such as tertiary graduation, starting a full-time job, marriage and family formation, leaving the family home, and how these affect their values, behaviours and quality of life in early adulthood.
2. To identify those characteristics of youth transitions which generate positive career, relationship, housing and health outcomes for young people, and those which expose young people to risks of unemployment, tertiary non-completion, residential & relationship instability, and poorer mental & physical well-being.
3. To interrogate theoretical notions of 'emerging adulthood', including configurations of structure and agency associated with particular transitional arrangements and how these vary across institutional contexts.
4. To collect new data on a valuable longitudinal cohort, and analyse transitions from secondary schooling in adolescence, towards temporary or more permanent work, family, and housing destinations in adulthood.
5. To use innovative social research methodologies, including longitudinal quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods research to explain varied youth transitions and outcomes.

From the Principal Chief Investigator

The Our Lives project is ten years old. This is a wonderful milestone – one we could not have achieved without the commitment and generosity of the Our Lives participants. When the study first commenced in 2006, we had the ambitious goal of following a single age group of young Queenslanders as they went through their teenage years and entered adulthood. We wanted to know who they were, what was important in their lives, and what they wanted for their futures. Over the years we have seen their life pathways unfold and have tried to understand the factors that have helped or hindered their journey. We have also been able to gain insight into their views on issues which impact Australian society.

In this report, we provide selected findings of what we have learnt about the Our Lives cohort over the years and highlight some of the studies we have undertaken using information collected. As you will see, we have focused on a range of topics.

I hope you find it interesting and informative.

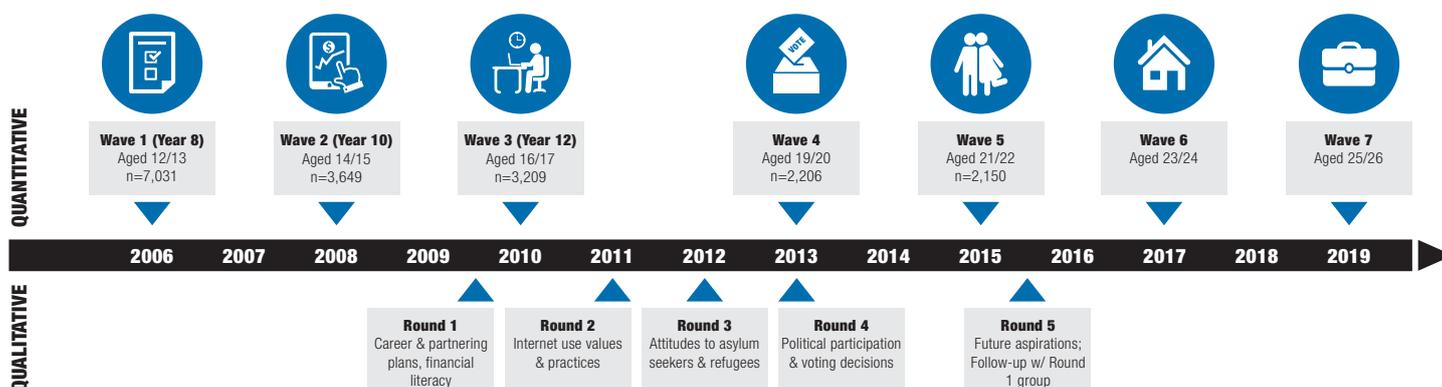
I would like to take this opportunity to extend my gratitude and thanks for your support and contribution to the project. I very much appreciate your willingness to take the time to complete our surveys and perhaps also be interviewed.

The first ten years have been a privilege and I look forward to exciting times ahead.



Professor Zlatko Skrbiš
Principal Chief Investigator

Project Timeline



Current Research Team



Professor Zlatko Skrbiš (Principal CI) is Professor of Sociology in the School of Social Sciences and Vice-Provost (Graduate Education) at Monash University. He is also an Honorary Monash-Warwick Professor and Honorary Professor at the University of Queensland. His research focuses on the question of identities in transition, culture and migration. He is the author of four books: *Long-distance; Constructing Singapore* (with Barr); *The Sociology of Cosmopolitanism* (with Kendall and Woodward); and *Cosmopolitanism: Uses of the Idea* (with Woodward).



Professor Bruce Tranter (CI) is a Professor of Sociology in the School of Social Sciences at the University of Tasmania. He is an experienced quantitative data analyst and survey researcher. His research interests include the social and political influences on attitudes and action toward climate change, national identity, and environmental social movements and their leaders. He has recently published the book *The Decline of Political Leadership in Australia?* (with Pakulski).



Dr Cameron Parsell (CI) is an Australian Research Council DECRA Fellow at the University of Queensland. He is also an Associate Editor of the *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, and a Policy Advisor to the Australian Council of Social Services. His primary research focus is on issues of homelessness and housing stability. He also has interests in examining the factors that promote positive career, relationship, housing, and health outcomes for young adults.



Dr Jonathan Smith is a Research Fellow in the School of Social Sciences at Monash University. He administers the day-to-day operation of the project and assists with implementing its research agenda. His research explores young people's educational trajectories, their developing values and relationships between adolescence and early adulthood, and digital inequality.



Dr Jacqueline Laughland-Booŷ is a Research Associate in the School of Social Sciences at Monash University. She is based in Queensland and works on the project as a qualitative researcher and interviewer. Her current research interests include identity formation in emerging adults, the life trajectories of young people living in Australia, and the acceptance of asylum seekers by young Australians.

For a full list of Our Lives researchers go to: artsonline.monash.edu.au/ourlives/research-team/

Questions and Answers

What is a longitudinal cohort study?

A longitudinal cohort study is research that follows the same group of people over time. These people share a common event. In the case of the Our Lives cohort this event was entering Year 8 at a Queensland secondary school in 2006.

This is a very special kind of study and there are very few like it in Australia. It is also important to stress that participants in this type of study are irreplaceable. That is why we are so appreciative of your continued support and involvement.

Does it matter if I drop out?

It is important that the 'Our Lives' sample continues to represent the life experiences of all young Queenslanders who are the same age that you are. If participants drop out, this means that the sample becomes biased. For example, if the people who drop out are those who are dissatisfied with their study or their job prospects, then we do not properly measure what happens to young people whose experiences have not prepared them for life in a way that they would like. It is therefore important to keep as many people in the study as possible.

Why are my answers important?

Your answers are important because you are providing valuable information about what life is like for a young Australian of your age. It tells us the opportunities that have been made available to you and the challenges you have faced.

We are also able to see differences in responses among the Our Lives cohort and explain them. For instance, variations among the cohort might be related to gender, education, or political views.

Why do you ask me the same survey questions?

Some questions are included in every survey. By asking you the same questions we are able to see if your situation or views change over time. However, we also include other items that are relevant to your current age or to what might be happening in Australia around the time of the survey.

How long will the study go for?

Ideally we would like the study to continue for as long as possible. That is, of course, dependent on funding. For the past ten years we have been generously supported by the Australian Research Council, who has also agreed to provide funding until at least 2019.

What is the information used for?

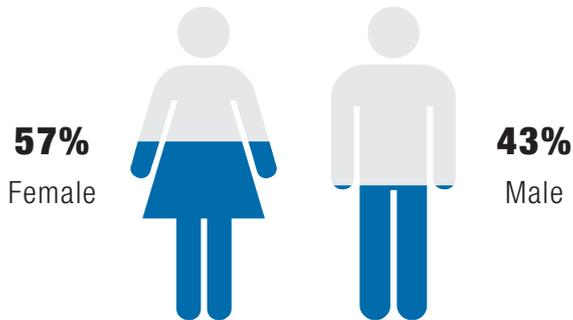
The data we collect is often reported in academic publications or at academic conferences. It has also been used by Honours, Masters, and PhD students in their research. It is important to stress that your individual identity and responses will never be made public.

Our Lives Participants: At a Glance

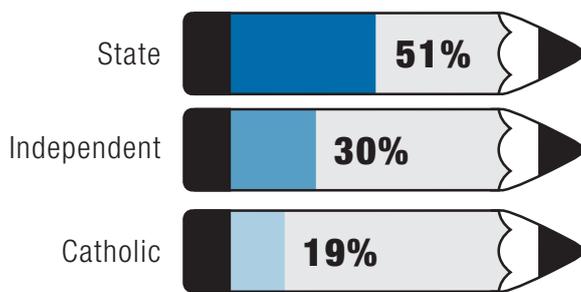


2006

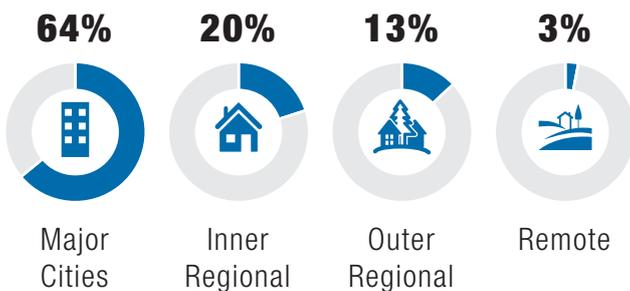
Gender



School



Region

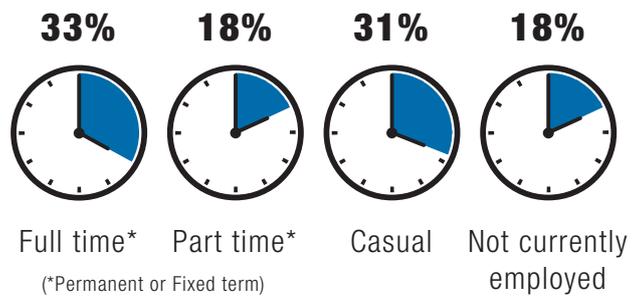


Country of Birth

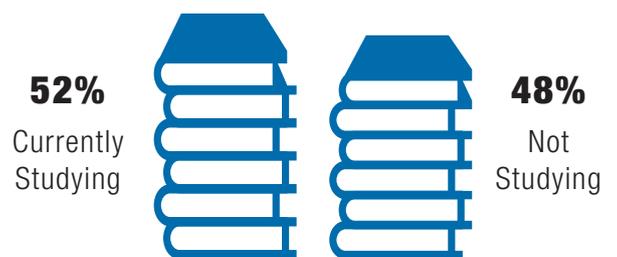


2015

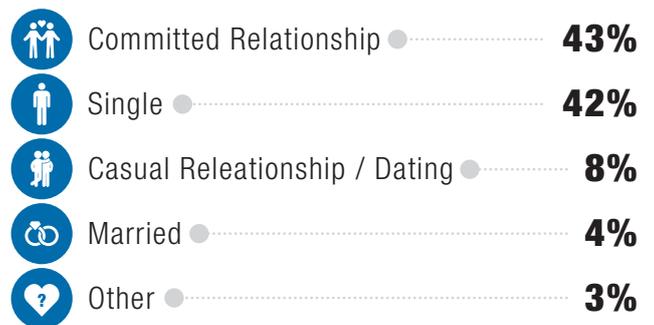
Employment



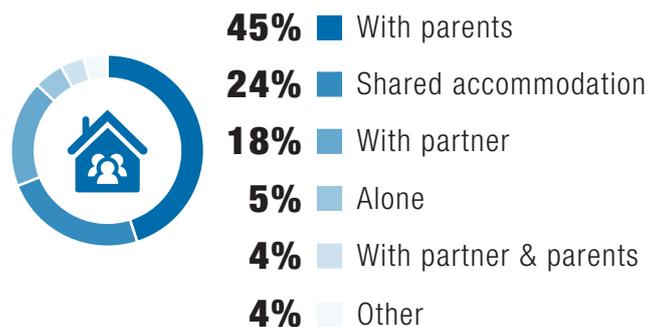
Study



Relationship Status



Living Arrangements



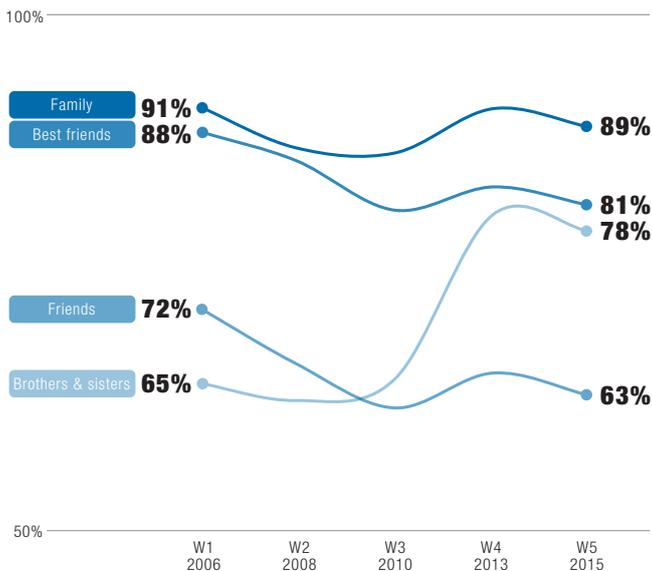
Family and Friends



The Our Lives participants are regularly asked questions about family and friends. These have included questions about their parents and siblings, friendship groups, and their wishes and expectations regarding future partners and having children. More recently we have been following our participants as they change living arrangements, form partnerships, and begin to think more seriously about parenthood.

Supportive social relationships are important in enabling young people to cope with setbacks in life and to approach the future with optimism and confidence. Since Wave 1, we have been asking participants how much they feel they can rely on others around them for support. Among family and friends, the responses have consistently shown the people they have most confidence in are their parents and best friend. Over the years, confidence in brothers and sisters has increased, whereas confidence in general friendship groups has slightly decreased.

How confident are you that the following people won't let you down?

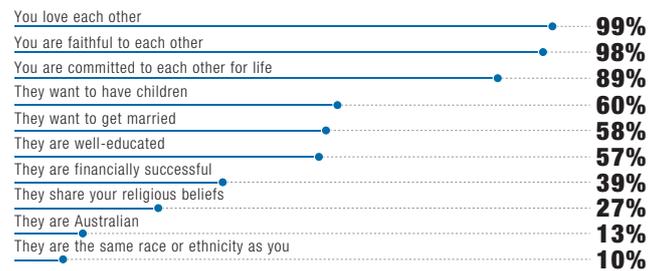


Waves 1-5. Percentage of participants responding as 'Confident' or 'Very Confident' that their family and friends won't let them down.

Many young people in their 20s become more focused upon finding a partner and entering a long-term committed relationship. Some may also be contemplating parenthood. In 2015, we asked participants a series of questions relating to relationships and having children.

At age 21/22 the majority had been in at least one serious committed relationship, while around one in five of the cohort had never been in such a relationship. When asked what qualities they thought were important in a partner, love, fidelity, and commitment rated as being most important.

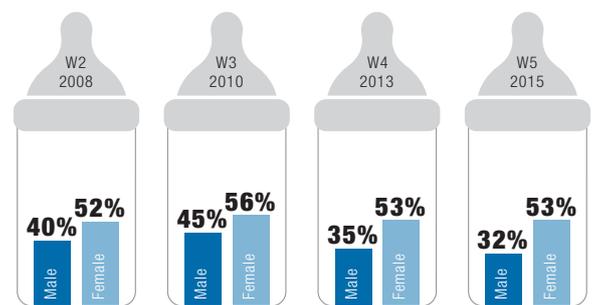
Thinking about the kind of person you would consider having a serious, committed relationship with, how important are the following things?



Wave 5, 2015. Percentage of participants responding that these qualities are 'Important' or 'Very Important' on a scale of 1-5 where 1='Not at all Important' and 5='Very Important'.

Since they were aged 14/15 years old, we have also asked participants about their wish to have children. Overall, many participants report a strong desire to eventually become parents. There is, however, a noticeable gender bias here, with the female participants being more likely than the males to say they definitely want children. Another interesting trend we have noted is that male enthusiasm for parenthood has decreased in early adulthood.

How strongly do you feel about having children?



Waves 2-5. Percentage of respondents indicating '9' or '10' on a scale of 1-10 where 1='Definitely do not want to have children' and 10='Definitely want to have children'.

Identity and intimacy

In a recent study Jacqueline Laughland-Booÿ and Zlatko Skrbiš teamed up with psychologist Peter Newcombe from the University of Queensland to explore 28 Our Lives participants' experiences of identity development in the area of romantic relationship formation. Their research provides some interesting and novel insights. Most importantly, they found that some young people are choosing to enter an identity development *hiatus*, whereby they are putting the process 'on hold' because external pressures are preventing them from going in a direction they believe best suits who they want to be.

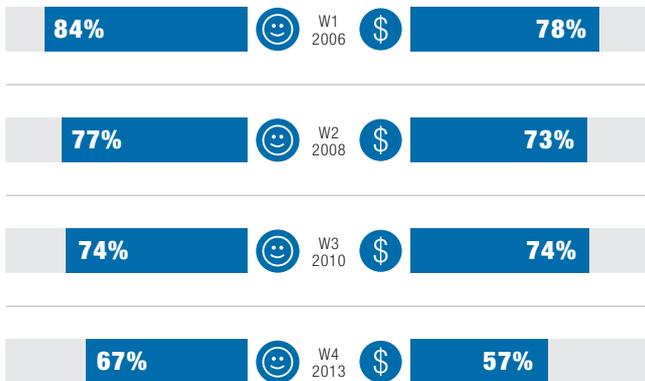
Education and Career



We are also very interested in the educational and career trajectories of the Our Lives participants. What educational pathways have they followed? How confident are they of eventually finding a job that pays well and that they enjoy? Such questions have been asked in surveys and interviews conducted with some members of the cohort.

In every survey we have asked participants questions relating to their future job aspirations. For instance, we have asked how confident they are that they will be in a job that pays well, and that they will enjoy. As the years have gone by, and more of them enter the labour market, the number of participants who rated themselves as being either 'confident' or 'very confident' on these measures has diminished.

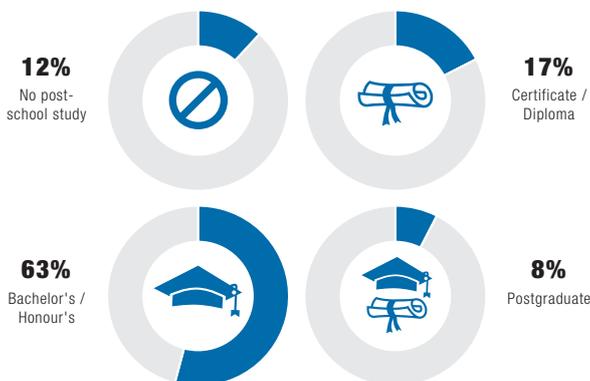
Confidence in aspired job attributes



Waves 1-5. Percentage of participants responding as 'Confident' or 'Very Confident' that they will eventually get a job that pays well and have a job that they will enjoy doing.

In the Wave 5, 2015 survey we asked participants their highest level of ongoing or completed education. Results showed that over 70% have engaged in university study. While an additional 17% of respondents have studied a Certificate or Diploma level qualification, 12% of the cohort have undertaken no study since leaving school.

Highest level of post-school study



Wave 5, 2015. Highest level of education – ongoing or completed.

Beliefs about academic success

Jonathan Smith and Zlatko Skrbis have recently explored Our Lives participants' beliefs about what causes academic success, and how these relate to their academic outcomes at the end of school. They found that beliefs emphasising 'internal' factors, such as working hard, were widespread amongst the cohort and particularly common in high-achieving students. Fewer participants attributed success to 'external' factors, such as having rich parents, or a supportive family – beliefs which were associated with lower achievement. The findings also indicated that urban students benefited more from the belief in hard work than rural students, and that influential grandparents can help enhance such beliefs.

With regards to employment status in 2015, 33% of the cohort had a full time job, 49% were either in part-time or casual work, and 18 % were not employed.

In 2015 and 2016, we spoke to some participants about their experiences in training for and getting a job. We have discovered that while many were confident in the direction they were heading, others had encountered hurdles and were less sure about what their future career might look like:

- “ I have a strong feminist framework so I'd love to work anywhere in women's issues... but I'm keeping an open mind because I am a new graduate – so beggars can't be choosers. ~ Cara (Social Work) ”
- “ I ended up working at the meatworks for a little bit and then I got an apprenticeship with the mechanics. ~ Sebastian (Car Mechanic) ”
- “ I'm sure I'll be fine, I would just like it if I just knew where I was, if I had more certainty about my direction and I knew where I was going to be in five years. ~ Ellen (Law) ”
- “ I don't regret the path that I've taken and everything that's happened. I've learnt a lot of different lessons and I've had a lot of different situations present themselves. I think you're much more able to succeed after you've failed. That's what I've found. ~ Richard (Undecided) ”

Whose choice?

It has been argued that those from privileged social backgrounds have more options with regards to their future educational and career pathways, but interviews conducted in 2009 and 2010 have suggested the opposite. Jacqueline Laughland-Booy, Margery Mayall and Zlatko Skrbis found that while economic status may offer security, more privileged young people might follow educational and career pathways based on social norms rather than ability. On the other hand, young people from less privileged backgrounds showed greater flexibility and forethought when planning for their future.

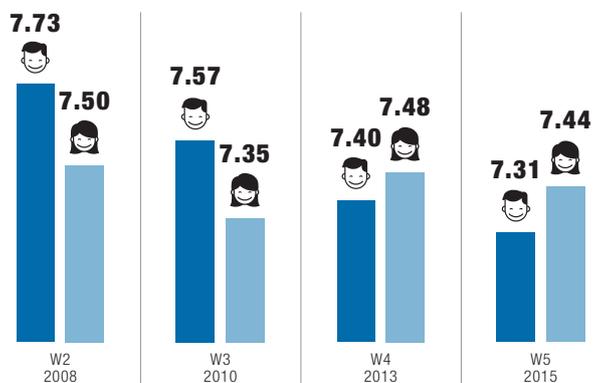
Health and Happiness



We have been measuring general levels of happiness and life satisfaction amongst the cohort across four surveys. More recently we have also asked participants questions related to their health and health-related lifestyle habits.

From Wave 2, 2008 participants have been rating their general level of happiness on a scale of 1-10. Across time there has been a slight decline in the average happiness of the sample as a whole. Happiness levels have also tended to vary according to gender. In 2008 male cohort members were, on average, slightly happier than females. By 2015, males' average happiness levels had steadily declined, whereas females' happiness levels increased after leaving school and were relatively stable across the entire period.

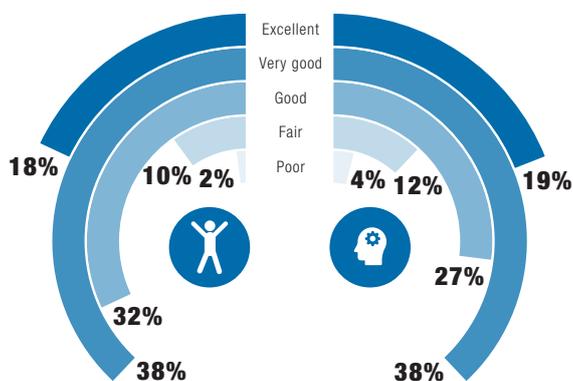
How happy are you with your life these days?



Waves 2-5. Mean happiness scores: Scale 1-10.

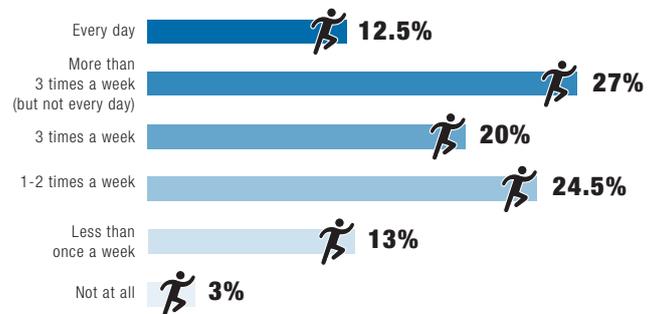
In terms of their overall physical health at age 21/22, 88% of respondents rated their physical health as 'Good' or better, whilst the remaining 12% reported being in 'Fair' or 'Poor' health. Rates of mental health were slightly poorer with 84% reporting their mental health as good or better and 16% saying they thought their mental health was either 'Fair' or 'Poor'.

Overall physical and mental health



Wave 5, 2015: Participants' reported overall physical and mental health.

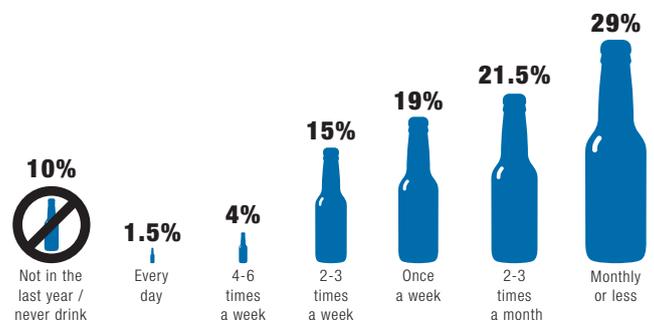
How often do you participate in moderate or intensive physical activity?



Wave 5, 2015. Participant responses to the item: 'In general, how often do you participate in moderate or intensive physical activity for at least 30 minutes?'

Regarding health-related lifestyle behaviours, the Wave 5 survey showed nearly 60% of the cohort undertook moderate or intensive exercise at least three times a week. While the majority of the cohort (88%) reported that they did not smoke cigarettes, 90% said they consumed alcohol with 61% of these individuals drinking a least 2-3 times per month.

How often would you have a drink containing alcohol?



Wave 5, 2015.

Tattoos, piercings and youth

As part of her Honours thesis, Carley Fraser explored tattooing and piercing among Our Lives participants, and how these practices relate to body image, current life circumstances and broader social factors. Within the cohort, a higher likelihood of engaging in these practices was found among women, those identifying as non-heterosexual, and those with lower levels of religiosity. A higher income level and not being in post-secondary education were also associated with a higher likelihood of having a tattoo or piercing.

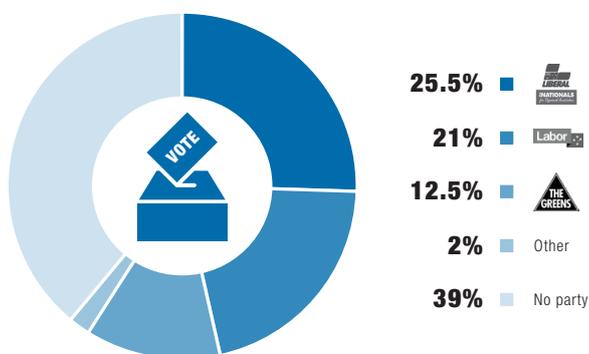
Politics and Society



The study has covered a period in which young people's social and political values typically begin to take shape. During their lifetime, the Our Lives cohort has seen considerable change and uncertainty in Australian society. Issues such as those relating to immigration, the environment, marriage equality, and the treatment of asylum seekers', have demanded that they reflect on the values they stand for and the direction they wish their country to go in the future.

While the Wave 5, 2015 survey showed strong participant support for The Liberal–National Coalition and The Australian Labor Party, 39% of participants did not support a particular political party.

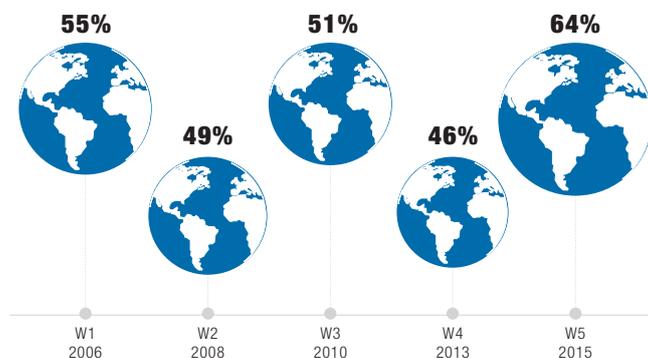
Political party



Wave 5, 2015. Political party support (percentages).

Although flows of people, goods, and information across borders are not a new phenomenon, globalisation has created a degree of global interconnectedness and interdependence that is historically unprecedented. Across all survey waves we have asked the cohort to rate the extent to which they believe in the importance of belonging to a global community. While over the years there has been a degree of fluctuation in attitudes, the most recent survey shows a sharp increase in those who believe being part of the global community is either 'Important' or 'Very Important'.

Belonging to the global community



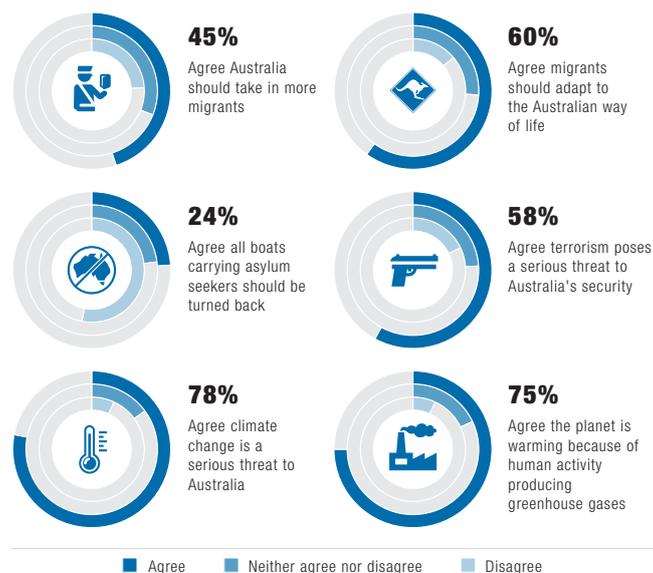
Waves 1–5. Percentage of participants responding that being part of the global community was 'Important' or 'Very Important'.

Attitudes towards same-sex marriage

Support for marriage equality and acceptance of homosexuality has increased rapidly in recent times. Jonathan Smith has investigated the Our Lives cohort's changing levels of support for same-sex marriage, and what causes young people to differ on this issue. Most respondents became more accepting of same-sex marriage as they grew older, particularly if they began cohabiting with a partner without being married. Meanwhile, being male, living outside a major city, not living with both biological parents, and being more religious were all associated with lower support for same-sex marriage.

As Wave 5, 2015 figures show, the majority of Our Lives participants believe Australia should take in more migrants. However, it is important to note that many also felt that migrants to Australia should adapt to the Australian way of life. Regarding other issues impacting Australia at this time, results indicate that the majority disagree with the statement that: 'Boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back'. The majority also agree that terrorism poses a serious threat to Australia's security. On issues concerning the environment, there is strong agreement that climate change poses a serious threat to Australia and that global warming is due to human activity.

Issues impacting Australia



Wave 5, 2015. Percentages. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Here 'Agree' is a composite of 'Strongly Agree' and 'Agree' responses. 'Disagree' is a composite of 'Strongly Disagree' and 'Disagree' responses.

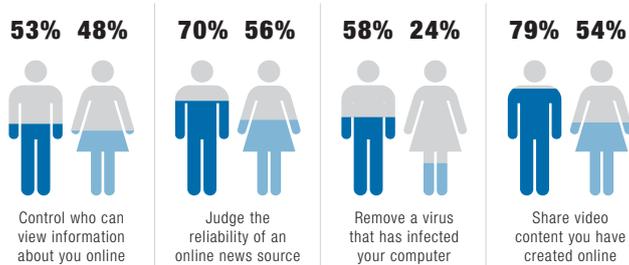
Technology Use



The Our Lives cohort have grown up amid rapid technological changes. The rise of broadband internet, smartphones, and social networking have all occurred since they commenced high school.

Throughout the years, our research has documented differences between young people in their internet access, usage and skill levels. In our most recent survey, for example, we examined respondents' confidence in their ability to undertake various online tasks. The results show large gender differences, with male respondents reporting higher levels of confidence in their abilities than females, particularly when it came to tasks such as removing a virus or sharing video content they had created.

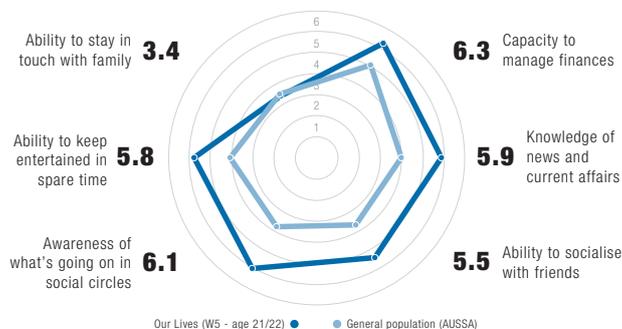
Confidence in undertaking online tasks



Wave 5, 2015. Percentage of participants responding as 'Confident' or 'Very Confident' in their ability to undertake various online tasks.

In the Wave 5 survey we also asked participants if they thought their lives would be disrupted if they were without access to the internet for a week. Using data obtained from the 2016 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AUSSA) we then compared our participants' responses with those from the broader adult Australian population. The results show that the 'digital footprint' of the Our Lives cohort is considerably larger than that of the general population. In other words, in most areas examined, the Our Lives respondents were more reliant on internet use and would experience greater disruption if they lacked internet access.

Internet disruption



Wave 5, 2015. Participant average responses to item: 'If you were without internet access for 1 week, how disruptive would it be for the following things?' Scale 1-10 (1 = no disruption / 10 = extremely disruptive). Responses compared with AUSSA 2016 ([Go to https://www.acspri.org.au/aussa](https://www.acspri.org.au/aussa)).

Beneath the digital native myth

Using data from the Wave 1 survey, Jonathan Smith, Zlatko Skrbis and Mark Western investigated differences in the amounts of time young people spent on academic and social activities online. Contrary to the idea that all young people are 'Digital Natives', i.e. skilled and prolific internet users, the research found that respondents varied in these Internet uses for different reasons. Compared to state school students, private school students spent more time using the Internet for homework, due to their stronger overall levels of academic motivation. Meanwhile, social internet use was found to depend on having better computer and internet access, which was a barrier for those living in regional and remote areas with poorer access levels.

What's next?

Following the Our Lives cohort over time has enabled powerful and unique insights that would not have been possible with a single 'point-in-time' study. By regularly sharing their life experiences, attitudes, and aspirations, the participants have helped generate one of the first and most comprehensive accounts of what it is like to grow up in 21st-century Australia. We would like to thank them for their generosity.

Over the past 10 years, we have seen the Our Lives cohort experience many 'firsts'. They were among the first Australians to manage their identities and relationships with smartphones and online social networking. They were also among the first to embark on their post-schooling careers after the Global Financial Crisis. Moreover, they reached voting age amid unprecedented instability in Australian politics, and developed views about social issues, such as climate change and same-sex marriage, which were scarcely discussed by earlier generations.

There are more 'firsts' in store for the cohort in the coming years. The Our Lives participants are now entering their mid-twenties, a time in life when individuals are often looking for more secure, full-time work and greater residential independence. Young people of this age might also form longer-term relationships and start families of their own. With surveys scheduled for mid-2017 and 2019, and additional qualitative interviews planned, we will continue to learn from this unique group of young Australians as they begin to have these new experiences.

We very much look forward to seeing how their life stories unfold.

Research Output

Publications

- Smith, J. & Skrbiš, Z. (Forthcoming) 'A social inequality of motivation? The relationship between beliefs about academic success and young people's educational attainment', *British Educational Research Journal*.
- Laughland-Booÿ, J., Skrbiš, Z. & Newcombe, P. (Forthcoming) 'Identity and intimacy: A qualitative longitudinal study of young Australians', *Journal of Adolescent Research*.
- Smith, J. & Skrbiš, Z. (2016) 'Arenas of comfort and conflict: Peer relationship events and young people's educational attainment', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(5), pp. 646-664.
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Doctor of Philosophy (PhD)

- Laughland-Booÿ, Jacqueline (2016) *Voices of Acceptance: Investigating the Attitudes of Young Australians towards 'Boat People'*. PhD thesis (Sociology), School of Social Sciences, Monash University.
- Coates, Rebecca (2014) *Educational and Occupational Aspirations of Young Australians: Towards Understanding Socioeconomic Outcomes*. PhD thesis (Sociology), School of Social Science, The University of Queensland.
- Smith, Jonathan (2013) *Youth Internet Engagement and Inequality in Australian Society*. PhD Thesis (Sociology), School of Social Science, The University of Queensland.

Master of Philosophy (MPhil)

- Brink, Katrina (2013) *The Plans of Young People in Queensland for the Year after they Leave School*. MPhil thesis (Sociology), School of Social Science, The University of Queensland.

Honours

- Fraser, Carley (2015) *Tattoos, Piercings and Youth: How Does Body Modification Fit into Young People's Broader Identities and Life Circumstances?* Honours thesis (Sociology), School of Social Sciences, Monash University.
- Rose, Michelle (2014) *Young Australians' Fertility Intentions: The Influence of Education, Career and Marriage Aspirations on Family Planning*. Honours thesis (Sociology), School of Social Sciences, Monash University.
- Newport, Rebecca (2014) *Online Social Activity amongst Australian Youth*. Honours thesis (Sociology), School of Social Sciences, Monash University.
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