

2022
AUSTRALIAN
YOUTH
BAROMETER
UNDERSTANDING
YOUNG PEOPLE
IN AUSTRALIA
TODAY

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PRACTICE



MONASH
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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 policy-makers, 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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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 INTRODUCTION 2
 About this report.....3
 Key Findings.....4
 Method and Approach5
 Educational and Policy Responses.....7
 The Role of Youth Sector Organisations9
 References10

2 VIEWS FROM OUR YOUTH REFERENCE GROUP... 11

3 YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE ECONOMY 12
 Key Findings.....12
 Review of Existing Data.....13
 2022 Interview and Survey Findings15
 Policy and Research Implications21
 References21

4 YOUNG PEOPLE AND WORK 22
 Key Findings.....22
 Review of Existing Data.....23
 2022 Interview and Survey Findings24
 Policy and Research Implications32
 References32

5 YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION 33
 Key Findings.....33
 Review of Existing Data.....34
 2022 Interview and Survey Findings35
 Policy and Research Implications39
 References39

6 YOUNG PEOPLE, HEALTH AND WELLBEING 40
 Key Findings.....40
 Review of Existing Data.....41
 2022 Interview and Survey Findings42
 Policy and Research Implications46
 References47

7 YOUNG PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS 48
 Key Findings.....48
 Review of Existing Data.....49
 2022 Interview and Survey Findings50
 Policy and Research Implications57
 References57

8 YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY... 58
 Key Findings.....58
 Review of Existing Data.....59
 2022 Interview and Survey Findings60
 Policy and Research Implications65
 References65

TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Demographic breakdown of interview participants5

Table 2. Survey and weighted sample by descriptive characteristics6

Figure 3.1. Main source of financial support for those who had struggled.....17

Figure 3.2. Adoption of savings and investment products18

Figure 3.3. Adoption of credit products18

Figure 3.4. Housing arrangements19

Figure 4.1. Industry of employment25

Figure 4.2. Perceived importance of characteristics of work26

Figure 4.3. Most important source of career advice .30

Figure 4.4. Participation in activities to improve employability.....31

Figure 5.1. Satisfaction with aspects of formal education35

Figure 5.2. Participation in informal online learning...37

Figure 6.1. Feelings of pessimism and anxiety among young people.....43

Figure 6.2. Problems with accessing food44

Figure 7.1. Young people's sense of belonging in different scenarios.....51

Figure 7.2. Relative importance of different groups to a sense of belonging53

Figure 7.3. Actions on social media).....56

Figure 7.4. Perception of gendered tasks56

Figure 7.5. Perceived generational changes in gender relations57

Figure 8.1. Problems that need immediate action60

Figure 8.2. Volunteering in organised activities.....60

Figure 8.3. Actions on social media.....62

Figure 8.4. Perceptions of social media use for change63

Figure 8.5. Perceptions of government support for young people in different areas.....63



1

INTRODUCTION

For the launch of the first Australian Youth Barometer in 2021, we sought to complement the rich existing data collected by a variety of organisations throughout Australia. What we felt was needed, in addition to this excellent work, was a holistic measure, using both qualitative and quantitative methods, of young people's attitudes to various dimensions of their lives, focusing on a critical period of transition from the ages of 18 to 24.

As suggested by the title, the Australian Youth Barometer gauges the pressures experienced by young Australians. Following publication of the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer, we looked at the intersections of various dimensions of young people's lives by drawing from the unpublished data in a series of 'deep dives'. These reports explored areas ranging from young people's attitudes to finances, food insecurity, and the experiences of queer young people. They have been well received and we intend to publish more. They are all available on the CYPEP website.

When we surveyed and interviewed young Australians last year, the spectre of COVID-19 loomed large over their lives, particularly those experiencing acute lockdowns along Australia's eastern coast. Lives were severely disrupted. Plans were put on hold. There was a sense that many young Australians were stuck in place. Some were literally confined to their homes.

This year saw a gradual shift in the pandemic response to what scholar Deborah Lupton refers to as the 'vaccine dilemmas' and 'living with COVID' phases.¹ With the distribution of vaccines (despite uneven uptake), along with new government measures, social, economic and cultural lives resumed. Education institutions reopened, as did employment opportunities for certain kinds of work. But I hesitate to write that life has returned to normal. Arguably it has not, but it seems too soon to tell exactly what world we have awakened to. Economic uncertainty and political turmoil have become more pronounced. We see global conflict between some countries and deep political divides within others. The impacts of climate change have assumed a more local dimension. Most recently, floods have compounded the challenges of many Australians as they emerge from the previous stage of the pandemic. There is an unshakable feeling of a world in transition. The findings of this year's Australian Youth Barometer therefore capture an important snapshot in time.





ABOUT THIS REPORT

As with the previous edition of the Australian Youth Barometer, we have incorporated important data collected by other organisations and researchers to provide context and direction to readers. Each chapter includes relevant data from existing research, focusing on reports published between 2021 and 2022, to complement the data reported in the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer. We have prioritised existing data that reports the experiences of young people aged 18 to 24, to align with the age group we focus on in our surveys and interviews. Because definitions of youth vary, existing research includes a variety of age ranges. In order to provide a comprehensive picture of new data reported in 2022, we have included reporting that intersects the 18 to 24 age range, but which is not always exclusively within this range. For example, although Mission Australia's research cohort is young people aged 15 to 19, we have included this data because it overlaps with our 18 to 24 age range. We have included data that young people themselves have participated in generating as respondents, but excluded that which parents or service providers have completed on behalf of young people. Finally, as this is a report with an Australian focus, we have drawn from nation-wide research rather than that which is specific to an organisation, states or territories, or a particular location.

This report is divided into six sections. The first section, Young people and the economy, explores young people's plans for financial security and

the barriers and enablers to security. Building on our recent report, *Young people's financial strategies: Insights from the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer*,² we examine how the way young people think about and manage their finances is changing, and provide more insight into how they choose financial products. The next section, Young people and work, presents findings into current employment experiences and career plans. The chapter on Young people and education explores changes to education experienced by young Australians in their formal and informal learning, and highlights the impact of different modes of learning. The following chapter, Young people and wellbeing, is a pivotal section of this report. We asked what young people believe is required to stay healthy mentally and physically, and discuss how the pandemic has affected young people's physical and mental health. Food insecurity, where young people do not have sufficient access to healthy and culturally appropriate food, emerged as a significant issue in last year's *Youth Barometer*, which we detailed in *Realities of food insecurity for young people: Insights from the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer*.³ We explore the often-hidden experiences of food insecurity further in this year's report. Young people's relationships with family, friends and romantic partnerships are examined, along with the impact of technology and social media on relationships.

Finally, this report presents findings on Young people's participation in society, including their experiences of belonging and exclusion.

KEY FINDINGS

This report contains many positive stories of young people navigating their way through life. The findings affirm that young people, generally, are resilient and have a positive outlook for their future. However, challenges remain.

A sense of belonging—to family, friendship groups, work and education institutions—was important to young Australians. However, belonging in education settings needs attention, with only 43% of young people often or very often feeling like they belonged when they were at their educational institution. Interviewees spoke of wanting more accepting educational environments. They also wanted greater choice around learning content and its delivery.

Reflecting a longer-term shift in educational delivery, more than half of young Australians currently in education took classes in a mix of online and face-to-face study, with only one in five studying exclusively face-to-face. Some interviewees wanted a greater link between study and future aspirations.

There is a greater shift in the types of qualifications undertaken. Nearly 60% of young people reported that they hold, or have been enrolled in, a micro-credential, micro-degree or micro-masters. One-third have participated in informal training online.

Some interviewees felt that their education was not fit for purpose in preparing them for working life. Only half of young Australians agreed or strongly agreed that their education prepared them for the future.

Although commonly employed in casual, non-professional roles in the service and hospitality industries, most young Australians desired full-time, long-term and secure work. Flexibility and personal meaning, for example, working in a field that is seen to make a difference, were also important.

Flexibility and security are complementary rather than contradictory, and reflect longer term trends and attitudes to work.

The nature of work continues to change, an important dimension of which emerges prominently in our findings: more than half of young Australians reported earning income from gig work in the last year.

Young people with long-term illnesses and physical disability were more likely to earn income from gig work compared to young people without a disability. Does such gig work provide flexible options for these young people, or does it exacerbate inequality and precarity? We need to know more about their motivations and individual experiences.

Young Australians perceived a movement towards more equal gender relationships at home and at work, with more than half believing that unpaid domestic work is not determined by gender. But a large proportion thought that the type of career pathway young people choose and the amount of money young people get paid in the workforce are determined by one's gender.

Precarity is a thread running throughout the findings. A notable proportion of young people indicated that they were not always able to eat the food that they wanted due to factors such as financial pressures, the influence of medication, or access to food that meets their particular dietary needs. With rising costs of living, some were concerned about their access to fresh fruits and vegetables now and in the future. In the past 12 months, almost one-quarter of young Australians experienced food insecurity. Half went without eating for a whole day because of lack of money at some point during the same period.

The pandemic and associated lockdown measures have taken their toll. Almost one-quarter of young people rated their mental health as poor or very poor. Most (85%) reported feelings of worry, anxiety or pessimism. Almost half often felt as though they were missing out on being young.

Some interviewees described how financial security was possible and desirable, but not feasible in the immediate future because they found it difficult to meet expenses such as rent and student fees. Concerns about the rising costs of living, housing unaffordability and the lack of stable and sufficient employment were front and centre. The vast majority of young Australians (90%) experienced financial difficulties at some point during the last 12 months. More than half thought they will be financially worse off than their parents. A similar proportion believed it was likely that they would achieve financial security in their future, but what of the rest?

Young Australians are engaged in their communities. Almost three-quarters volunteered, with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people more likely to have volunteered during the last year compared with other young Australians. Nevertheless, the vast majority (87%) of young people saw barriers to being involved in organised activities on issues important to them.

The digital divide is not just one of uneven access to technologies, but there is also a divide in behaviours and perceptions of harm.

Young people were ambivalent about the effectiveness of social media to achieve social change. Most believed that social media can assist under-represented groups to amplify their voice and shine a light on important issues, but social media was also seen to be a distraction from important issues. Some interviewees described social media platforms as echo chambers and as having negative emotional impacts. Despite this, more than half of young Australians used their social media profiles to try to influence social change.

Another interesting issue that emerged in relation to social media was that one in five young Australians agreed or strongly agreed that writing insulting things online is not bullying, and one-quarter agreed or strongly agreed that there are no rules online and that they can do whatever they want. Although this is not surprising in relation to the wider research, the findings in this report affirm that the digital divide is not just one of uneven access to technologies, but there is also a divide in behaviours and perceptions of harm.

METHOD AND APPROACH

Following publication of the inaugural Australian Youth Barometer last year, we refined the methodology for this year's report. Some of the questions and the way we have organised the data are different. This is deliberate. But, like the 2021 Barometer, we again used a concurrent mixed-methods design. We conducted interviews and ran the online survey simultaneously. CYPEP researchers developed and refined an original questionnaire for the survey, with a mix of closed, Likert-style questions and open-ended questions. Interviews were semi-structured. In both types of empirical investigations, we explored a range of topics including education, employment, health and wellbeing, finances, housing, civic participation, relationships, and the impact of COVID-19. We analysed responses to questions in relation to other question responses so that we could examine interconnections in the data and enhance our understandings.

In total, 505 young people completed the survey and we interviewed another 30. The age range of participants was 18 to 24 years. Participant recruitment was undertaken by research consultancy Roy Morgan, who implemented the survey and scheduled the interviews. Interviews were then conducted by CYPEP researchers.

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

Interviews

Interviews took place in 2022 and were approximately one hour long. They were conducted via video conference using Zoom and professionally transcribed for analysis. Table 1 shows a spread across genders, with 4 people identifying as non-binary. Among interview participants, 19 lived at home with family, 3 lived with a partner, 4 lived alone independently and 4 lived with a friend or in a shared house. Most participants lived in metropolitan areas. All Australian states and territories were represented, although more interviewees resided in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland.

Responses were analysed to garner complementary insights drawing on participants' open-ended discussions. Interviews were analysed thematically with the aid of qualitative analysis software QSR NVivo. Following deep engagement with the data, researchers generated an initial set of codes to support the collaborative analysis of the data.⁴ Through a recursive process, the initial codes were developed and refined to generate themes that reflected the rich and nuanced patterns of meaning across the data.

TABLE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC BREAKDOWN OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

| | | |
|---------------------------|------------------------------|----|
| AGE IN YEARS | 18 | 0 |
| | 19 | 4 |
| | 20 | 8 |
| | 21 | 5 |
| | 23 | 5 |
| | 24 | 4 |
| STATE | ACT | 3 |
| | NSW | 6 |
| | QLD | 7 |
| | SA | 2 |
| | TAS | 1 |
| | VIC | 7 |
| | WA | 4 |
| LOCATION | Metro | 24 |
| | Regional | 6 |
| GENDER | Woman | 13 |
| | Man | 13 |
| | Non-binary/Gender diverse | 4 |
| LIVING ARRANGEMENT | Alone independently | 4 |
| | At home with family | 19 |
| | With friends or a sharehouse | 4 |
| | With partner | 3 |
| ETHNIC BACKGROUND | Anglo Australian | 23 |
| | Diverse backgrounds* | 7 |

*Due to small numbers, individual backgrounds are not listed.




Survey

The survey was completed by 505 participants aged 18 to 24 years. The average survey completion time was 15.7 minutes. Analysis used probabilistic weights to make the sample representative of Australian young people in terms of age, gender and location. Table 2 shows a comparison of survey participants' characteristics using and without using probabilistic weights. Socioeconomic status (SES) corresponds to the Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) 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). Remoteness is also based on the participants' postcode and classified according to the Remoteness Areas Structure within the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS). 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) and is based on contingency tables and chi-square tests for group differences between the variables of interest and the demographic characteristics in Table 2. Both contingency tables and chi-square tests incorporate survey weights. In the report, only statistically significant differences at the 95% confidence level are reported, with consideration given to cell sizes when reporting these differences. For example, if statistically significant differences according to educational attainment were identified, but were driven by differences for those with primary education (only 6 participants), such differences are not reported).

TABLE 2.
SURVEY AND WEIGHTED SAMPLE BY
DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS
SAMPLE SIZE: 505

| | N | PERCENTAGE | WEIGHTED N | WEIGHTED PERCENTAGE |
|---|-----|------------|------------|---------------------|
| AGE (YEARS) | | | | |
| 18 | 34 | 6.7 | 48.8 | 10.4 |
| 19 | 56 | 11.1 | 64 | 13.7 |
| 20 | 53 | 10.5 | 65.1 | 13.9 |
| 21 | 83 | 16.4 | 69.9 | 14.9 |
| 22 | 103 | 20.4 | 72.1 | 15.4 |
| 23 | 64 | 12.7 | 72.1 | 15.4 |
| 24 | 112 | 22.2 | 76.9 | 16.4 |
| GENDER | | | | |
| Woman | 262 | 51.9 | 225.4 | 48.1 |
| Man | 224 | 44.4 | 223.9 | 47.7 |
| Non-binary/gender diverse/agender | 16 | 3.2 | 17.5 | 3.7 |
| Prefer not to say | 3 | 0.6 | 2.2 | 0.5 |
| HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT | | | | |
| Postgraduate degree | 33 | 6.5 | 30.7 | 6.6 |
| Graduate diploma and graduate certificate | 42 | 8.3 | 34.7 | 7.4 |
| Bachelor degree | 130 | 25.7 | 120.6 | 25.7 |
| Advanced diploma and diploma | 52 | 10.3 | 42.4 | 9 |
| Certificate | 86 | 17 | 76.2 | 16.2 |
| Secondary education | 153 | 30.3 | 155.9 | 33.2 |
| Primary education | 6 | 1.2 | 6.6 | 1.4 |
| Other education | 3 | 0.6 | 2 | 0.4 |
| STATE | | | | |
| ACT | 15 | 3 | 9.5 | 2 |
| NSW | 155 | 30.7 | 157 | 33.5 |
| VIC | 129 | 25.5 | 129 | 27.5 |
| QLD | 105 | 20.8 | 87.9 | 18.7 |
| SA | 40 | 7.9 | 31.6 | 6.7 |
| NT | 6 | 1.2 | 2.6 | 0.5 |
| TAS | 9 | 1.8 | 5.7 | 1.2 |
| WA | 46 | 9.1 | 45.9 | 9.8 |
| LOCATION | | | | |
| Metro | 403 | 79.8 | 389 | 82.9 |
| Regional | 73 | 14.5 | 59 | 12.6 |
| Rural | 29 | 5.7 | 21 | 4.5 |
| SES (POSTCODE) | | | | |
| Low | 91 | 18.1 | 85.5 | 18.3 |
| Medium | 186 | 37 | 168.9 | 36.1 |
| High | 226 | 44.9 | 213.5 | 45.6 |
| COUNTRY OF BIRTH | | | | |
| Australia | 461 | 91.3 | 428.2 | 91.3 |
| Abroad | 44 | 8.7 | 40.8 | 8.7 |
| FIRST NATIONS | | | | |
| Yes | 60 | 11.9 | 59.6 | 12.7 |
| No | 431 | 85.3 | 397.4 | 84.7 |
| Don't know/prefer not to say | 14 | 2.8 | 12.1 | 2.6 |
| DISABILITY | | | | |
| Mental health condition | 99 | 19.6 | 97.7 | 20.8 |
| Long-term illness | 36 | 7.1 | 30.6 | 6.5 |
| Physical disability | 20 | 4 | 15.2 | 3.3 |
| Something else | 8 | 1.6 | 10.7 | 2.3 |
| Multiple conditions | 34 | 6.7 | 30.7 | 6.5 |
| No | 291 | 57.6 | 264.2 | 56.3 |
| Prefer not to say | 17 | 3.4 | 20.1 | 4.3 |



Participants in our research felt the education system was inadequately preparing them for working life and their future aspirations.

EDUCATIONAL AND POLICY RESPONSES

The findings of the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer highlight a number of fault lines in need of attention. As noted above, some participants in our research felt the education system was inadequately preparing them for working life and their future aspirations. This affirms other findings published by CYPEP earlier this year in our discussion paper, *Young Women Choosing Careers: Who Decides?*⁵ Although many were satisfied with their education, there is a need to revisit and refine the purposes of education and its alignment to the contemporary needs of young people and society. As our research suggests, this discussion needs to occur within education institutions, but also among other key actors with responsibilities for preparing young people for their lives ahead, such as employers, parents and carers.


This report demonstrates that informal learning, especially offline learning, is also common. Therefore, schools need to ensure that young people have the skills to evaluate the accessibility, trustworthiness and credibility of information, and encourage young people to learn outside school, especially if they cannot rely on the support of family and friends. The rise of different styles of study and training are not without their challenges. Young people are increasingly enrolling in micro-credentials, but this uptake was uneven among demographic groups. Notably, uptake was particularly strong among young men and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people. We need a better understanding of how these credentials are valued in the job market and what motivates young people to pursue and complete them.

Workforce changes can exacerbate vulnerability. Lack of regulatory protection of workers in the gig economy, for example, could leave already vulnerable young people unprotected from exploitation and potentially sets them up for long-term disadvantage.

Uncertainty continues to shadow the horizon for many young people. Young Australians still aspire to home ownership, for example, but many believe it is increasingly beyond their reach. Some groups of young people, such as non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people, are particularly pessimistic about their ability to achieve this goal. This is, perhaps, one of the most important areas in need of urgent policy intervention, particularly during the current economic upheaval.

We can expect rising living costs and salary stagnation to affect more young Australians. Food insecurity also affects those with full-time jobs and those living in high-socioeconomic areas, but it is often shrouded by stigma and shame associated with seeking help. Financial struggle is not confined to a particular group of young people. Like food insecurity, it is evident among young people from across diverse demographic backgrounds. It is unacceptable that Australians can live beneath the poverty line after working a 48-hour week.^{6,7} Such precarity can be concentrated in young people during a critical period in their lives when, by necessity, many are forced to make choices between work and education, or even whether they eat enough each day. We need better systemic approaches to understand and respond to these challenges beyond the hard work of front-line charities.

Unsurprisingly, housing, employment and climate change are young Australians' top priorities. Heightened feelings of pessimism and anxiety require targeted and ongoing mental health support. Despite welcome initiatives led by governments and not-for-profit organisations, we need to maintain and grow support for mental health. Importantly, our interviewees saw health as encompassing physical and mental health, supported by affirming relationships, a positive state of mind and effective stress management. Such holistic understanding of health calls for holistic responses.



Young people's views are important and need to be heard and addressed.

Finding better ways to tap into and represent young people's diverse views continues to be a challenge for policy makers.

There is a perceived generational difference with policy makers, and it is disheartening to find that young people still do not feel they are properly represented in public and political discussions, and that their concerns are still not taken seriously. Fostering more inclusive, thriving communities starts at the top. Governments need to be doing more, but efforts promoting greater representation and inclusion need to take place across society in general. Businesses and civil society organisations also have an active role to play.

Although young Australians acknowledge the progress made towards more equal gender relations compared with their parents' generations,

especially in the household, many believe that gender plays a role in work and educational experiences and pathways, especially career pathways. Workplaces in traditionally gendered careers, such as nursing or construction, can play an important role in creating spaces that welcome young people from all genders.

Then there is the pandemic. Consider these figures: one in 20 young people aged 15 to 19 experienced homelessness during the pandemic, marking a 20% increase since 2017.⁸ Mental ill health among 16 to 24-year-olds grew from 26% in 2007 to 39% in 2020–21, an increase of 50% in 15 years.⁹

Young people will shape the weather ahead and efforts to improve their lives early on will impact Australia's social, economic, political, and cultural development. We need to hear more from those who might not normally speak up.

THE ROLE OF YOUTH SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

We talk more about systemic, government responses later in this report, but here I would like to highlight the important but undernourished work of youth organisations. Across Australia, youth sector organisations and those working to support young Australians have experienced declining funding over the past decade. Youth services typically operate on shoestring budgets, despite the scale and complexity of their work. These organisations perform three important functions. First, youth sector organisations generally target local domains and provide support to young people where they live. Time and time again, research has shown that it is at the local level where young people are most engaged. Young people understand their social, political and economic worlds through the lens of the local, even with the powerful role that global digital media play in everyday life. Their understanding of the world is profoundly filtered and shaped by their local communities, peer networks and education institutions.

Second, youth organisations are often tasked with responding to the more difficult challenges that young people face across diverse areas, such as health and wellbeing, lower educational attainment and precarious employment. These challenges can be both ongoing and episodic. Ongoing challenges include the possible learning and behavioural challenges experienced by young people at school. In disadvantaged communities, it is not uncommon to see a range of not-for-profit and government organisations surrounding the school—if not co-located at the school—to ensure wrap-around services for young people most in need. Youth organisations have also provided much needed help and support to young people who have been affected by episodic challenges, such as the pandemic and the 2019–20 bushfires.

Third, youth organisations themselves provide a kind of barometer of the pressures young people experience that can inform policy responses to wider social challenges in Australia. They can represent the needs of young people and be important channels where young people can speak up, have their voices heard and influence their worlds.

Governments throughout Australia face difficult decisions when allocating funds that are already stretched thin, but it is important to consider this: young Australians are diverse. Recent census data indicates that Australians aged 10 to 24 represent about 18% of Australia's population and about 30% of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population.¹⁰ ABS data show 74.5% of young people lived in major cities, 16.6% lived in inner regional areas and 8.9% lived in outer regional, remote and very remote areas. Therefore, including voices from regional, rural and remote Australia on the federal government's new youth advisory committee will be important. According to 2019 data from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), about one-quarter of young people aged 15 to 24 were born overseas, 9.3% had a disability, 51% were male, 49% female, and 6.1% identified as gay, lesbian or having another sexual orientation.¹¹ As we highlighted in our report, *Queer young people in Australia: Insights from the 2021 Australian Youth Barometer*,¹² data on gender and sexuality are limited, as questions in the recent Australian census did not include choices that allowed for a wider spectrum of gender and sexuality.

Young people reflect the social fabric of contemporary Australia. Ensuring representation of such a diverse constituency is important. Young people will shape the weather ahead and efforts to improve their lives early on will impact Australia's social, economic, political, and cultural development. We need to hear more from those who might not normally speak up. Arguably, it is those least likely to put their hand up whose voices we need to hear the most—voices from disadvantaged backgrounds are particularly absent.

Including the diverse voices of young people in decision making about their futures is challenging for all organisations, but there are positive signs. The federal government's appointment of the Hon. Dr Anne Aly MP as Australia's minister for youth in 2022 restored youth consultation to government decision making after the abolition in 2013 of the Youth Advisory Council and Office for Youth. The government's youth engagement model¹³ is also a welcome step. The current federal government has promised to further engage with young people in a way that goes 'beyond the committee, by incorporating local forums, workshops, and town halls for young Australians to directly engage in debate and offer their perspectives and ideas'.¹⁴ This is promising. Too often young people's voices are sought in tokenistic or symbolic ways.

Any national response to the pressures young people experience today must reflect the diversity of young people and adequately fund efforts to address big-ticket items identified by young people as important to them. As one 20-year-old from Victoria told us in last year's Australian Youth Barometer: 'Obviously, we're going to be the future leaders, presidents, prime ministers and treasurers and all that, so we have to make sure that we have our priorities set now, going into the future, so that when we do take over, we know what plans and goals to achieve and what action to take.' This remains as salient as ever.

At the Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice, we continue to be inspired by Monash University's strategic plan, Impact 2030, which charts the path for how the university will actively contribute to addressing the challenges of our age through its research and education, and in collaboration with government, industry and community.

We are aware that the Australian Youth Barometer has limitations, including the 18 to 24 age range of respondents, and limited data on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, those living in regional and remote communities, those with a disability, and those from gender diverse backgrounds, to name a few. We want to do more in the future but we cannot do this without your help. Please join us in maintaining and growing this resource.

Right now, we are focused on how the findings of this report can contribute towards building thriving communities with Australia's young people at the centre, alongside those supporting them on their diverse journeys towards our collective future.



Professor Lucas Walsh
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2

VIEWS FROM OUR YOUTH REFERENCE GROUP

On education, work and the economy

“

It's undoubted that the COVID-19 pandemic has permanently changed a lot of the ways we approach our day-to-day living. Whilst it's important to continue to highlight the discrepancies between socioeconomic classes and marginal/vulnerable communities exacerbated over the past couple years, it's also significant to celebrate the developments that have accelerated as a result. The rapid activation of remote learning and working has provided greater flexibility for students, workers, educational institutions and workplaces. It allows individuals who are balancing multiple commitments the flexibility to access opportunities such as making an income, maintaining social connections or receiving health care without needing to worry about geographical barriers, particularly those who live rurally or remotely. Policymakers should consider investing and supporting initiatives and organisations to maintain and upscale their online capabilities to ensure all young people have the opportunity to access their offerings.

ANDREW

On education

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I think it's important to further explore the finding that 75% of young people engaged in informal learning opportunities. I wonder if the high engagement in informal learning opportunities indicates a means for young people to enact agency and a desire to be more informed, self-educate, and create change in our own lives. However, I also wonder whether this finding speaks to accessibility and inclusiveness in formal learning opportunities. Perhaps it is a response to the suggestions young people gave for improving education such as 'having greater choice around content and delivery' and 'more inclusive and accepting education institutions'.

REBECCA

On work, education and the economy

“

I think it's striking how important (secure) employment was for young people. It made all the difference between a young person being financially secure or not. Yet those with long-term illness or disability were significantly less likely to have secure work, and almost half of all young people felt their education did not prepare them for what lays beyond. These findings suggest to me that, though the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic is behind us, there is still an important window of opportunity to transform school and work for young people and secure our futures as we emerge from the crises of the past few years.

MARK



3

YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE ECONOMY

KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 90% of young Australians experienced financial difficulties at some point during the past 12 months.
- 2** 53% of young people thought they will be financially worse off than their parents.
- 3** 54% of young Australians thought that it was likely or extremely likely that they would achieve financial security in their future.
- 4** 60% of young Australians turned to family members as their main source of support when they ran short of money.
- 5** 65% of young Australians had a savings account, but 15% reported not having any form of investment.
- 6** The most common savings and investment products for young people were term deposits (15%), investments in their superannuation fund (13%), cryptocurrency (12%) and self-managed stocks (11%).
- 7** The most common forms of credit were credit cards (31%) and buy now, pay later products (27%).
- 8** Financial security was seen as having enough income to be able to regularly pay for expenses between pay cycles and save without having to rely on others. There was also an emotional aspect, where financial security involved being comfortable, enjoying yourself, and not being under stress.
- 9** Many young people felt that financial security was a goal that was possible, but it was not feasible in the immediate future. This is because they found it difficult to meet their expenses, such as rent and student fees, given their current financial situations.
- 10** Completing qualifications and securing full-time employment, implementing strict saving strategies, and living with family or partners, were seen as important and feasible strategies for working towards financial security.
- 11** Rising costs of living and a lack of stable and sufficient employment were common barriers to achieving financial security. For some young people, COVID-19 contributed to these barriers.
- 12** Financial products such as buy now, pay later and credit cards were not common products among the young people we interviewed, and many were wary of these services. Those that used these services shared negative experiences or described how they try to limit their use. Family advice was the main factor when deciding on financial products.
- 13** Although owning a house was a goal, some young people felt that it would be difficult to achieve due to rising prices and the competitiveness of the housing market.





REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Financial security

According to the 2021 Australian census, 81.7% of young Australians aged 18 to 24 usually received some income. For 21% of young people, this income was less than \$300 per week, for 25% it was between \$500 and \$799 per week, and for 34% it was more than \$800 each week.¹

In a 2021 survey of more than 20,000 young Australians aged 15 to 19 years conducted by Mission Australia, 52% of respondents indicated that financial security was extremely or very important to them, and 15.8% reported being very concerned about it. Of the respondents who reported experiencing barriers to their work or study goals, 20.8% indicated that financial difficulty was one of those barriers.²

In a separate survey conducted by the Australian Securities and Investments Commission (ASIC) in 2020 and 2021, 59% of young females and 43% of young males aged 15 to 21 agreed or strongly agreed that they often felt stressed about money.³ However, they also planned for the future. Eighty-one per cent reported having a savings goal and 21% said it was a goal to be accomplished in more than two years. More than half (54%) reported being willing to sacrifice current spending to have enough money when they retire and 62% reported that they believed it was important for them to build up their superannuation.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to have an impact on young people's trust in their ability to achieve financial security, which decreased from 60% in 2020 to 51% in 2021.³

In 2020, 20% of young people aged 16 to 24 received income support payments.⁴ Of these, 51% received unemployment payments, 31% received student payments, 10% received disability-related payments and 8.3% received parenting payments. In the ten-year period between 2010 and 2019, 50.2% of Australians aged 18 to 24 in 2010 personally received at least one income support payment.⁵ This was the working-age cohort with the highest proportion of people receiving income support. In comparison, 31.8% of people aged 25 to 44 years and 30% of people aged 45 to 55 years received at least one income support payment.⁵

In 2018, 12% of young Australians aged 15 to 24 were deprived of two or more essential items and 7.2% were deprived of three or more. Additionally, 10% of young Australians experienced financial stress, that is, having a shortage of money that led them to struggle to meet payments or having to ask for help. Both deprivation and financial stress were less prevalent among young people living with their parents than among those living elsewhere.⁶ In 2020, about 13% of young women and 11% of young men had incomes below the poverty line. These poverty rates were lower than those for women and men over 65 years of age (17% and 15% respectively) but higher than those for people aged 45 to 54 (9% for women and 8% for men).⁷



Adoption of financial products

The ASIC survey revealed that 45% of young Australians aged 15 to 21 reported using buy now, pay later services. Thirty-one per cent of these users reported that having a buy now, pay later option meant that they bought something they were not able to afford, and 22% reported feeling that they were taken advantage of as information about costs was not clear until after they had made the payment.³ Among the same cohort, 14% indicated that they had shares, 7% held term deposits, 6% invested in bitcoin or other cryptocurrency, and 3% invested in property. Of those who had invested, 82% monitored their investments at least monthly, and 53% of young investors monitored investments at least weekly. For 45% of young investors, a parent or family member influenced their investment choice.³ Twenty-eight per cent of young Australians followed a financial influencer; 65% of these young people indicated that they had changed their financial behaviour as a result of influencer advice.

Housing

On the night of the 2021 Australian census, 4.2% of young Australians were staying in motels, hospitals, colleges, or other non-private dwellings. In comparison, only 3.0% of people aged 25 to 32 and 2.4% of people aged 32 to 39 were in this situation. Forty-seven per cent of young people in non-private dwellings reported being there as a guest, patient, inmate or other resident.⁸

A higher proportion of young people lived with their parents in 2019 than in 2001. This was especially the case for young women, with 79% of women aged 18 to 21 and 50% of women aged 22 to 25 living with their parents in 2019, compared with 63% and 32% respectively in 2001.⁵ In 2017–2018, 28% of young people aged 15 to 24 living in low income households experienced housing stress, that is, spending more than 30% of their income on housing. Young people who lived with their parents were less likely to experience housing stress (22%) than those who did not live with their parents (45%).⁹



According to our survey, 53% of young people thought they will be financially worse off than their parents. Those who were born abroad were more likely to feel this way than those who were born in Australia.

2022 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

Financial security

Many interviewees had a clear vision of financial security as having enough income to be able to pay for their expenses between pay cycles and having additional income left over to save. Several interviewees also described financial security as not having to rely on others, such as friends or family, to meet their expenses.



I think ... not living pay cheque to pay cheque. I think having money in between that you can just put aside. I think being able to pay bills on time, without any issues. Never having to borrow money. I think that's what I would specify being financially stable as.

WOMAN, 22, VIC

When describing financial security, several interviewees also used emotive language. For example, financial insecurity was linked to negative emotions such as stress and worry, while financial security was associated with being comfortable and being able to enjoy yourself.



Not being under financial stress. I think not having to worry about paying things week to week and having adequate savings, so that if you do have financial pressures that come up out of nowhere, or you suddenly find yourself without a job, that you do have money saved as an emergency fund, you know, to get you through some tougher times.

MAN, 24, VIC



I suppose it's just having ... a good enough income to meet with regular expenses, as well as having enough that you can save some for the unexpected ones that crop up and ideally still having enough to enjoy yourself a bit.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 20, QLD

It is important to note, though, that many interviewees did not feel that financial security was achievable in the immediate future. This was because of their current financial pressures and a recognition that financial situations can change quickly.



[Financial security is] not being scared about running out of money before the next time you get paid, having enough money saved to be able to not be stressed about losing your job ... It just, it's relative to what your individual situation is, and that can change very quickly. So today financial security to me, I could be very financially secure and then tomorrow I could lose my job, get into a car accident and then have to pay you know, a lot of money and a medical bill and then I won't be financially secure.

WOMAN, 24, NSW

According to our survey, 53% of young people thought they will be financially worse off than their parents. Those who were born abroad were more likely to feel this way than those who were born in Australia (71% compared with 52%). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were more positive, with 30% believing they will be financially worse off than their parents, compared with 57% of other young Australians.

Barriers and enablers to financial security

Fifty-four per cent of young Australians thought that it was likely or extremely likely that they would achieve financial security in their future. When asked about factors which can support or inhibit their efforts to achieve financial security, almost every interviewee spoke exclusively about the external barriers that they faced. Most commonly, this included the rising cost of living and the increases in rent or housing prices.



It's hard to kind of make a budget and stick to a budget at the moment, just because of the changing costs of everything, and I guess the uncertainty.

WOMAN, 23, VIC

It was also common for young people to talk about a lack of stable and sufficient employment. For some, this was also exacerbated by COVID-19.



I think just keeping my job and keeping that, what do you call it, work schedule routine. If I can just consistently keep getting shifts, I think that would be great, but with my previous job I was getting, like, one shift a week and they eventually just kept going down. I was getting two shifts and it then went down so I think like getting adequate shifts would be my way of getting financially secure.

MAN, 19, QLD



When COVID initially hit I lost my main source of income, being, at the time, my work, and it was that weird grey area between when JobKeeper was around, and when people started losing jobs. I was living off whatever money I had for an indefinite amount of time.

MAN, 24, ACT

Current financial situation

Our survey data revealed that 90% of young Australians experienced financial difficulties at some point during the past 12 months, and 26% did so often or very often. Young people across demographic groups shared this experience. Consistent with this, only a small number of interviewees explained that they felt comfortable with their current financial situation.



I don't live pay cheque to pay cheque. Whilst I was talking about food prices being high, and maybe supply being inaccessible, I don't feel like I am unable to put food on the table. I might have to adapt, but I, I still have access to those things.

WOMAN, 23, QLD

Many interview participants described their current financial situation as a challenge that they had to navigate. Several interviewees explained that their primary income was government support, but this was insufficient to cover their living expenses and had to be supplemented with additional work.



My primary income ... is a disability pension and is not a huge amount. I have crunched the numbers and it's about half of what you would make if you worked full-time on minimum wage.

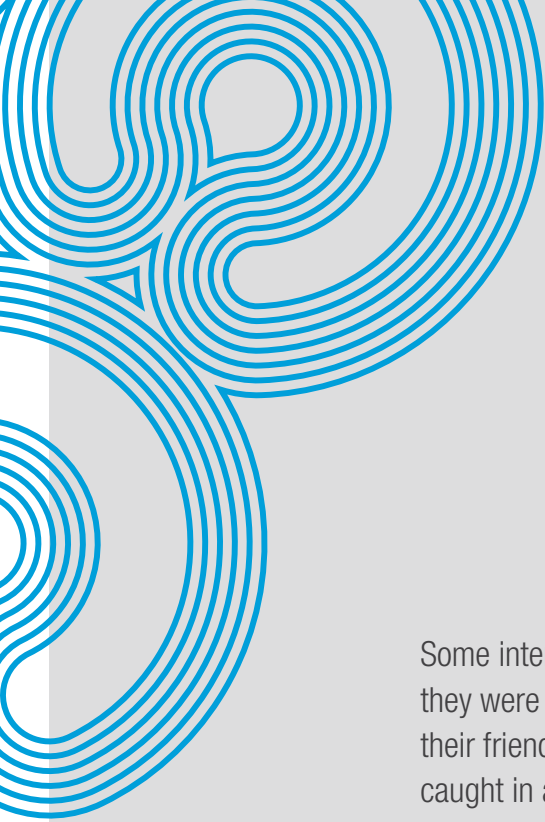
NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA

It was also common for interview participants to explain that they worked multiple jobs in order to stay afloat. This was a significant challenge, especially for those who were studying, as there were often extended periods during placements or exams when they could not work.



I'm kind of doing my best. I've worked now, I work part-time and I work a few jobs. So, I do that to try and stay afloat. I used to have savings, but I don't anymore ... There was a period of time throughout uni when I wasn't working, and I was living off my savings to focus on a course that I had to pass.

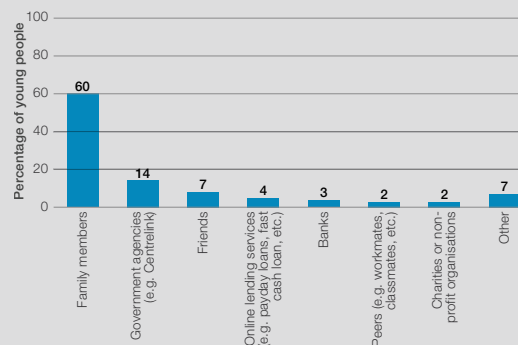
WOMAN, 23, NSW



Some interview participants shared that they were able to access support from their friends and family if they were caught in a financial emergency. This is consistent with survey findings that, for 60% of young Australians, family members were their main source of support when they ran short of money.

This was more common for young people with a high socioeconomic background (68%) than for those from a medium (59%) or low (40%) socioeconomic background, and less common for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (40%) than for other young Australians (64%).

FIGURE 3.1.
MAIN SOURCE OF FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR THOSE WHO HAD STRUGGLED (N=456)



Choosing financial products

In light of these challenges, the large majority of interviewees shared strategies and actions that they were taking to work towards financial security. For many of those who were studying, sourcing paid internships or completing their qualification and attaining full-time employment were seen as important milestones towards achieving financial security.



Ideally, getting an internship within uni and then from that, getting a graduate position, and then hopefully having a stable career from there.

WOMAN, 19, VIC

A few interviewees also explained that they have made specific choices about their living situation, such as living with family or moving in with a partner, in order to work towards financial security.



I've been in a relationship for just shy of two years now, and both of us thought that maybe we should move out of our respective homes because ... I'm a person who doesn't really like debt at all, and when I think of two separate loans, I'm just sitting there thinking, that's a lot of debt.

MAN, 19, SA

The majority of interviewees explained how they carefully watched their spending, often limiting their expenses to essential items. Several explained how they also had multiple accounts, where portions of their income were automatically saved



I've actually got, like, three bank accounts set up, so one's a spending account, one's sort of a general savings account and another's life savings, so one that gets a bit of a higher interest rate if it finishes each month with more in it than there was at the start ... I'll try and keep a certain amount, a fairly minimal amount in the spending, keep a certain buffer in the general savings one and then for any extra I can [set] aside towards a specific goal whether that's a car or eventually moving ... because renting can be a bit precarious sometimes.

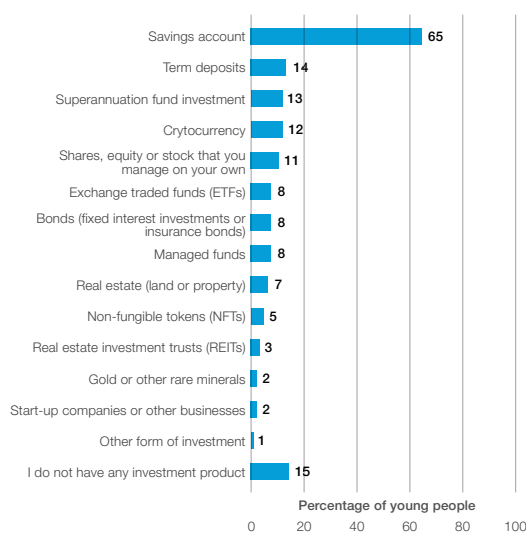
NON-BINARY PERSON, 20, QLD

Although many interviewees felt that investing in stocks, property and cryptocurrency were valuable strategies for achieving financial security, they were not commonly making these investments. Apart from having savings accounts and debit cards, the majority of interviewees did not indicate that they used other financial products.



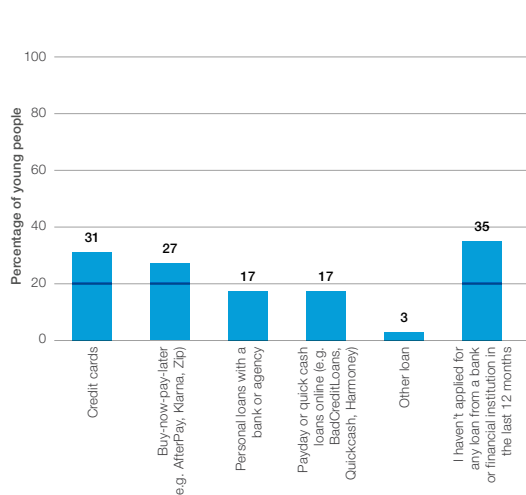
This is consistent with our survey results, which found that 47% of young Australians often or very often were able to save part of their income. Further, 65% of young Australians had a savings account, but it was less common to have other forms of savings or investment. Fifteen per cent of young Australians reported not having any form of investment. The most common savings and investment products for young people were term deposits (15%), investments in superannuation (13%), cryptocurrency (12%), and self-managed stocks (11%).

FIGURE 3.2.
ADOPTION OF SAVINGS AND INVESTMENT PRODUCTS (N=505)



In terms of credit, 65% of young Australians reported to have applied for a loan from a bank or financial institution in the last 12 months. The most common forms of credit were credit cards (31%) and buy now, pay later products (27%).

FIGURE 3.3.
ADOPTION OF CREDIT PRODUCTS (N=505)



The few interviewees who did use financial products such as buy now, pay later services described how they limited their uses of these services or shared how past experiences have negatively impacted their financial situation.



I have in the past, so I've had to pay ... but I accumulated a little bit of debt through that, and I can't actually access any type of loan because of my credit score because of ZipPay and AfterPay, so at the time, I didn't quite realise that it would be such a big effect, but it is.

WOMAN, 22, VIC

Among young Australians who used buy now, pay later products, the most common purchases were clothes (89%), leisure activities (76%), personal necessities such as getting a haircut, household products, healthcare or medicine (73%) and entertainment (72%). However, many of the interviewees were quite wary of buy now, pay later services and credit cards.



The only financial service I use is AfterPay ... but I'm quite restrictive on how I use it ... I have a set amount that I won't let those fortnightly payments exceed, and it's quite a low amount. I'm not comfortable owing more than \$100 a fortnight on anything. I mostly use it as a tool to maybe purchase a few things in a group instead of purchasing them individually over time, which can sometimes save you a bit of money, but I use it really sparingly.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA



No, no credit card. No, honestly. I am praying that I never have to get one in my life ... they're a trap. I think they can serve some good purposes. Like, they can increase your credit score if you pay it back ... [but] I think it's important to remember that all things do eventually come to an end.

MAN, 20, TAS



For several of the young people we interviewed, these decisions appeared to be underpinned by a desire to avoid borrowing money. If this was necessary, they were more likely to borrow from their family or receive advances on government support, than take a loan from a bank.



I think in general, working on borrowed money is, if you don't need to, then it's a bad idea.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

When asked how they determined which services were appropriate or not appropriate for them, many interviewees explained that they took recommendations and advice from family members. Although some young people looked online at recommendations by others, especially on YouTube or Reddit, only a few described investigating services in any depth themselves.



It was a recommendation from my parents to get it.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 20, QLD



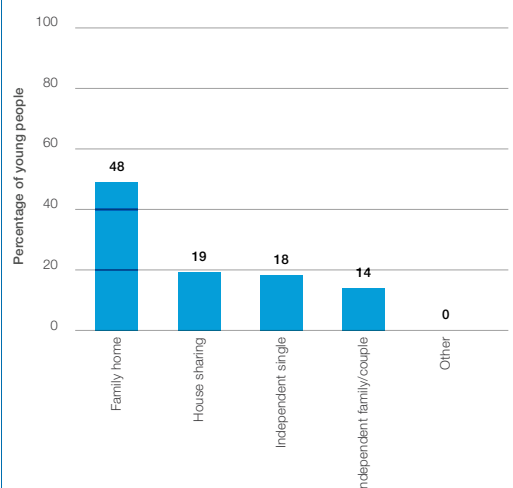
There was a lot of research that went into whether it would be the right thing for me and obviously, which shares or funds to invest into. A lot of it ranged from both financial institutions ... reading on their websites what would be, you know, the right choices to make. Everything from financial influencers on social media, who cannot necessarily give financial advice, but just generally, not asking questions, but following content that they produce and learning about it, if that makes sense.

MAN, 24, VIC

Housing

According to our survey, 49% of young Australians lived in their family home, 19% in a house-sharing arrangement, 18% independently on their own, and 14% independently as a family or couple. Young women (58%) and non-binary, gender diverse or agender young people (47%) were more likely to live in their family home than young men (39%), while Aboriginal and Torres Islander young people (40%) were less likely to do so than other young Australians (51%). Similarly, the majority of young people we interviewed explained that they lived at home with their family. Approximately one-quarter indicated that they lived with partners or friends. Only a few lived independently.

FIGURE 3.4.
HOUSING ARRANGEMENTS (N=505)



Sixty per cent of young Australians thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would stay in their accommodation for the next 12 months. 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. These perceptions were shared across demographic groups. A few interviewees shared that the current rental market was a source of housing precarity.



The landlord sold the house. Because there is a bit of a rent crisis in Hobart, it has been pretty hard for young people to get places.

MAN, 20, TAS

For many interviewees, purchasing a home was a clear goal. However, it was often seen as a goal very much in the future.

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So, I'm not sure quite where I'll end up, but it's definitely a goal, be a homeowner, ... to, like, have somewhere to call home that you don't have to rely on someone else for.

MAN, 23, ACT

A few interviewees spoke about how they were currently working towards owning a house or being in a position where they did not have to pay rent, but this was not common.

More than half (58%) of young Australians thought it was likely or extremely likely that they will live in a comfortable home in the future. Half thought it was likely or extremely likely that they will be able to purchase a property or house in the future. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were more likely to feel this way (61%) than other young Australians (49%). Non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people were more pessimistic about this prospect. Seventy-nine per cent of this group thought it was unlikely or extremely unlikely that they will be able to afford a property or house, compared with 25% of young women and 17% of young men. Young people living in metropolitan areas (25%) were more likely to think it was unlikely or extremely unlikely that they will be able to purchase a property than those living in rural (20%) or regional (11%) areas.

In light of this goal of home ownership, several interview participants pointed to different factors which they saw as barriers to purchasing a home. This included the competitive nature of the housing market, inflating prices, and precarity due to COVID-19.

“

Probably in the next five years, I would like to be able to buy a house. I think that in Sydney, it's a very competitive housing market and it's sort of, it's like, the ultimate mark of financial stability, which is a shame... [because] I think would give me a sense of security.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

“

I would say right now, we were probably ready, we were ready to buy actually at the beginning of COVID, and what stopped us was the uncertainty around what COVID going to do. Realising what's happened now, it would have been a great time to buy pre-COVID because inflation hit so hard, and I would say, now, we're like looking and going like, 'inflation—so unpredictable'. Like, I'm witnessing a couple of my friends who bought their first home and their mortgage has completely doubled, and he's having to change jobs, look for other work, they're in negative equity because of how much the inflation has gone up, and so that's like scary.

WOMAN, 23, QLD

For a few interviewees, these challenges were so insurmountable that they could not picture themselves owning a house.

“

Housing is just so expensive, and the only person I know my age who owns a house, he only owns it because of his parents ... He only owns it because his parents died. That's not the way I want to own a house.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 21, WA



POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Financial struggles are a generalised problem that young people from all demographic groups experience. Increasing living costs and salary stagnation have meant that even those juggling several jobs struggle to make ends meet. Deep structural change is needed to ensure that young people working up to 48 hours a week can live above the poverty line. Increasing payments from government social programs to ensure those who receive them live above the poverty line is also needed to temporarily alleviate those in temporary poverty.
- Those who cannot live with their families need additional help, not only for the provision of housing but also for advice on choosing financial products and having support when struggling financially. Further research is needed to identify specific gaps in support and financial education for young people living away from their families. Schools can play an important role in ensuring that all young Australians have the tools to make well-informed financial decisions.
- Young Australians still aspire to home ownership, although some groups of young people, such as non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people, are particularly pessimistic about their ability to achieve this goal. More research is needed to understand if this is a generally pessimistic view about the future or about the housing market in particular, and whether it is a response to structural barriers constantly faced by this group of young Australians.

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4

YOUNG PEOPLE AND WORK

KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 56% of young Australians reported earning income from gig work in the past year.
- 2** 84% of young people with long-term illnesses and 85% of those with a physical disability earned income from gig work in the previous month, compared with 56% of those without a disability.
- 3** Young Australians thought about both practical and socio-emotional characteristics of their jobs. 31% of young people nominated security of employment as a very important characteristic in a job, 30% thought flexible hours were very important, and 30% thought it was very important that a job was meaningful and made a difference.
- 4** 44% percent of young people who were looking for a job preferred full-time employment, 33% preferred part-time employment and 22% preferred casual employment.
- 5** 47% of young people sought career advice from parents or carers, 41% from friends or peers, and 32% from teachers at school.
- 6** At least 87% of young Australians have participated in an activity to improve their employability.
- 7** 52% of young Australians declared that they gained a formal qualification with the intention of getting a job and 49% chose specific subjects in their final years of high school with the same intention.
- 8** Commonly cited positive aspects of current employment for young people included feeling like they were part of a team and having a sense of passion for their work.
- 9** Young people aspired to work in an area that they felt passionate about and which built on their area of study.





Young people aged 15 to 24 were more than twice as likely to have had their work situation impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic between March and May 2020, when the employment rate for that age group dropped from 60% to 50%

REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Working conditions

The 2021 Australian census data reveals that 31% of young Australians aged 18 to 24 were employed part-time, 28% worked full-time, 7% were unemployed and looking for a job, 6% were employed but away from work, and 21% were not in the labour force.¹ Twelve per cent of young Australians were not engaged in employment, education or training.² Most of those who were employed (56%) worked less than 35 hours per week, while 24% worked 40 hours per week or more.³ This translates to an average of 26.3 hours per week—lower than the 33.8 hours worked on average by people aged 25 to 32 or the 34.3 hours worked on average for people aged 33 to 39.⁴

Most young Australians who worked did so in the private sector (91%).⁵ The five most popular industries for young Australians aged 18 to 24 were retail trade (18% of young people), accommodation and food services (15%), health care and social assistance (11%), construction (10%) and education and training (6%). Young people made up 24% of workers in retail trade and 28% of workers in accommodation and food services.⁶ Young Australians were a significant proportion of workers in several occupations, making up 20% of workers in community and personal services, 25% of sales workers and 15% of technicians and trade workers.⁷ Two per cent of young Australians declared they were owner-managers of incorporated or unincorporated enterprises, although most of these (84%) were enterprises without any other employees.⁸

Young people aged 15 to 24 were more than twice as likely to have had their work situation impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic between March and May 2020, when the employment rate for that age group dropped from 60% to 50%, compared with a drop from 74% to 70%

for the total working age population. In the same period, the unemployment rate for young people increased from 12% to 16%. It peaked at 16.4% in July 2020 before it fell back to 11% in April 2021. The unemployment rate for the overall population was 5.5% in the same month,⁹ a difference that was already evidenced in the decade prior to 2018.¹⁰

In 2020, 91% of 20-year-old Australians were working or studying. Of those who were working, 54% worked part-time and 24% worked full-time.¹¹ By 2021, when they were 21, 95% were working or studying and, of those who were employed, 56% worked part-time and 34% worked full-time.¹² There are signs of deteriorating working conditions compared with those who were 20 years old in 2014. In 2020, 39% of 20-year-olds had a permanent job, 22% had more than one job and 42% were underemployed, that is, working fewer hours than they would like. In contrast in 2014, 43% of 20 years old had a permanent job, 18% had multiple jobs and 32% were underemployed.¹¹

The proportion of young Australians aged 15 to 24 employed on a casual basis increased from 50.6% in the period spanning 2001–2004 to 55.7% of young Australians during 2015–2019. In comparison, only 16.7% of people aged 35 to 44 were employed on a casual basis during 2001–2004, and this rate dropped to 12.7% during 2015–2019.¹³ In the period spanning 2017–2019, young people who had just completed their transition from education to employment were less likely to be employed as casuals (40.3%). Among those who were employed, the median weekly salary (December 2019 prices) was \$647.23, which was only 56.8% of the median weekly salary for the overall population. University graduates had better outcomes, with 55.9% employed full-time, compared with 41.4% of young people with other post-school qualifications, 35% of those who completed high school, and 40.3% who did not complete high school.¹³



The gig economy

Evidence about the experiences of young Australians' participation in the gig economy is limited. In 2021, 8% of Australian 21-year-olds worked in a job that paid them per task or assignment, as opposed to a wage. The most popular occupations of this type were babysitting, singing or playing an instrument, conducting surveys, tutoring, and food delivery.

Among those participating in this type of work, 42% did so to fill gaps in their income from other sources, 50% wanted work experience, and 59% said they wanted to do something with their spare time.¹²

Between October 2017 and October 2018, 5.5% of Uber drivers in major Australian cities were young people aged 18 to 24, representing the smallest age group for Uber drivers. People aged 35 to 54 were the largest age group and made up 44.2% of Uber drivers.¹⁴

Career aspirations

Career aspirations during school years shape outcomes during young adulthood. Young people who were 15 years old in 2003 and who aspired to have a managerial or professional job were more likely to be studying or employed at age 25 in 2013 and, regardless of whether or not they had completed tertiary education, earned 11% more than other young people, even after accounting for differences in gender, socioeconomic background and maths achievement.¹⁵

2022 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

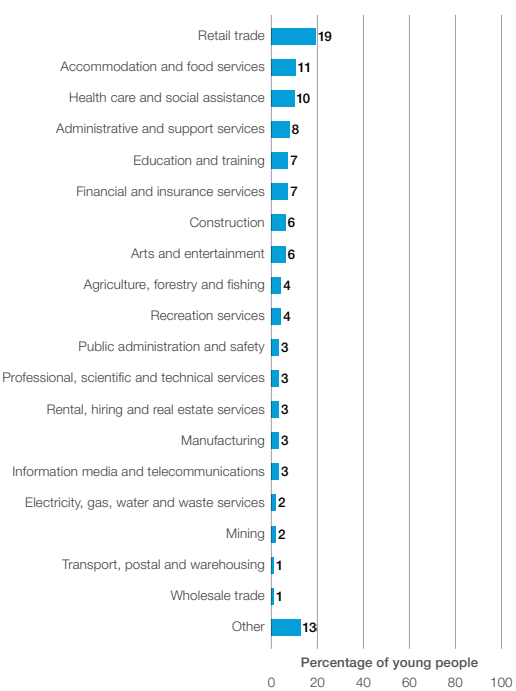
Current or recent employment

According to our survey, 57% of young Australians were working for wages or salary, 15% were not currently working or employed, and 15% combined multiple roles, such as housework and caring work without pay and working for wages and salary. Sixty-three per cent of young people from medium SES backgrounds and 55% of those from low SES backgrounds worked for wages or salary, compared with 53% of young people from a high SES background. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people, 25% worked for wages or salary, compared with 62% of other young Australians. Eleven per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people exclusively performed housework and caring work without pay, compared with only 2.4% of other young Australians.

Of young people who were employed, 41% worked full-time (35 or more hours), 32% worked part-time and 18% were casual. A further 2% had multiple types of employment and 7% were between jobs. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were less likely to be employed as casuals (6%) and more likely to be between jobs (20%) than other young Australians (20% and 4%, respectively). The most common industries in which young Australians worked reflected the ABS data, with 19% in retail trade, 11% in accommodation and food services, 10% in healthcare and social assistance and 8% in administrative and support services.

According to our survey, 45% of young Australians experienced unemployment at some point in the past 12 months, and 61% of young Australians were underemployed at some point in the past 12 months

FIGURE 4.1.
INDUSTRY OF EMPLOYMENT
(N=420)



The survey also asked about people’s participation in the gig economy, defining 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. At least 56% of young Australians reported having earned income from gig work in the previous year. Twenty-five per cent of respondents did so often or very often in the previous month, and 43% declared they had not participated in any gig work in the previous month. Young men were more likely to participate in the gig economy. In the previous month, 69% of young men undertook gig work, compared with 46% of young women, and 37% of non-binary, gender diverse or agender young people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were also more active gig workers (78%) compared with other young Australians (52%). Young people with long-term illnesses or physical disability were also more likely to earn income from gig work (84% and 85% respectively) compared with young people without a disability (56%).

According to our survey, 45% of young Australians experienced unemployment at some point in the past 12 months, with 31% unemployed for a period of two to three months. Young Australians in rural areas were more likely to report experiencing unemployment (69%) than those living in regional (27%) and metropolitan areas (47%). A high proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people also experienced unemployment (61%) compared with other young Australians (42%). Further, 61% of young Australians were underemployed at some point in the past 12 months. For 41% of this cohort, that period of underemployment lasted two to three months. Young people in rural Australia were also more likely to report experiencing underemployment in the last year (76%) than those in regional (51%) and metropolitan areas (61%).

Interview participants discussed being in casual employment. A few worked full-time or part-time. Most participants reported having to attend workplaces face-to-face and often were not able to take advantage of remote working opportunities. Casual jobs were mostly in retail, hospitality or the services sector and included call centre operator, pizza delivery, data entry, child care (leadership position), hospitality, artist (ad hoc project work), disability worker, aged care worker, student services, fast food worker, retail sales, and tutoring. Of the few who worked full-time, professional jobs were more common and included teaching, night-time security, HR and recruitment, and apprentice chef. Most interview participants reported being employed at the time of the interview, but a few were not working. Reasons for not being in work varied and included study commitments, mental health barriers or COVID-related layoffs. Of those interviewees who were not currently working, most had worked in the past and were able to reflect on their experiences, and consider what their futures might hold.



Positive aspects of work

When thinking about getting a job, young Australians valued a diverse range of characteristics. For 31% of young Australians, a secure job or one linked to a long-term contract was very important. For 30% it was very important for the job to have flexible hours and for the same proportion it was very important that their job was meaningful and made a difference. Although these three characteristics received the highest proportion of 'very important' responses, overall, all the characteristics nominated in figure 4.2 below were important for young people across all demographic groups.

When interview participants were asked to reflect on the positive aspects of their employment experiences, many listed multiple positive aspects, weighing up a range of elements that they valued in their jobs. Rarely was there one standout feature singled out; rather, a handful of dynamics that were interrelated and evenly weighted were cited as contributing to making the role one they enjoyed and valued.

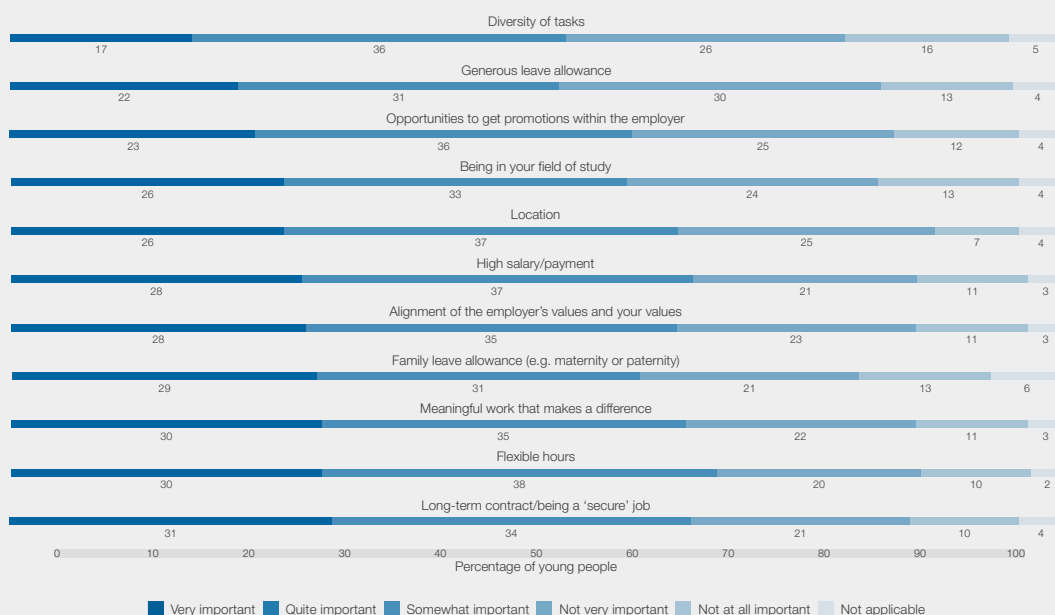
Feeling part of a team was a very commonly cited positive aspect of participants' current employment. Whether participants were in professional or casual employment, being able to work together with like-minded colleagues and managerial staff and achieve a sense of teamwork, were highly valued.



One thing that sort of gets me excited to go to work is the people there ... it's just a nice vibe ... Everyone's just working together and everyone's just nice to each other, and you just feel like you want to be there and, sort of, almost forget that you're working sometimes.

WOMAN, 19, VIC

FIGURE 4.2.
PERCEIVED IMPORTANCE OF CHARACTERISTICS OF WORK (N=505)



Along with feeling part of a team, having a passion for the role and contributing to the greater good were other positive aspects commonly described by participants. Participants discussed passion in a range of roles and seeking meaning in a range of avenues, for instance, from customer service to education roles.

“

I like kids, that's why I decided to be a teacher, so that's also, you know, it's wonderful getting to do something I'm passionate about.

WOMAN, 23, QLD

“

It's just like ... that stuff warms your heart, because you're really helping them [my clients] make a difference to their life.

WOMAN, 23, QLD

Being able to contribute to the greater good was an important positive aspect for a few interviewees.

“

I like the fact that it is helping with climate change.

MAN, 22, WA

Another positive aspect of their current employment for several participants was being able to work in the same area as their chosen future career.

“

What made me want to apply for it [my current job] to begin with, was just that I'm doing an IT course for my degree and ... just having that [my data entry role] there on, like, a resume for later on, or just doing it alongside doing my degree, is going to look good in the future.

MAN, 19, ACT

Beyond gaining experience in their chosen field of employment, a few participants also explained that gaining work experience in general was a valued element in the current job.

“

It's just good to be working and something to put on your resume, regardless of what it is. And it was also a good experience just working with other people.

MAN, 23, ACT

The structure of their employment was an important aspect of participants' employment. Several interviewees, particularly those who were balancing university study or other commitments, mentioned being able to benefit from convenient hours and flexibility.

“

I do like the flexibility to work around my uni schedule. That's one of the most important things, and probably one of the main reasons why I have stayed with the job for so long.

MAN, 24, VIC

Being able to earn money irrespective of the nature of the role or its benefits, was noted by a few participants as a positive aspect.

“

I think it is a good job, because it's giving me experience and also paying the bills, which is pretty good in my books.

MAN, 20, NSW

Negative aspects of work

Overall, interviewees cited fewer negative aspects to their jobs than positive ones. However, when negative aspects were discussed, dealing with stress in the workplace and managing difficult workplace relationships were the most common issues.

Stress was invariably described as being occasional in nature, and was related in some cases to the nature and responsibility associated with the work being undertaken, the fast-paced nature of the role, or dealing with difficult and demanding customers or clients.



I've got to deal with some tricky things. Cases of having to report stuff that's gone on with kids at home, which makes me pretty upset which, you know, I find that quite stressful.

WOMAN, 23, QLD

Managing difficult relationships with managers and other senior staff was another common struggle described by participants. While a few discussed relationships with peers, it was managers or senior staff that caused the most consternation for participants.



I remember there was one guy that used to work with us that was pretty terrible. It was a bit miserable when he would turn up ... He was one of the kind of managers at the back with what we were doing, and he was like, a control freak. Everything had to be done a certain way and this and that. The other thing was that he just didn't do much himself.

MAN, 20 VIC



It was my boss, and it was to the point where I felt like I wasn't being valued at all, to the point of every time there was ever a problem, she would always blame the educators and say you didn't time-manage properly. You need to do this more, you need to do this more, and I'm like, we are struggling.

WOMAN, 24, WA

A few participants noted that managing angry or difficult clients or customers was particularly negative and stressful.



It went from them [a customer] being mad [that something went wrong] to them being mad at me and my manager because I was unprepared ... When I get overwhelmed and stuff, I stutter a lot and they [the customer] were saying that it wasn't good enough ... In situations like that, I absolutely hate the job because people are arseholes.

MAN, 24, ACT

Several participants cited financial security and remuneration as important but that they had not been able to achieve this in their current roles.



They don't really give me many shifts so, you know, financial security was not really there. It's like, I get fuck-all money from this. I am like, I just got sick of it. I was like, 'no, I want money'.

MAN, 20, TAS



The bad aspects would obviously be money but that's something I was well aware of because the arts is not a very profitable industry ... Your chance of actually making a net profit's nil really.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA

Inconvenience, particularly in relation to commuting distance, was identified by a few participants as a challenge with their roles. Long commutes precipitated a few to resign their employment in favour of opportunities closer to home.



Like, I quit like after three weeks, two weeks ... I was driving three hours a day.

MAN, 21, VIC



Career aspirations

More than half (58%) of young Australians thought that it was likely or extremely likely that they will work in a job they like in the future.

When looking for a job, 44% percent reported preferring full-time employment, 33% preferred part-time employment and 22% preferred casual employment. The remaining 1% preferred something else. There were marked gender differences in this preference. Whereas 52% of young men preferred full-time employment, 48% of non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people preferred casual employment.

Among young women, preferences for full-time or part-time employment were even, with 38% preferring full-time employment and 37% preferring part-time employment. Young people with a higher level of education were more likely to prefer full-time employment. For example, only 28% of those who completed secondary education reported preferring full-time employment, compared with 61% of those with a postgraduate qualification.

The way interview participants discussed career aspirations was consistent with how they described the positive aspects of their current employment. Many talked about following their passion and shaping future careers around what they felt passionate about or interested in.



[I want to] work in research ... [because] I really like the process, I guess, of doing experiments and writing them up and addressing gaps in literature, and just think the way that the brain works, or doesn't, is something yes, and I want to keep learning more.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 21, WA

Another common theme among interviewees was a strong desire to work in the area in which they have studied or trained. This was particularly evident among those studying in areas that led to professional careers.



I definitely want to try and get into cybersecurity, because that's the major I'm doing for my degree, and that all really interests me. I want to get into the whole cybersecurity, like, everything about that, but really anywhere related, I'd be happy.

MAN, 19, ACT

Several also described specific career aspirations, with a clear pathway of steps towards their ultimate career goal.



I actually wanted to do psychology since I was about 15, but I have very specific aspirations in terms of what I actually want to do with that qualification.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA



My current aim is to work in, or try and work my way into, a park ranger role. My current plan for a pathway into that is get into a project firefighter role with Parks Victoria, and then when the opportunity arises, apply for an ongoing ranger position.

MAN, 24, VIC

The most important sources of career advice for young Australians were their parents or carers (47%), friends or peers (41%) and teachers at school (32%).

A few participants indicated being unsure about their future career direction. For this group, a definitive goal was elusive, however they explained weighing up a few different potential careers.



I have no idea. I kind of, in an ideal world, I'd like to do something involving environmental communications, so possibly, you know, working for a company that's doing something really positive for the environment ... but I really don't know at the moment.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

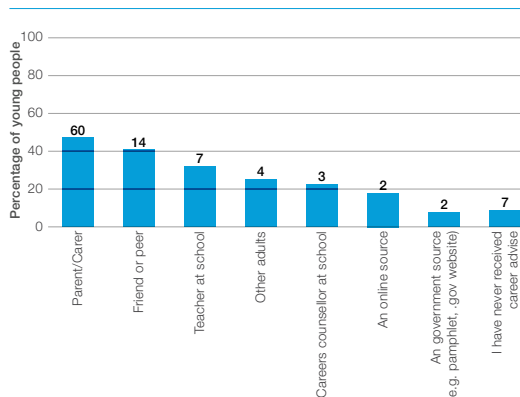


I'm not sure, I was considering psychology. But then again, like, I feel like there isn't really much that, I don't know, I don't feel too motivated at all [or] have a drive for my future, I'm kind of just floating or directionless.

MAN, 21, VIC

These career aspirations and expectations are not formed in isolation. According to our survey, 91% of young Australians had received some form of career advice. The most important sources of career advice for young Australians were their parents or carers (47%), friends or peers (41%) and teachers at school (32%). The relative importance of these sources of advice was similar among demographic groups.

FIGURE 4.3.
MOST IMPORTANT SOURCE OF CAREER ADVICE (N=505)



Barriers to achievement

Several participants explained that maintaining good grades in their university studies would constitute a challenge and be a potential barrier to achieving career aspirations.



I guess studying hard will be a challenge in the academic stuff, getting good grades, those might be a challenge.

MAN, 22, NSW

Several also cited gaining practical experience in their area of study, such as via placements, as a challenge to achieving career aspirations.



I think the biggest thing is probably like, the placement aspect of the degree, like, you know, however many years the degree is for, like, so many placements for so many days.

WOMAN, 23, VIC

The location of job opportunities, and having to travel or move in order to access them, was noted by a few participants, particularly by those interested in more niche professions and those living in regional areas.



Needing to be in the location where the company is operating is fairly important because often, they need people to start right away rather than allowing for time for a person to move there.

MAN, 20, NSW

Competition in their industry of choice, and anticipating difficulties entering the job market was another barrier identified by participants.

“

It's an incredibly difficult field to break into, you're not going to get paid well for work you're expected to do and that, like, there's very few openings.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

Mental health struggles barred a few participants from their studies and represented a challenge to achieving career goals.

“

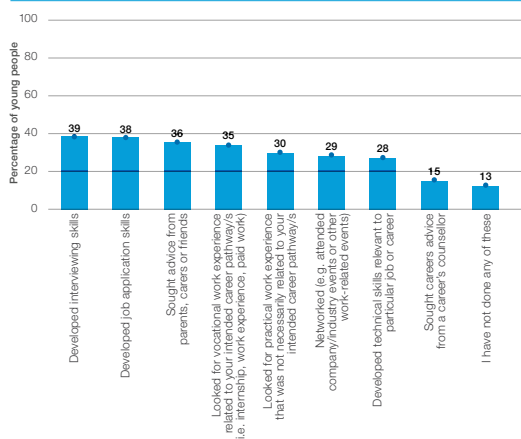
I am quite behind in my university because of mental health. So, because I had a massive depressive episode a couple of years ago and it cost me, like, a whole years' worth of university, and yes, sometimes I feel like that setback might ... because it's a big gaping hole on my transcript. So, I'm always sort of anxious about that.

MAN, 23, ACT

Enablers of success

According to our survey, 87% of young Australians have participated in at least one of the employability activities listed in figure 4.4, with the intention of improving their chances of getting a job. The most popular activities were developing interviewing skills (39%), developing job application skills (38%), seeking advice from parents, carers or friends (36%), and looking for vocational work experience in their career pathways (35%). Only 15% of young Australians declared seeking careers advice from a career counsellor.

FIGURE 4.4.
PARTICIPATION IN ACTIVITIES TO IMPROVE EMPLOYABILITY (N= 505)



Fifty-two per cent of young Australians also declared that they gained a formal qualification with the intention of getting a job in that field, and 49% chose specific subjects in their final years of high school with the same intention. Volunteering and completing short certificates were also chosen by 28% and 29% young Australians, respectively, with the intention of getting a job.

According to interview participants, doing well in education and gaining applied experience were enablers for their career goals and aspirations. The most commonly mentioned enabler that would help participants achieve their career goals was engaging in formal education, particularly tertiary education, that prepared them for their chosen careers.

“

I guess things like the fact that I went to what is considered like a good school and I will have a formal education, like I'll have a degree and I think those things ... [will] work in my favour.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

Being in a position to accumulate practical experience in their chosen field was a key enabler.

“

Probably working in a related industry through my university. I think that was a good decision on my part. Gaining that hands-on experience whilst I'm studying will help me to attain a job when I finish my degree.

WOMAN, 23, NSW

A few did not articulate any particular enablers to achieving their career goals, and expressed a belief that if they worked hard and remained focused their ambitions would come to pass.

“

I don't think [I will encounter any barriers], because I work hard. If my goals are clear, I don't think there's gonna be many challenges or difficulties that I couldn't overcome.

MAN, 22, NSW

“

I can't imagine I would encounter any difficulties really. I feel like it's pretty straight forward.

MAN, 20 VIC



POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Differences in employment preferences show the need for variety in employment options. It is important that work and employment conditions adjust to individual needs young people might have, for example, while completing their education, doing domestic work or caring for others. Employers and policy makers need to ensure that, regardless of their employment type, young people can enjoy fulfilling lives.
- A high proportion of young people from disadvantaged groups, such as those living with chronic illness or disability, were participating in the gig economy. This is probably linked to the flexibility of gig work and lower barriers of entry, enabling young people who need particular adjustments to tailor their work schedule to suit their needs. This highlights that workplaces outside of the gig economy need to do more to incorporate these characteristics and become more inclusive of young workers who need support. At the same time, the lack of regulation specifically for workers in the gig economy, often hired as independent contractors rather than employees, leaves already vulnerable young people unprotected and facing continuing long-term disadvantage. Policy makers should focus attention on ways to guarantee workers in the gig economy the same rights as workers outside the gig economy, while also preserving the benefits that gig workers enjoy.
- Young people's perceptions of an ideal job combined both practical and socio-emotional aspects of work. Having flexible hours, a secure job and a high salary are important to young people, but it is also important that the work makes a difference and that they can share their employer's values. Attracting and retaining young workers requires employers to offer jobs that fulfil both practical and socio-emotional aspects of work.
- Schools and teachers play an important role in shaping young people's career pathways, either via the subjects they choose or by providing them with advice about potential careers, but so do parents and friends. Careers education needs to involve all these actors to make sure young people get advice that reflects current trends in the job market and sets them up for success in the career pathway they decide to take.

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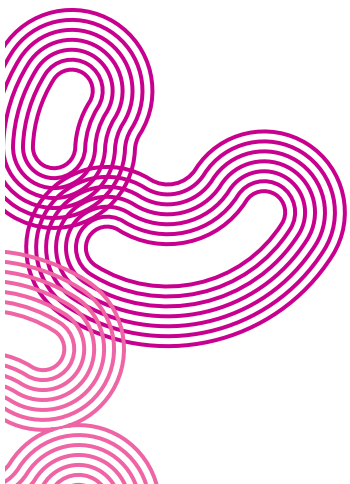
5

YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION

KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 55% of young Australians currently in education took classes in a mix of online and face-to-face study. Only 19% studied exclusively face-to-face.
- 2** 53% of young Australians agreed or strongly agreed that their education had prepared them for the future.
- 3** 59% of young Australians reported that they hold or have been enrolled in a micro-credential, micro-degree or micro-masters.
- 4** 32% of young people participated in some form of informal training online, and 27% of young Australians used multiple online sources.

- 5** Young people used informal learning opportunities to learn about diverse topics such as work-related skills, performing arts, political issues, and sex education.
- 6** Young Australians engaged with a wide range of sources for informal learning, including online platforms, family and friends, youth organisations, workshops, and research. When learning about finances or civic participation, interviewees most commonly sought advice from family and friends.
- 7** Young people would like to see changes in education, including having greater choice about content and its delivery, a greater link between study and future aspirations, and for education and educational environments to be more accepting of difference.
- 8** Young people are aware of misinformation and believed it was important to evaluate the accessibility, trustworthiness and credibility of information they were accessing. Most evaluated information by considering how recent it was, the reputation of the source, the credibility of the author, and the use of evidence to support the arguments made.





REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Qualifications

According to 2021 census data, 51% of young Australians aged 18 to 24 were in enrolled in education, 12% had a bachelor degree, 5% had an advance diploma and diploma level qualification, 14% had a certificate III or certificate IV qualification, and 57% had a secondary education qualification.¹ Among those who were in education, 18% were in vocational education and 60% were in university or other higher education.² Most young Australians in education (68%) studied full-time, 20% studied part-time, and 11% did not state their mode of study.³ The most common fields of study undertaken by young people were management and commerce (16% of enrolments), society and culture (13%), health (10%), engineering and related technologies (9%) and food, hospitality and personal services (8%).⁴

In 2020, 62% of 20-year-olds were studying for a qualification. Only 37% of these students spent time on campus, a drop from 97% in 2019.⁵ In 2021, when they were 21 years old, 54% were still studying for a qualification and 34% had already completed one.⁶

In a survey of more than 20,000 Australians aged from 15 to 19, 84.5% respondents were studying full-time in 2021 and 8.1% were studying part-time. Most (62.1%) respondents in education were satisfied or very satisfied with their studies, and 9.1% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied.⁷

In 2021, 73% of young Australians under 25 in undergraduate education rated the quality of their entire educational experience positively—an increase from 68% in 2020. The most positively rated aspects included learning resources (80%), teaching quality (79%), and skills development (79%), while learner engagement (52%) was perceived less favourably.⁸

Micro-credentials

The National Microcredentials Framework was published in November 2021 with the aim of bringing coherence to the offering of micro-credentials, establishing a formal definition of micro-credential and a minimum set of standards in the Australian context. As defined by this framework, a micro-credential is 'a certification of assessed learning or competency, with a minimum volume of learning of one hour and less than an AQF [Australian Qualification Framework] award qualification, that is additional, alternate, complementary to or a component part of an AQF award qualification.'⁹ The discussion around micro-credentials has focused on the definition, indicators of quality, their expansion and their role within higher education,^{10,11} with little attention paid to the experiences of young people opting in for these courses. However, it does appear that micro-credentials are disproportionately undertaken by people who are wealthier, have university degrees and who are supported by their employers.¹²

Training package skill sets are the closest type of nationally recognised Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications to a micro-credential offered by registered training organisations in Australia and recorded by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER). According to the NCVER data, in 2021 at least 18,895 enrolments and 8,880 completions¹³ of training package skill sets were from young Australians aged 18 to 24. This constituted 21% of all enrolments in training package skill sets and 23% of all completions during that year. These records do not include enrolments and completions of unaccredited training, which in 2021 accounted for 52.2% of employers.¹⁴

Among 20- to 24-year-olds who, in 2021, completed either nationally recognised VET short courses or subjects only, most reported benefitting by having achieved the main reason for undertaking the training (87.4% and 87.8%, respectively), having improved their employment status (67.1% and 65.9%) and being satisfied with the training overall (92.4% and 90.8%).¹⁵

The workplace has been identified as a particularly important place for learning outside school. During youth (between the ages of 15 and 27), literacy levels in Australia grow an average of 7.8 points, which is about the OECD average, but literacy levels of those with low parental education grow more (8.65 points) than for those with high parental education (6.12 points).¹⁶

2022 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

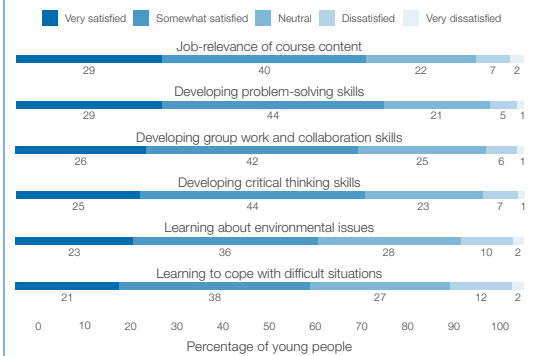
Student experience

Our survey revealed that 65% of young Australians had completed a post-secondary qualification, 50% were currently undertaking full-time study and a further 26% were studying part-time. Among those who were currently studying, 55% did so in a mix of online and face-to-face study, 23% studied only online and 19% studied only face-to-face. Young people from a low SES backgrounds were more likely to study only online (40%) than those from a high SES background (15%), and those who were born abroad were more likely to study face-to-face (31%) than those born in Australia (17%). Disability was also linked to different modes of attendance for young people currently in education. Thirty-four per cent of young people with a long-term illness reported attending online classes only compared with 22% of those with mental health conditions and 7.9% of those with physical disabilities.

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. More than half (59%) of young Australians held or had been enrolled in a micro-credential, micro-degree or micro-masters, and 21% had been enrolled in a micro-certificate course offered via online classes only. Sixty-nine per cent of young men undertook micro-certifications, compared with 51% of young women and only 41% of non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were more likely to report participating in micro-certificates (86%) than other young Australians (55%). Micro-certifications were highly popular with those who had already attained an advanced diploma or diploma, graduate diploma or graduate certificate, or a postgraduate degree (81%, 79% and 78%, respectively).

In terms of satisfaction with different aspects of their education, 73% of young Australians were very or somewhat satisfied with the development of problem-solving skills and 69% with job relevance of the course content. Only 58% were satisfied with learning about coping with difficult situations, and 59% with learning about environmental issues. Only 53% agreed or strongly agreed that their education had prepared them for the future. This feeling was shared across demographic groups.

FIGURE 5.1.
SATISFACTION WITH ASPECTS OF FORMAL EDUCATION (N=505)



When interviewees discussed their education, they largely reflected on their experiences in a positive light. They spoke about aspects such as the content, learning approaches and the educational environment.



Just the environment was just very, like, open and creative and ... I just really loved that.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 20, QLD

A number of interviewees also shared negative experiences in educational settings. When they discussed these experiences, young people often spoke about a misalignment between themselves and what was expected of them by the education system.



I didn't overly enjoy uni, but that's because I'm not very academic in you know, reading and writing.

WOMAN, 23, QLD

For this reason, a small number of young people used these personal reflections to call for change.



I certainly feel like you could expand how education is really conceptualised and structured in a way that does offer a wider breadth of how people undertake their study and how people undertake learning.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA

The majority of young people wished that their education had a stronger focus on developing basic life skills, such as securing work, writing a CV, and working with other people. Several interviewees wished that they had learned about voting and financial management.

Changes to education

Many interviewees wanted greater choice around the delivery of subjects in their school and explained that their preferred subjects were not offered due to logistical constraints and lack of student numbers. Most often, these were performing arts or IT/coding subjects.



I was not interested in a lot of the subjects that I was doing, just because of the way it was set up, and they put, like, several courses on different lines and you had to fill all six lines with the course on any one of them. The problem is, a lot of the stuff that I was interested in was all being put on the same line, so I could only do one of the subjects and then the other ones would just be filled in with stuff where it's, like, 'I don't want to do this, I don't want to be here. I'm here because, basically, I was made to pick this'.

MAN, 19, ACT

A small number of interviewees felt pressured by their school to select certain subjects.



[My school was] very strict ... you have to do nine subjects over a two-week timetable ... I felt very overwhelmed and pressured and forced.

WOMAN, 24, WA

The majority of young people also wished that their education had a stronger focus on developing basic life skills, such as securing work, writing a CV, and working with other people. Several interviewees wished that they had learned about voting and financial management.



I think something that needs to be in all schools across the board is having a class related around tax returns, you know, financial stability ... just very basic life skills, information about loans, interest rates ... If I had been taught that in a class specifically for that at school, I think I would have had so much more stability and knowledge around those things.

WOMAN, 22, VIC

A smaller number of interviewees wished that there had been more discussion about the different pathways for further study. For some, these were pathways to university, while others called for a greater focus on vocational options.



In the school that I grew up in there was quite a lot of stigma around ... vocational pursuits ... I feel like that was quite discouraged in my school and uni was the only option ... When I was growing up it wasn't really talked about, those kinds of vocational options which could be really valuable for a lot of people.

WOMAN, 23, NSW

Young people also explained that their school experiences were characterised by pressure to achieve academically. To alleviate this pressure, they suggested changes to assessment processes and addressing feelings of competition in school cultures.



I think that [my final years of school were] soul crushing ... it was a horrible, horrible time for myself and all my peers around me and I think, being under that constant, academic, rigour for so long ... they had the bell curve, which ultimately ... makes it more of a competition ... I guess you were, it's that mindset of being in constant competition with each other.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

A considerable number of students wished that their education was more responsive to their needs and was more accepting of differences among students. In some cases, this was in reference to specific teachers, however, there were also calls for these changes across the education system. A small number of interviewees voiced these concerns in relation to specific support for young women, queer young people, or students with disabilities.



I don't think there are enough teachers being able to kind of teach people to their levels and abilities and get more personal with ... people's strengths and weaknesses.

MAN, 20, VIC



Informal learning

Although formal education played a large role in young people's lives, 75% also engaged in informal learning opportunities outside of schools and universities.

According to our interview participants, these subjects of study were broad and included work-related skills, performing and creative arts, wellbeing, finances, political issues, ICT and coding skills, sex education, and sport.

Young people learned these skills from a wide variety of sources. According to our survey, 32% of young Australians had participated in some form of informal training online, and 27% used multiple online sources. Only 68% of young women reported accessing informal learning online compared with 81% of young men and 82% of non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people. Thirty-two per cent of young people used online platforms such as Udemy, Coursera or Skillshare, 32% used social media and 31% used online platforms hosted by training companies. Interview participants also reported learning skills from online social media platforms, family and friends, specialised workshops, youth organisations, self-education resources and research articles. Many interviewees consulted multiple sources, but for information about financial management and civic participation, they most commonly went to family and friends.



Like tax [and] banking stuff ... I really should know this ... I'm really glad I had my mum who helped me with a lot of that stuff ... I know not everyone had that, especially because I have a few friends who weren't close with their parents and have some problems with their parents, and so they really struggled to [learn about] those [topics].

WOMAN, 20, QLD

Young people were more likely to use online and social media platforms, such as YouTube and TikTok, to learn new skills such as coding, crafts, and workout routines. A number of interviewees supported their learning by using these platforms to ask questions of others online.



If I was to have something that I want to [learn to] do ... I can ask on Facebook ... and a lot of people will end up answering me and showing me how [to do it].

WOMAN, 23, QLD

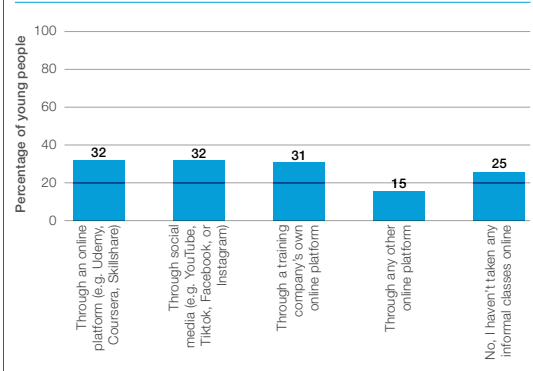
While these online and social media platforms were primary sources of information themselves, for several interviewees, they were also a guide to other information.



I started by looking at ... people that I followed [on social media] in the sport [space] ... from there, I found a lot of people that were doctors and sports scientists and stuff and then I looked at their papers ... I kind of just went up the chain until I would find a lot of journal articles and stuff that taught me a lot of things about the topic.

MAN, 20, VIC

FIGURE 5.2. PARTICIPATION IN INFORMAL ONLINE LEARNING (N=505)





Evaluating information

The overwhelming majority of interviewees felt that it was important for them to evaluate the information that they engaged with. When accessing information about developing practical skills, such as crafts and cooking, interviewees explained the need to evaluate it based on its accessibility and format.



Sometimes I just pick multiple [sources], see which one's better, which one I prefer to follow, easier to follow through ... Just whatever one I feel like is best for me to follow, which one I understand, which one I think I'm going to be capable of doing.

WOMAN, 21, SA

On the other hand, when accessing sources of information that focused on new content such as world events, politics and personal wellbeing, young people recognised that information may be biased by certain agendas.



[You have to ask] Who is it? Who, when you're getting this information, who's it benefiting? ... Where are you getting this information... [and why do] they want you to know about the information?

WOMAN, 20, QLD

A few interviewees explained that making these judgements was difficult. In such cases, they often relied on their own lived experiences and judgement to evaluate information. Sometimes, too, this involves considering others' assessment through comments and like/dislike ratings.



I check the comments; I check the comments and see what people have said around that, see the feedback on that avenue that they take me down, and if the feedback has been poor for that, then I would listen to what they [the comments] say.

MAN, 19, QLD

For young people who felt more confident in critically evaluating the information they accessed, they considered the currency of the information and the reputation of the publishing source. They often looked for recent sources directed at an Australian audience and a track record of publishing quality content. For many, these were often education or government institutions or verified outlets, such as The Conversation.



[Trustworthiness involves] the writers and the actual sources, so whether that's the websites, or publications ... if I am intentionally searching for particular information, often I will, say, use and go to The Conversation, because I know that's who those articles are written by, and they're peer reviewed by scientists, and so while they're not necessarily journals, they are written by people studying those topics.

MAN, 24, VIC

A large number of interviewees considered the public credibility of the author, their qualifications, years of experience, and whether they are recognised as having expertise in a certain field. Additionally, if authors were not subject experts, the visibility of their identity was important for interviewees to make their evaluations.



I would trust someone who puts their name out there and their face out there over someone who has no profile picture, no outside links.

WOMAN, 24, WA

Just a small number of interviewees indicated that they evaluated information based on how data and evidence were used to justify the arguments being made.



There's a lot of posts ... that will quote certain statistics or quote something that a person has said without providing very good context or very good sources ... [so] I'll often search it too and try and find the actual, either a peer reviewed thing or an article that covers it in in-depth and has proper figures quoted and everything to see if it's actually factual.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 20, QLD



POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- The dominance of online delivery, either alone or in combination with face-to-face classes, is uneven across socioeconomic groups. Further research is needed to identify and monitor the long-term impacts of this switch on the socio-emotional aspects of learning, as well as on learning, job market and wellbeing outcomes. Policy initiatives may need to provide additional support to ensure that differences in mode of delivery do not result in further inequalities.
- The popularity of micro-credentials is uneven across among demographic groups. As the implementation of the National Microcredentials Framework advances, it is vital to monitor the effects of micro-credentials on young people. We need a better understanding of how these credentials are valued in the job market and what motivates young people to pursue them, along with a better understanding of their impact on young people's employment and wellbeing outcomes.
- Informal learning is common, especially offline and with the input of family and friends. Young people have different mechanisms to assess if the information they source is trustworthy, but schools must ensure that all young people have the skills to judge different information sources and are able confidently to evaluate a source's credibility, so that they can continue learning outside school.

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6

YOUNG PEOPLE, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 24% of young Australians rated their mental health as poor or very poor, and 41% rated it as good or excellent.
- 2** At least 85% of young Australians reported feelings of worry, anxiety or pessimism.
- 3** 45% of young Australians reported they often or very often felt like they were missing out on being young.
- 4** 28% of young Australians had received mental health support in the past 12 months, and 16% had sought but not received such support.
- 5** 24% of young Australians experienced food insecurity in the past 12 months.
- 6** 51% of young Australians went without eating for a day due to lack of money at some point during the past 12 months.
- 7** Young people described health in holistic terms, incorporating physical health, mental health and a robust sense of wellbeing that was bolstered by affirming relationships, a positive state of mind and effectively managing stress.
- 8** The most common strategy to support mental health was seeking help from friends, family and intimate partners. The next most common was seeking professional help such as therapy or other forms of clinical support.
- 9** A notable proportion of young people indicated they were not always able to eat the food that they wanted. Reasons included financial pressures, the influence of medications, and access to food for certain diets.
- 10** A number of young people were concerned about the rising costs of living affecting their access to fresh fruits and vegetables now and into the future.

REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Physical and mental health

The 2021 Australian census revealed that 28% of young Australians aged 18 to 24 had at least one long-term health condition. Sixteen per cent reported only one health condition and more than 3% reported having two or more conditions.¹ Among those with a long-term health condition, the most common were mental health conditions (43%) and asthma (31%).²

Physical health was highly valued by 64.4% of young Australians and was closely linked to other forms of wellbeing, with 49% of young people engaging in physical exercise to manage stress.³ Despite this concern with physical health, 14.4% of 18- to 24-year-olds consumed more than 10 standard drinks in the preceding seven days⁴ and, although less likely to smoke daily compared with older age groups, 21.7% had used an e-cigarette or vaping device at least once.⁵

In a 2021 survey undertaken for Mission Australia, mental health emerged as a clear theme. The top personal concerns for young people were coping with stress, mental health, and study problems. Women were more likely than men to be concerned about achieving study or work goals, barriers to achieving goals, coping with stress, mental health and body image, and unfair treatment due to gender.³

Incidences of anxiety conditions among young people aged 15 to 24 have increased over time, from 18.9% of young women in 2014/15 to 24.6% in 2017/19, and from 7.9% to 13.9% for young men.⁶

Most young people rated their mental health and wellbeing in positive terms, with 30.4% rating it as 'better than good', 31.2% 'very good' and 9.2% 'excellent'. However, 15.4% rated their mental health and wellbeing as 'poor'. Young men were more likely to rate their mental health and wellbeing in positive terms, and gender diverse young people were more likely to rate it negatively. Almost half (44.5%) of young people reported feeling stressed either all of the time or most of the time in the previous four weeks.³

Just over one-third (35.6%) of young LGBTIQ+ people aged 15 to 21 rated their mental health and wellbeing as poor/fair, which was substantially higher than the broader population, where only 9.1% rated their mental health and wellbeing as poor/fair. Eighty-one per cent of LGBTIQ+ young people reported high or very high levels of psychological distress, with higher rates among trans and gender diverse young people compared with cisgender young people.⁷

In the 2020–2021 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing, 46% of young women and 31.2% of young men aged 16 to 24 indicated they had a mental health disorder and had experienced symptoms in the previous 12 months. High rates of anxiety disorders were also reported, with 31.5% of young people experiencing symptoms in the previous 12 months. Again, the rate for young women was higher at 41.3%. Among 16- to 34-year-olds, 20% experienced psychological distress at high or very high levels.⁸

COVID-19 impacts

COVID-19 has had a substantial impact on young people over the past few years. Although the number of cases among young people has been relatively high, the number of deaths for this age group has been low.⁹ Federal government health data as at August 2022 show that 20- to 29-year-olds had the highest number of cases (902,863), followed by people in the 30 to 39 age group, and then by those aged 40 to 49. Yet there were only 30 deaths among people aged 20 to 29 during the same period.¹⁰

Several aspects of the lives of young Australians were negatively impacted by the pandemic: 68.3% reported that it affected their participation in activities, 62.3% said it affected their education, and 50.3% reported impacts on mental health.³ Twenty-three per cent of 20-year-olds reported having a serious mental health illness and almost 20% of 20-year-olds felt lonely all or most of the time.¹¹

Life satisfaction declined for young people at greater rates than for other age groups, and rates of psychological distress increased.¹² Life satisfaction rates among 20-year-olds dropped from 78% in 2019 to 73% in 2021, but more than 90% reported they had some support during difficult times, generally from family and friends.¹¹

Avenues of support

Young people aged 16 to 34 sought out mental health support, with 24.1% having seen a mental health professional, compared with 16.8% of those aged 35 to 64. Among LGBTIQ+ young people, 44.5% reported receiving treatment or support in the last 12 months for a diagnosed mental health condition. These rates varied between diagnoses, with LGBTIQ+ young people most commonly accessing support for generalised anxiety disorder (33.1%) or depression (32.8%) compared with, for example, post-traumatic stress disorder (6.0%) or an eating disorder (4.1%).⁷ In order to reduce stress, common strategies among young people included doing something relaxing (63.2%), spending time online (62.3%) and playing games or watching TV/movies (61.4%).³



2022 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

What does it mean to be healthy?

Interviewees described what it meant to be healthy in terms of both mental and physical health.

Mental health and wellbeing for young people were conceived in multiple ways, such as maintaining positive connections and relationships, as well as a more internal focus on state of mind. When asked what it meant to be healthy, many participants described a broader state of wellbeing.



It's a combination of factors. I think it's both physical and mental, and I think it is also dictated by our environment. Like, I think, for me, being healthy means that I'm being active regularly. It means that I have access to nature, like, I'm spending time outdoors, and kind of actively appreciating it, and I suppose strong connections as well.

WOMAN, 20, NSW



[Being healthy] means being able to eat well and exercise somewhat regularly to maintain physical fitness and health. But it also means being in an environment where you are happy and not in a state of mental anguish.

MAN, 20, NSW

Several interviewees mentioned managing stress alongside physical health as a key element of being healthy.



Being able to be in a mindset of being content with what I have at the moment, it's not necessarily just physical health; obviously, physical health does come with feeling healthy but also having that mindset of, okay, what I have got is great and living in the moment, not putting too much pressure on myself.

WOMAN, 21, QLD

A few interview participants spoke about health as having affirming, positive relationships and an internally self-aware understanding of contentment.



[Being healthy is] how do I feel as a person? Am I happy? Do I feel supported? Do I feel I have meaningful connections in my life? For me, in general, looking at that very personal idea of how I feel impacts a lot of my areas of health

NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA

Interviewees also described being healthy in terms of physical health, and maintaining strong, fit bodies. Healthy eating and exercise were a key part of this, and several participants expressed a desire to be better at incorporating healthy habits into their everyday lives.



Physical health is important, you know. I want to be fit, I want to be strong. You know, my heart has got to be working well. I gotta have a good BMI.

MAN, 22, NSW

Interview participants who described experiences of chronic health conditions had a slightly different understanding of health. Staying physically healthy and avoiding illness were important among this cohort.



Eating well, building immunity, that's a big thing for me at the moment ... and feeling, like, motivated and not tired ... I had COVID a while ago now. It wasn't bad, but ever since then, I'm continuously like, I've either got a cough or I've got a sore throat, or I've got a runny nose or all these things at once, but in the past, I never used to get sick.

WOMAN, 23, VIC

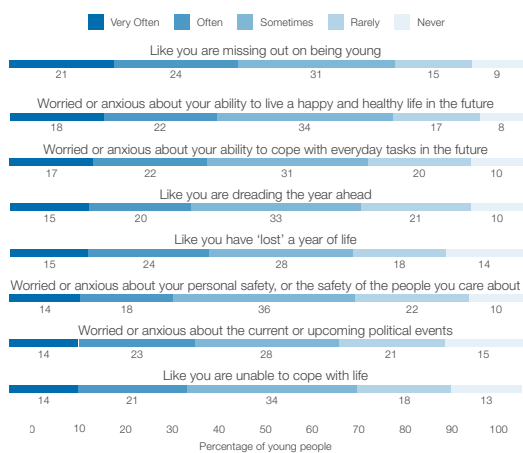
Eighty-five per cent of young Australians reported having feelings of worry, anxiety or pessimism.

Mental health

Twenty-four per cent of young Australians rated their mental health as poor or very poor, and 41% rated it as good or excellent. Young women (30%) and non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people (54%) were more likely to rate their mental health as poor or very poor than young men (17%), while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were less likely to report experiencing poor or very poor mental health (14%) in comparison to other young Australians (26%).

Eighty-five per cent of young Australians reported having feelings of worry, anxiety or pessimism. Most commonly, young people reported they often or very often felt like they were missing out on being young (45%), worried about their ability to live a happy and healthy life in the future (40%), felt like they had lost a year of their lives (39%) and worried about their ability to cope with everyday tasks in the future (39%).

FIGURE 6.1.
FEELINGS OF PESSIMISM AND ANXIETY AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE (N=505)



In response to a question about how best to stay mentally healthy, interview participants had a range of strategies that reflected approaches to health more broadly. One commonly cited strategy was gaining support from key relationships, including family, but more often from friends and intimate partners. Being able to talk to someone about difficulties or struggles in their lives without recrimination was important to participants.



Keeping a good circle of friends can definitely keep your spirits up, having people that you can rely on to cheer you up when you're feeling down and definitely having a good connection with family members ... We [my friends and I] all sit there, talk crap and have a good time, try to have a little stress relief, no talk about work, that kind of stuff.

MAN, 19, SA

For several interview participants, professional support such as therapy was a key strategy for staying mentally healthy. This was particularly the case for the few participants managing chronic mental ill health. Several others spoke about having used therapy in the past, or said that they would access such services should they need it.



I've been to a lot of counsellors and psychologists, psychiatrists, and being able to remember their important mantras really helps.

WOMAN, 24, WA

In the past 12 months, 28% of young Australians had received mental health support, and 16% had sought but not received mental health support. Of those with a mental health condition, less than half (49%) received mental health support, and a further 13% sought but did not receive support. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were more likely to have sought but not received mental health support (35%) than other young Australians (13%).

A few interviewees discussed encountering barriers to getting mental health support, such as affordability and ease of accessing professional support.



In terms of professional support, it can be hard to find, and especially hard to afford and schedule as a younger person who is less likely to have set ... shifts, or they'll have study things happening.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 20, QLD



Several interviewees conceived mental health as an internal state that could be managed and controlled by maintaining emotional self-awareness, a strong sense of self-belief or by prioritising individual needs.



Looking at things for the way they are, I understand that my emotions, and my feelings are completely valid. I do also understand that they are not necessarily rational, and they are not realistic at times, too.

MAN, 20, TAS



I think the best ways to stay mentally healthy are prioritising yourself, I think, especially when it comes to work, putting yourself first.

WOMAN, 22, VIC

A few interviewees struggled to explain any specific mental health strategies. For these participants, who indicated they had not struggled before with mental ill health, an overt method was not seen to be necessary.



I've never really had any problem with my mental health. I'm generally just like, my reaction to quite a lot of things is just, sort of, 'oh, okay, well, that happened', which just, kind of, my normal way of looking at things.

MAN, 19, ACT



My mental health, I've never really had any issues with mental health. I've always been good ... Maybe talk to someone about it who's close.

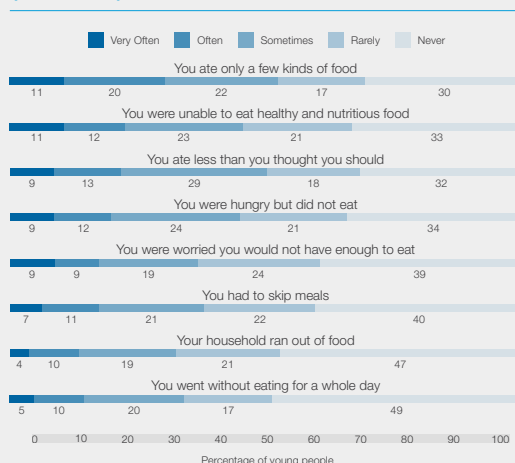
MAN, 21, VIC

Food insecurity

Our survey measured young people's experiences of food insecurity by asking young people if there was ever a time in the past 12 months when they had run out of food and were unable to purchase more. Overall, during the past 12 months, 24% of young Australians experienced food insecurity. Young people across regions and SES backgrounds reported experiencing food insecurity, but there were pronounced differences for some groups. Food insecurity was experienced by 49% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people compared with 20% of other young Australians. Fifty-five per cent of young people with a physical disability and 50% of those with a long-term illness experienced food insecurity, compared with 17% for those without disability or illness.

At least once in the past 12 months, lack of money meant that 70% of young Australians ate only a few kinds of food, 68% ate less than they thought they should, 67% were not able to eat healthy and nutritious food, 66% were hungry but did not eat, 61% were worried they wouldn't have enough to eat, 60% had to skip meals, 53% ran out of food, and 51% went without eating for a whole day.

FIGURE 6.2.
PROBLEMS WITH ACCESSING FOOD
(N=505)



More than half of the interviewees shared that they had consistent and secure access to the food that they need. Most often, they explained that they had the resources to access this food themselves or they lived at home with their family.



I have a lot of time, so I'm able to cook all my own lunches and dinner. I eat at least two home cooked meals a day. I do all my own grocery shopping. I have a great degree of control over what I eat, when I eat, how I eat, which has meant that over the past few years, I have had the freedom to really pinpoint the best ways for me to make sure that I'm getting what I need.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA



I am fortunate enough to live at home so that is helpful with mum and dad being able to pay for groceries, where I can obviously if I need to pay for food I can, but I generally try and prepare food at home so that I don't have to pay for food out.

WOMAN, 21, QLD

Although these young people had the resources to access food, they also noted that over the past few years, there had been instances where they could not purchase the food they desired because of supply issues.



Recently with, like, the flooding, and you know, how, like, a lot of things were not available, I guess, then we had to kind of choose alternatives, but no, I've always, I think I've always had access to good food.

WOMAN, 23, VIC

A small number of interview participants discussed how factors such as time pressures and the accessibility of food that suited their dietary needs impacted their ability to eat what they wanted. This is consistent with our survey findings, which revealed 72% of young Australians were not able to find the food they wanted in their suburb or town and 57% shopped for food more than an hour away from home at some point during the past 12 months.



I was living with my partner at the time, and we are both vegan ... and there weren't any shops nearby and my partner was trying to go to the shops, and I had uni work that I didn't have time to organise myself, so I just barely ate anything for a week.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA

A notable proportion of interviewees shared that they had experienced food insecurity at some point throughout their life. For many of these young people, these experiences were linked to insecure income and not being able to afford food between pay cycles.



There have been quite a few times when I have been down to my last two or three dollars to last me a week and, most of the time, [that] means that I live off a loaf of bread and some two-minute noodles. Yes, I would say there have been times when I have not been able to eat the food I wanted, if any food at all.

MAN, 24, ACT



I'll have a week of being able to eat whatever I want to eat and then, you know, next week, I have no money, so I basically just have to live off bread.

WOMAN, 22, VIC

A few interview participants described strategies to deal with insecure access to food, such as dumpster diving.



No, I am a bit street smart with that kind of shit ... [I used to] dumpster dive or do some other shit ... because I need[ed] the food ... It was late at night. I was like, 'Well, how am I going to get food?' ... Definitely didn't have, like, direct access to it, like, money-wise at times.

MAN, 20, TAS



Several interviewees discussed factors unrelated to their financial situation that affected their ability to eat what they wanted. One theme related to how mental health and medications influenced appetite.



It's a combination of forgetfulness and suppression of appetite, and nausea is a side effect of one of my medications, so I have to put it in a bit more of an active effort ... I have to figure out 'Okay, how am I going to buy this one specific food? Because I'm not going to be able to eat anything else today.'

WOMAN, 20, NSW



The only reason that I wouldn't eat the kinds of food that I need to is probably due to stress. Unfortunately, that's how I experience stress. It really affects my appetite.

WOMAN, 23, NSW

A number of interviewees expressed concerns about the rising cost of living and how this would affect their ability to access the food that they need now and into the future.



I just feel that the prices of what fresh fruit and vegetables are at the moment is, like, I don't even know how to explain it. I feel like if it was to go up anymore, I would rather not eat fresh fruit and vegetables and, I'd rather go to like, frozen stuff.

WOMAN, 23, VIC

POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Young people have a holistic understanding of health, which calls for holistic research and policy responses. Cultivating spaces that foster connections with family, peers and the physical environment will have repercussions for health. Initiatives that incorporate this understanding are more likely to be effective in attracting young people's interest and engagement.
- Feelings of pessimism and anxiety are prevalent among young Australians, and support is not always available or accessed by those who need it. Three key actions could help to provide young Australians with the tools to deal with negative feelings: increasing the public provision of mental health support for those who attempt to access it; understanding what prevents those who need mental health support from accessing it; and reducing the barriers for groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people that prevent them from receiving mental health support when they request it. Schools can also play a role in educating students on how to cope with negative feelings and develop the socio-emotional skills and capabilities to manage relationships and stressors.
- Food insecurity is a prevalent problem for young Australians and affects even those with full-time jobs and those from high SES backgrounds. Better measurement tools are needed to capture the multidimensionality and complexity of the phenomenon. Simplistic measures, such as asking if young people had run out of food, can hide the strategies young people use, like skipping meals or substituting fresh food for cheaper alternatives, in order to not run out of food. Multiple charities work hard to supply food to those who struggle to access it, but more work is needed to remove the stigma associated with accessing help. Structural solutions to lift young people out of poverty are also needed to mitigate the prevalence of food insecurity.



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7

YOUNG PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS

KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 49% of young Australians were single and 38% were in a relationship.
- 2** 57% of young Australians thought it was likely or extremely likely that they will live in a long-term relationship with someone in the future and 53% thought it was likely or extremely likely that they will have children.
- 3** 70% of young Australians thought a sense of belonging to their family was important and 68% of young people thought a sense of belonging to their friendship group was important.
- 4** 60% of young Australians often or very often felt like they belonged when they spent time with family and 57% felt a sense of belonging when they spent time with friends.
- 5** 43% of young Australians often or very often felt like they belonged when they were at their educational institution.
- 6** 21% of young Australians thought that writing insulting things online is not bullying, and 25% believed that there are no rules online so they can do whatever they want.
- 7** 58% of young people perceived a movement towards more equal gender relationships at work or in employment, yet 59% thought gender determined choice of career, 58% thought gender influenced how junior workers are treated by senior staff, and 58% thought it determined the amount of money young people get paid.
- 8** 56% of young Australians perceived a shift towards more equal gender relationships in the household, and most did not believe that domestic activities, such as organising money, household shopping and paying bills, household chores, teaching children discipline, and home-schooling children during lockdowns were determined by gender at all.
- 9** Important relationships with friends, peers, family and intimate partners intersected a range of domains in young people's lives, from socialising, managing mental health to housing and financial aid.
- 10** Participants reported experiences of non-belonging and exclusion in education contexts, particularly secondary school where stories of social isolation, struggles making friends and bullying were common.





REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Formal relationships

In 2021, 10% of young Australians aged 18 to 24 lived with their partners in a de facto marriage and 2% lived together with their partners in a registered marriage.¹ The census records that 6% of young women has had at least one child² and 3.4% of young Australians were parents living with their children in the same household.³

Social connection and support

Young people frequently turned to informal avenues of support, with 80.5% of young people reporting that they would go to friends, 69.7% that they would go to a parent or guardian, and 47.5% that they would go to the internet for help with important issues.⁴

Research into online safety undertaken by the office of the eSafety commissioner found that young people aged 13 to 25 with an intellectual disability saw digital technology and the internet in positive terms. Positive attributes included the ability of online platforms to support learning and education, communication, social interaction, as an avenue for entertainment and for its ability to support independence.⁵

For LGBTIQ+ young people, 88.3% felt that friends were the most supportive for those coming out about their sexuality or gender identity. Teachers (65.2%), followed by teammates (63.6%) and co-workers (60.8%) were the next most supportive groups.⁶ Online spaces were mediums for connecting with the LGBTIQ+ community and could become happy, comfortable and safe spaces by blocking negative content and seeking affirming content. Family and school peers played a role in helping young people create these happy online spaces.⁷


Social media formed a critical component in the lives of gender diverse young people aged 16 to 35. Findings counter fears expressed during COVID-19 lockdowns about young LGBTIQ+ people forced to isolate in unsafe, homophobic spaces. Rather, while homes were found to be sometimes challenging, the time available during lockdowns was used to explore and deepen gender and sexuality identities, as well as interacting with LGBTIQ+ communities.⁷

Unfair treatment and online risks

The most common reasons for unfair treatment reported by young people included gender (37.3%), mental health (27.6%), and race or cultural background (27.6%). Reports of unfair treatment were higher among gender diverse young people (69.9%) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (52.5%). Almost half of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (47.1%) reported being treated unfairly in the previous year, compared with only 33.6% of other young Australians, and 30.9% were extremely or very concerned about personal safety, compared with 19.3% of all other respondents. Of those who reported being treated unfairly, 52.5% said it was due to race or cultural background.⁴

Young people with intellectual disabilities reported encountering online risks in the form of cyberbullying, inappropriate content for their age, contact from people not known to them, too much screen time, scams, purchasing things accidentally, and private information breaches. While many young people encountered similar issues online, young people with an intellectual disability responded differently, and were more likely to avoid particular activities or types of media in order to mitigate negative experiences online.⁵

LGBTIQ+ young people reported concerns with online spaces, including limited diverse content, lack of representation of particular aspects of identity, such as race or ethnicity, disability, or neurodiversity, censorship of LGBTIQ+ content, and poor transparency of moderation policies. LGBTIQ+ young people also expressed concerns about frequent anti-trans, homophobic and bi-phobic hate speech and called for clearer understanding of censorship approaches to address such content.⁷



32% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were parents, compared with only 7% of other young Australians.

2022 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

Important relationships

Almost half of young Australians reported they were single (49%) and 38% were in a relationship. Another 10% were casually dating, and the remaining 3% had another relationship status or preferred not to disclose. Fifty-one per cent of young women reported being in a relationship, compared with 27% of young men and 11% of non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people, while 56% of young men reported being single, compared with 42% of young women and 28% of non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were also more likely to be in a relationship (45%) than other young Australians (37%). Eleven per cent of young Australians were already parents. Those in rural areas were more likely to be parents (27%) than those in regional (19%) and metropolitan (8%) areas, and 32% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were parents, compared with only 7% of other young Australians.

Thinking about the future, 57% of young Australians thought it was likely or extremely likely that they will live in a long-term relationship with someone, and 53% thought it was likely or extremely likely that they will have children. Only 21% of non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people thought they would be in a long-term relationship in the future, compared with 69% of young women and 49% of young men.

There was no statistically significant difference between gender groups in planning to have children; however, young people living in metropolitan areas (24%) were more likely to report it was unlikely or extremely unlikely that they will have children than young people in regional (12%) and rural (4%) areas. When thinking about relationships more broadly, 60% of young Australians thought it was likely or extremely likely that they will have a supportive social network around them in the future. Young women (69%) and young men (53%) were more likely to think this was the case than non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people (47%).

During the interviews, discussions about important relationships, including those with close friends, peers, family and intimate partners, intersected and underscored conversations about a range of topics. Interviewees were also asked about belonging, including times, places and people with whom they felt they belonged. They spoke about positive feelings associated with having like-minded people around them, but also discussed the role of relationships in managing mental health problems, financial support, and housing. A few talked about feeling excluded from those around them, including friends, family or intimate partners, and the pain this could cause.

While friendship groups were often formed during secondary school, a few interview participants explained that these had not been easy places for them to form such relationships.

Belonging

Our survey revealed 60% of young Australians often or very often felt like they belonged when they spent time with family and 57% did so when they spent time with friends. These feelings were broadly shared across demographic groups. Among interviewees, friendship groups were the most common source of belonging. Friendships were formed in a variety of arenas and the feelings of connections forged with like-minded others, with those who understood and supported them, were highly valued.



I used to do improv, and I felt like I belonged there ... I was able to contribute something positively in the group, and I was able to make people laugh, I love everyone there ... I could be more authentically me.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 21, WA



I knew that I had always felt a little bit off about the friends I had, and I just felt like I was trying to fit in. But with these guys I felt like I didn't even need to fit in, and I think that was like, I felt like I belonged there because I just felt so comfortable. Like, they are still my friends now.

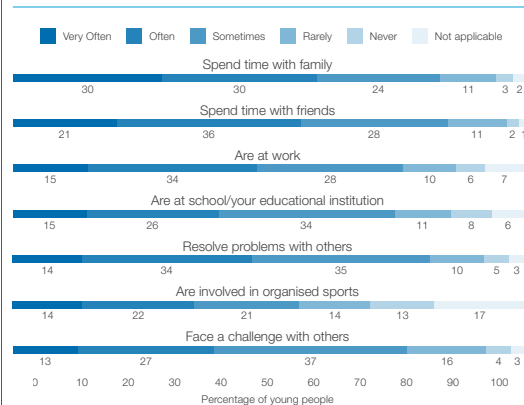
MAN, 20, TAS.



I guess it's just that feeling of, like, that unconditional love and support [from my friends], I guess ... I know that I can reach out to them for, like, anything, and they will do whatever they can in their ability to help me. Which I really like, and that really helps because we just all support each other, and we all take care of each other.

WOMAN, 20, QLD.

FIGURE 7.1.
YOUNG PEOPLE'S SENSE OF BELONGING IN DIFFERENT SCENARIOS (N=505)



While friendship groups were often formed during secondary school, a few interview participants explained that these had not been easy places for them to form such relationships. According to our survey, only 43% of young Australians often or very often felt like they belonged when they were at their educational institution. Forming friendships via community groups connected by shared interests, or through church groups, were other sources of a sense of belonging and connection.



I started going to just community events and settled into a community that I really liked, which is just, it's why a lot of my friends aren't my age because it's like, people that just had the same interests as me like, Dungeons and Dragons, tabletop games, board games, stuff like that.

WOMAN, 23, QLD.



At the church that I attend on Friday nights ... the community made me feel like I belonged, just with acceptance and people asking how I was. And yeah, having people to check in on you really makes you feel like you belong.

MAN, 24, VIC.



Almost half (49%) of young Australians who had resolved problems with others, and 41% of those who had faced a challenge with others, said it had often or very often provided a sense of belonging. Forty-three per cent of young people who were involved in organised sports said that it provided a sense of belonging. Among LGBTIQ+ interviewees, a few said being in safe queer spaces where they could be accepted for who they were provided a sense of belonging.



With my friends, like, new friends I made in uni. I love my friends from primary school but my friends at uni, have I mentioned this anyway, I'm gay and my friends at uni are also gay. My friends from primary school are not, so, like, I love them, but ... I wasn't aware of, like, having to watch what I said, because that's often a thing. If I'm around my parents I have to be careful, like, oh, like, what can I say?

WOMAN, 20, NSW



When I am in queer spaces, a lot of the time I can feel like I belong there. When I am being respected and understood by the people in my surroundings, I can feel comfortable there.

WOMAN, 24, NSW

Some interviewees associated belonging with gaining an improved understanding of who they were as a person, and what their interests and passions were.



Belonging was something that came, partly, with better understanding who I was as a person, but also being offered and having access to opportunities to actually seek out people ... [for example] I spent a lot of time in a youth centre which I found really good because it was a way for me to meet people my own age, but I had the freedom to choose and form relationships better.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA



It's only been the last year that I've found that I've been accepted in my work community, home, that whole, where I felt that sense of belonging, because I have learned about who I am, the type of people I like hanging out, the hobbies that I enjoy, but as a naive 18- to, even like, I would say, 22-year-old, I didn't know my people, who my people were or my passions or anything like that.

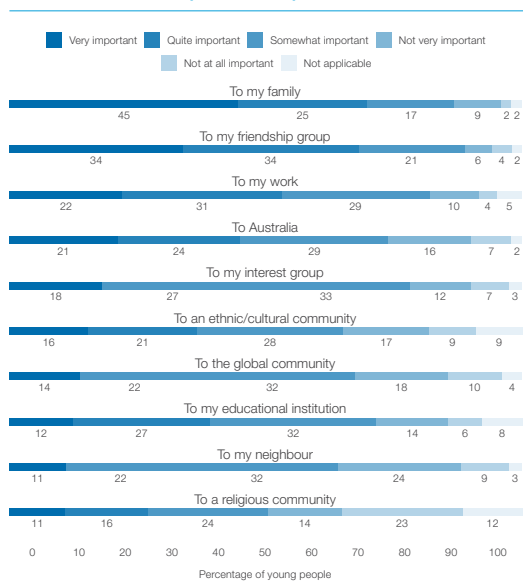
WOMAN, 23, QLD



The importance of belonging

A sense of belonging to their family was nominated by 70% of young Australians as very or quite important, 68% thought belonging to a friendship group was important, and 53% nominated belonging to their work as important. A sense of belonging to a religious community and their neighbourhood was important for 27% and 33%, respectively. These feelings were shared among demographic groups, although slightly lower rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people reported these areas as important for a sense of belonging.

FIGURE 7.2.
RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF DIFFERENT GROUPS TO A SENSE OF BELONGING (N=505)



Our interview participants discussed how relationships and a robust sense of belonging also underscored various domains of their lives, such as the workplace, mental health, housing and finances. Several noted that they felt a sense of belonging and connection with their colleagues in the workplace.

“

I do think, I think where I'm at now and, workwise, I feel like I belong and, you know ... I mesh so well with the team.

WOMAN, 22, VIC

“

This week when I'm at placement, I feel like I really belong in my field. Like, the people I work with, the things that I do, they're like ... I don't know, even though I've only been there, like, I feel like I belong in the centre.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

Relationships provided important support for some participants going through mental health problems.

“

I think that I'm pretty lucky with the people that I'm surrounded with, I guess. I'm really close with my family. I've got two sisters, similar age, and my oldest sister, I've always just, anything can always go to her, and I never feel like there's nothing that I can't tell her, so I feel like, yes, I've got like a good support system, and my partner as well, and friends.

WOMAN, 23, VIC

“

[As an inpatient in a private hospital] we played games together, we made jokes together, we watched movies together. Every night we watched a horror movie. It was great. And I also didn't feel alone ... When I was at this group and I saw that other people my age were still also struggling, and things like that, it made me feel very welcoming and belonging, just the way that we all had each other's backs.

MAN, 24, ACT



Relationships with family and intimate partners underscored participants' housing situations and financial affairs. In the context of the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns and separation from family, feelings of connection at home with friends and housemates became particularly important for a few participants.



Because I was there in a different state from my family during a time when there were COVID lockdowns for half a year, I was unable to see my family for quite a long time. Being in a place with people I could call friends [in my student accommodation] and who I felt like I belonged with was very important.

MAN, 20, NSW

For some young people, relationships with partners and family were important elements of financial and housing security.



My long-term partner, he owns the house that we live in, so I suppose what I pay in rent isn't paying off some stranger's mortgage. It's actually paying off the house that I'm probably going to live in for a very, very long time.

WOMAN, 23, VIC



[Thinking about purchasing a house] but I guess, a little bit of that would come with having a partner and I guess you would split that. In some ways you'd split that, it wouldn't be as much of a financial burden.

WOMAN, 19, VIC

A few participants explained that their parents were helping financially in an ad hoc manner.



Recently, yes. Only a little bit. Yes, my dad will transfer me a little bit per week ... I'd probably be fine without it, but he just wanted to, kind of, show some support. As I'm trying to save up for my placements, he wanted to help out a little bit.

WOMAN, 23, NSW

Disconnection and exclusion

Secondary school was the most common domain where interviewees felt a sense of disconnection and exclusion. Some described struggles making friends during their teenage years and feeling disconnected from their peers, while others talked about being bullied by their peers and expressed how this made them feel isolated and alone.



[Connecting with others] was something I really struggled with growing up because I always felt very socially isolated, even if it was not a literal, physical isolation. I was never able to emotionally or socially connect to people the way my peers were ... I found high school generally to be a bit of a social free for all, and it never really worked out well. It could be quite a malicious environment.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA



I just didn't fit in [in high school], you know, it was like a bunch of blokey blokes. I just didn't fit in. I tried hard just to fit in just because I wanted to be a part of the cool kids' group, but it just never worked, because I just wasn't like that.

MAN, 20, TAS



The public school, there were people, they weren't very nice. I was bullied in that school. I don't know why, I was very quiet. Probably just because I was a bit more academic and nerdy than they were.

WOMAN, 23, QLD

A few interviewees felt excluded in other educational settings, including primary school or university.



[I] just felt kind of socially I had nothing in common with these people. Different interests and even the way that I dressed versus them and stuff. Yes, I just felt like I couldn't find any sort of level ground with anyone.

MAN, 20, VIC



For some participants, their primary feelings of exclusion and isolation related to family.



When I was younger, and I was at home, my parents were very controlling, and I was just constantly at work and stressed from school. I just couldn't handle that. I was so upset and just tired and rundown and no one was listening to me.

WOMAN, 24, WA



I have quite a large family, my parents are divorced ... I respect my family, I know that, and, like, there's part of me that loves my family, but I don't belong in my family.

WOMAN, 20, QLD

A small number of participants described their frustration at being excluded and isolated in the workplace due to difficult colleagues.



[At work] I'm always just, kind of, there in the background, with no idea to say, and be like, 'Ah, okay, I'm gonna go check on the clients. Ha-ha! I'll leave you guys to it.' And yes, I think it's just, even at work right now just, I don't feel like I really fit in.

MAN, 21, VIC



I worked for this company that was in mining and I was the youngest by far, as you can imagine, and I was maybe one of three women in the company, and I felt, yes, they were like 'Who is this young, energetic thing with these alternative worldviews?' Like, on a daily basis, I was questioned, or, you know, side comments of 'Why are you like this?' You know.

WOMAN, 23, QLD

A few participants said they had always felt a sense of inclusion among the people they interacted with, and within the spaces they occupied.



I would not say that there are places where I really felt that I didn't belong. I feel like I have been quite privileged and blessed in that sense.

MAN, 24, VIC

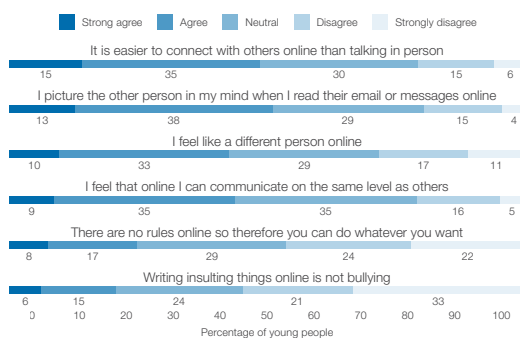


Fifty per cent of young people felt it was easier to connect with others online than in person.

Relating with others online

More than one-fifth (21%) of young Australians believed that writing insulting things online is not bullying, and 25% believed that there are no rules online and they can do whatever they want. However, young Australians were more likely to report empathetic online behaviour. Fifty per cent of young people felt it was easier to connect with others online than in person and 51% pictured the other person in their mind when they sent messages online.

FIGURE 7.3. ACTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA (N=505)



There were marked gender differences in perceptions of online bullying. While 75% of young women and 63% of non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement 'writing insulting things online is not bullying', this figure was only 37% for young men. Similarly, 69% of young people with a mental health condition were more likely to disagree or strongly disagree with this statement, compared with 53% of those with no disability.

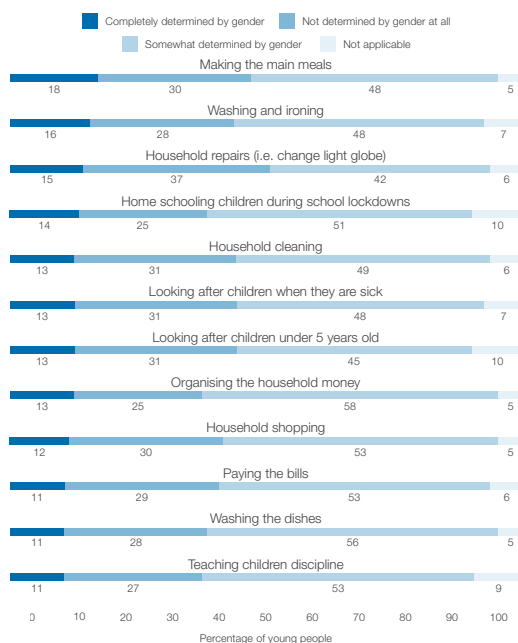
Thirty-five per cent of young women and 9% of non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people reported feeling like a different person online, compared with 54% of young men.

Most young Australians thought that work and employment experiences were determined by gender

Gender relations

According to young Australians, some tasks are determined by one's gender, while others are not. Most young Australians thought that domestic activities, such as organising the household money (58%), washing the dishes (56%), teaching children discipline (53%), household shopping (53%), paying the bills (53%) and home-schooling children during lockdowns (51%) are not determined by gender. However, 52% thought household repairs were at least somewhat determined by gender. Non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people were more likely to think these tasks were not determined by gender at all, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were more likely to believe they are determined by gender.

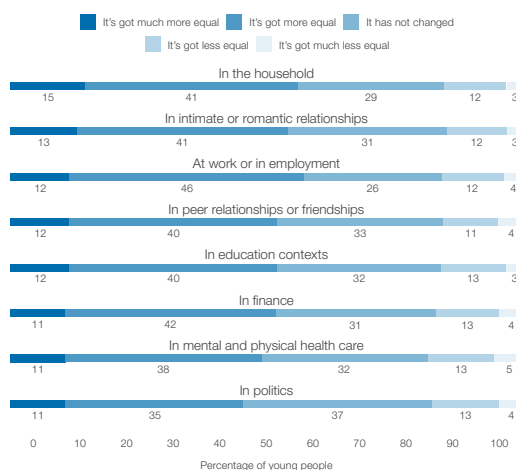
FIGURE 7.4. PERCEPTION OF GENDERED TASKS (N=505)



Most young Australians thought that work and employment experiences were determined by gender, with 59% believing gender determined the career pathways young people chose, 58% thought gender influenced how junior workers are treated by senior staff, and 58% also thought it determined the amount of money young people get paid.

When thinking about how gender relations have changed between generations, young people perceived a movement towards more equal relationships, with 58% believing relationships in the workplace have become more equal, and 56% believing relationships in the household were more equal. Mental and physical health care stands out as an area in which young people thought less progress has been made, with 18% believing gender parity was less equal compared with previous generations.

FIGURE 7.5.
PERCEIVED GENERATIONAL CHANGES IN GENDER RELATIONS (N=505)



POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- There is scope for schools and other educational institutions to foster a sense of belonging for all students by creating and enacting policies of school belonging that support teachers and students to create environments in which all students feel included. Further research is needed to understand the impact the move to online learning has had on feelings of belonging to their educational institution and to understand how to support young people's socio-emotional development in virtual environments.
- Young Australians believe progress has been made towards more equal gender relations compared with previous generations, especially in the household, but see work and careers as areas that remain unequal. Schools can play a significant role by ensuring that all students, regardless of gender, have access to information about possible careers across all industry sectors, and are supported in their aspirations. Employers in traditionally gendered occupations, such as nursing and construction, can also play an important role in creating workspaces that welcome young people of all gender identities.

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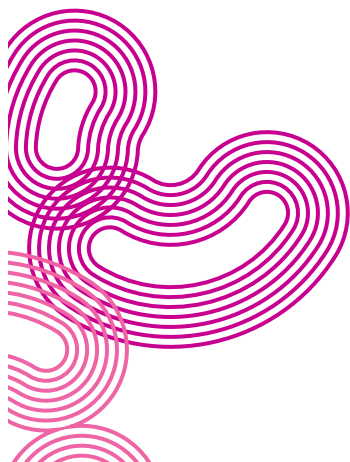
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8

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY

KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 61% of young Australians cited housing, 47% cited employment, and 46% cited climate change as top priorities.
- 2** 73% of young Australians have volunteered at some point in their lives, with 87% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people volunteering during the last year, compared with 65% of other young Australians.
- 3** 87% of young Australians felt there were barriers preventing them from being involved in organised activities on issues that are important to them, including that activities were too time consuming (34%), too expensive (29%), or were difficult to access (23%).
- 4** Young Australians were ambivalent about the effectiveness of social media to achieve social change: 86% of young people believed social media can help under-represented groups amplify their voice; 86% believed it can cast attention on important issues that otherwise might not receive it; and 85% believed social media can distract from important issues.
- 5** 56% of young Australians used their social media profiles to influence social change, 26% used their profiles to encourage others to take action on issues that were important to them, and 23% participated in online groups related to an issue or cause.
- 6** Young Australians nominated housing (30%), mental health (24%), and finance (19%) as areas where there was not enough government support for young people.
- 7** Young people felt that it was important for them to be able to enact change in important areas of their lives through both individual and collective action. A number also recognised the need for systemic responses to bring about sustainable change.
- 8** Most young people saw digital and social media as playing a positive role in their civic participation because of its capacity to connect with large audiences, generate discussions to drive change, allow young people to share their voices and experiences, and act as an information source about civic issues.
- 9** Interviewees were mindful of the challenges and possible dangers of using digital and social media for civic participation purposes, such as being in an echo chamber, and potential negative emotional impacts.
- 10** Only a very small number of young people felt properly represented in public and political discussions and many raised concerns about perceived generational differences with policy makers, a lack of input in decision-making processes, and perceptions that they were misunderstood by others and their concerns were not taken seriously.
- 11** Young people called for greater and more accurate representation of their diverse voices in politics.





REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Top national issues

In a 2021 survey for Mission Australia,¹ 45.7% of young people nominated COVID-19, 38% the environment, and 35.4% equity and discrimination as the top issues Australia needed to address. Climate change was nominated as a personal concern for 25.5% of young Australians. Only 23.4% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people said the environment was a top national issue compared with 38.9% of other young Australians.

Almost half (47.1%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people said they had been treated unfairly, compared with 34.2% of other young Australians. More than one-third (34.6%) of young people felt that mental health was an important national issue. This was more frequently nominated by young women than young men. Higher numbers of young men identified the economy and financial matters as a major issue. Gender diverse young people were more likely to cite LGBTIQ+ issues as an important national issue.¹

Young people were also more likely than Australians in other age groups to be 'satisfied with the direction of the country', and also to have remained satisfied throughout the pandemic.²

Volunteering

The 2021 Australian census reported that 12.8% of young Australians aged 18 to 24 years spent time doing unpaid voluntary work during the previous year. This is lower than the volunteering rate for Australians aged 15 to 17 (14.4%) and for Australians over 40 (15.7%), but higher than that for people aged 25 to 32 (10.0%).³

Between 2019 and 2021, the rate of young people aged 18 to 24 who volunteered in the previous year declined from 36.5% to 25.6%.⁴ Despite this decline, young people were among the least likely to have stopped volunteering during that period.

Environmental practices

Young Australian migrants were found to perform everyday modes of environmental care within their homes, with differences in environmental practices evident between first and second generation migrants.⁵ Second generation migrants were more likely to be vegan or vegetarian for environmental reasons, were slightly more engaged with forms of activism such as protest, and felt more comfortable participating in the political sphere than first generation migrants. Parents, upbringing and cultural context were the main influences that shaped environmental practices, followed by education and school. Young migrants tended to be disengaged from online spheres and local councils when it came to environmental practices. This was likely related to language barriers, differing priorities and a general dislike of being visible in political arenas.⁵

Community connection

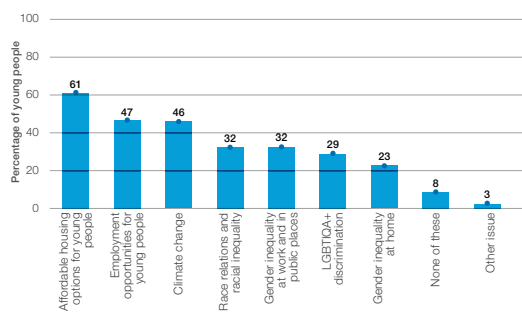
Almost one in five (17.2%) LGBTIQ+ young people attended a school or university LGBTIQ+ group in the previous year, and 33.9% indicated that they had stood up for LGBTIQ+ rights in educational or work settings in the previous year.⁶

2022 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

Achieving change

When asked which issues needed immediate action in Australia, 61% of young Australians identified affordable housing options for young people, 47% said employment opportunities for young people, and 46% nominated climate change. Other issues nominated by 3% of respondents included controlling inflation, hate speech and freedom of speech, discrimination against neurodivergent and people with disabilities, and government corruption and debt. Non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people were more likely to think immediate action needed to be taken on the proposed issues, while Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were less likely to think these issues require immediate action.

FIGURE 8.1.
PROBLEMS THAT NEED IMMEDIATE ACTION (N= 505)



Participants said it was important that they could enact change in areas of their lives that mattered to them, including the environment, social justice, and young people's representation in politics.

Interviewees commonly provided examples of small individual actions that they took to effect change, such as changing water consumption habits and discussing issues of importance with friends and family. Voting and writing letters to government representatives were seen as important formal avenues for making change.

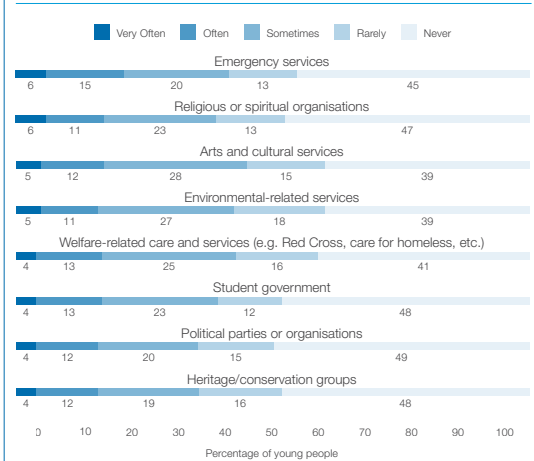


I think [voting's] an official channel for change. I think there are other unofficial channels and I think that there are people who are doing all sorts of cool things in their own lives, or kind of in a smaller scale community sense, which are equally valuable, but they're not necessarily going to produce large scale-change.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

Another form of individual action discussed by interviewees was volunteering. According to our survey, 73% of young Australians had volunteered at some point in their lives and 68% did so in at least one of the activities listed in figure 8.2 during the past 12 months. Seventy-six per cent of young men and 76% of non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people reported volunteering in these activities during the past year, compared with 60% of young women. A high proportion (87%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people volunteered, compared with only 65% of other young Australians. Overall, the most popular volunteering activities were environmental-related services (61%), arts and cultural services (61%), and welfare-related care and services (59%). Volunteering for political parties or organisations (51%), heritage and conservation groups (52%) and student government (52%) were the least popular activities.

FIGURE 8.2.
VOLUNTEERING IN ORGANISED ACTIVITIES (N=505)



Although individual actions were valued, many interviewees also recognised the need for collective action. They spoke about joining political parties, unions, and environmental action groups, as well as participating in protests and petitions.



I think political participation and education are huge ... Attending, like, your local interest club ... to meet like-minded people, firstly, and then educate more people with those like-minded people. I think that would increase whatever change you are trying to achieve ... [Y]ou meet like-minded people and you are stronger as a group, rather than you individually trying to ... organise your own thing.

MAN, 19, QLD

Barriers to participation in organised activities on issues that were important to them were perceived by 87% of young Australians. The most common barriers included activities being time consuming (34%), expensive (29%), and difficult to access (23%). Twenty-five per cent of young people reported that they were not interested in being involved in organised activities.

Despite being passionate about individual and collective actions, a few interviewees felt broader systemic responses were needed to bring about change, and a small number were quite cynical and pessimistic about the possibility of change.



Ultimately, change needs to be across the board and while young people can definitely do certain things and lobby people and advocate for what they believe in, they ultimately can't overhaul structures or systems that have been designed to maintain and continue the status quo.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

Sixteen per cent of young Australians did not think they could make a difference by being involved in organised activities. The proportion was higher for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (30%). Additionally, 29% of young Australians thought it was unlikely that climate change would be effectively combated in the future. Interview participants also reflected this pessimism.



I'm a bit pessimistic in this way and I think that adults don't want to be told what to do by youth. It's ... very hard for the youth of today to make major change without a miracle happening ... I just don't have high hopes. I just think that adults or the older generations just won't care ... I hope that kids, through all youth protests or petitions and things like that, would be able to make change. I just struggle to see it being possible on a large scale.

MAN, 24, ACT

Role of digital media in civic participation

Many interviewees believed that social and digital media had a positive impact on their civic participation. Most often, they discussed how these media allowed them to quickly and easily reach large audiences across the world.



I think social media allows us to talk about and publicise things in a way that we haven't necessarily been able to before, so I think it expands reach, which is really valuable.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

Although several interviewees said they were not always successful in achieving this wide reach, they saw strategies such as humour and linking media as helpful for generating traction.



I'd say if you get enough people on board, they have no choice but to enact change, but I'd say that is, like, a one in a million shot. Like, this post or that post goes viral and sparks a movement, there's no exact science to it. It just happens.

MAN, 23, ACT

Many interviewees emphasised the ability of social and digital media to generate discussions—especially between users with opposing views—and drive change on important issues. Some also described actively participating in these discussions as part of their current social and digital media habits.

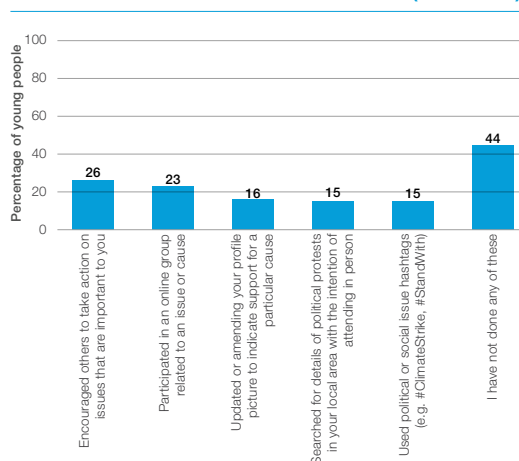


I'll just use those comments to educate ... [and] not try to battle what people are saying, but to educate them ... I would like to hope that it does make a little bit of a difference to at least someone.

WOMAN, 22, VIC

Fifty-six per cent of young Australians used their social media profiles in at least one of the ways listed in figure 8.3. More than one-quarter (26%) used their profiles to encourage others to take action on issues that were important to them, and 23% participated in online groups related to an issue or cause. Only 15% used hashtags for a social or political issue, 15% searched for details of protests to attend in their local area, and 16% updated their profile picture to indicate support for a cause. These actions were broadly shared among demographic groups.

FIGURE 8.3.
ACTIONS ON SOCIAL MEDIA (N=505)



For many interviewees, social and digital media was the primary way of ensuring that their voice, experiences and perspectives were shared. They often shared their beliefs, political opinions and stories because they felt that this would bring about change.

“

I donate blood and plasma pretty frequently and so whenever I do that, I put a photo on my Instagram story and ... I have friends who I know I am connected with who are interested in what I'm doing and who might be influenced by seeing me do something that they've thought about doing themselves, and it might incentivise them to do the same and so ... even if it's just two people, it does have an impact.

WOMAN, 20, NSW

Interviewees discussed using digital and social media as their sources of information to educate themselves about civic matters. This included researching parties during elections, keeping up with policy developments and educating themselves about civic movements.

Several interviewees explained how they used social media to access information about the climate strike protests.

“

With the climate change protests ... [m]ost of that was organised through Facebook and sharing on social media because it's that easy to do. Then the momentum speeds up as more and more people get them, and because of that it's just a great way of building community with people who care about the same thing and can help you make a change.

MAN, 24, ACT

Some interviewees expressed concerns about using digital and social media for civic purposes. They felt that it created echo chambers, encouraged fake or performative forms of activism, or could have a negative emotional impact.

“

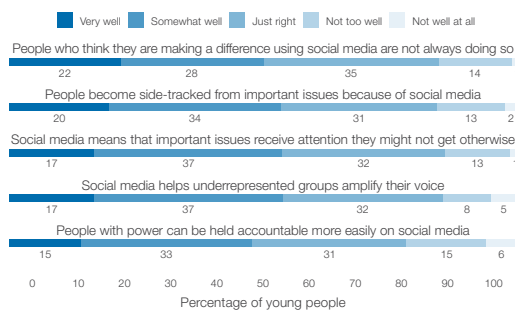
I think you're exposed to lots of things, but then I guess also you tend to end up in an echo chamber.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 21, WA

Our survey also reflected an ambivalence about social media. Negative aspects, such as people becoming side-tracked from important issues, and people not always making a difference even when they think they are, were acknowledged as fair representations of social media by 85% of young Australians. At the same time, 86% of young Australians thought social media could help under-represented groups amplify their voice, 86% thought it cast attention on important issues that might not get it otherwise, and 79% thought it could facilitate accountability from people with power. These perceptions were shared across demographic groups.



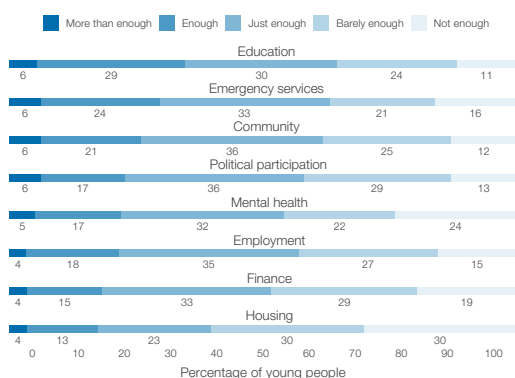
FIGURE 8.4.
PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL MEDIA
USE FOR CHANGE (N=505)



Youth representation in public discussions

We asked young Australians if they thought that the government provides enough support for young people in a variety of areas. Thirty per cent nominated housing, 24% mental health, and 19% finance as areas with not enough support for young people. Areas that were seen as having enough support included education (35%), emergency services (30%), and community services (27%). Non-binary, gender diverse and agender young people were less likely to believe government support was adequate than young women and men.

FIGURE 8.5.
PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNMENT
SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN
DIFFERENT AREAS (N=505)



Only 23% of young people thought that the government provided enough or more than enough support for young people in the area of political participation. Only a very small number of interview participants thought that young people's voices were heard in public and political discussions, and those who did felt that it was a result of young people taking more proactive steps, such as being politically engaged and voting.



I've definitely noticed, a lot of my generation has kind of pushed their way into those sorts of [political] spaces if they didn't feel like they were being heard. I think our voices are definitely out there. There's definitely young people getting their opinions heard.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 20, QLD

Several young people believed that their voices were considered differently in public and political discussions depending on the situation and, as a result, felt it was important not to treat young people as a homogeneous group. Some felt that their voices were only heard in relation to specific issues and only in their immediate community, but not in broader national discussions.



I guess it depends on which publics and where the discussions are taking place ... if you're talking about [national] politics, I think that there is, sort of, often a very general and vague reference to the younger generations ... but I don't think there's often enough specific, individual consideration of what that actually means, because young people are an incredibly diverse group and to treat them as an amorphous blob is counterproductive.

WOMAN, 20, NSW



I hold a lot of power over my direct environment ... [but] it can be quite overwhelming to try and grasp very complicated issues happening in places that you have never been to, places you are not immersed in, places you have never lived.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 22, WA

Despite these two perspectives, the overwhelming majority of interviewees thought that their voices and perspectives were not properly represented. Interviewees felt misunderstood by others, and resented simplistic and stereotypical representations of young people as being poor at financial management and too dependent on their parents.

“

Recently [the cost of living] was discussed in parliament and it was putting down young people and our ability to afford things, and making it seem like we don't know anything about finances ... Thankfully, I think there was a bit of support against that in parliament, so there's politicians out there that, I would say, are very accepting of young people and understanding of the issues we have, but I think a massive majority of them just think that you know, we live off of our parents or ... we're not independent enough.

WOMAN, 22, VIC

This feeling was particularly strong among young people from minoritised groups.

“

We aren't taken seriously ... nobody takes us seriously. I'm [also] part of a bunch of minority groups that are consistently spoken over [by] people who aren't part of those minority groups.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 20, QLD

Interview participants also discussed perceived ideological divides with older generations. Young people felt that these divides were particularly pronounced in parliament, where they did not see themselves reflected, especially along multiple axes of identity. As a consequence, some young people felt that their perspectives were not adequately considered.

“

When I think 'politician', I think 'old white dude'. We have no young representation. Also, no Indigenous representation. Like, there's barely any women represented. I just feel like it's not great ... It definitely doesn't match the split of how our age brackets are in Australia.

WOMAN, 23, QLD

In light of these experiences, many interviewees called for greater and more accurate public representation of young people's diverse perspectives in politics. For those who shared these suggestions, the idea of such representation was exciting and they thought it would encourage more young people to be involved in politics.

“

Putting a more diverse lot of people in government and in media, making it representative of queer people, people of colour, people of different faiths and beliefs and people of different walks of life ... I think a lot of the time young people are dismissed and sort of pushed to the side.

WOMAN, 24, NSW

“

If people are able to know that they are heard and represented, it really lets people, and encourages people to strive to work towards that ... [and] more younger people are encouraged to get involved directly in politics, whether that is actually signing themselves up for elections, or in other ways.

MAN, 24, VIC



POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Young Australians do not feel that their voices are heard in public discussion and political debates. More effort is needed to include young people in discussions and decisions that affect them and are important to them, and also to publicise the ways in which young people are involved. Policy makers should actively seek to include a broad range of perspectives that recognises the diversity of young people.
- Initiatives that achieve greater diversity among our political representatives, including gender, age, ethnic, cultural, sexual and socio-economic diversity, would encourage young people's involvement in political and civil life. Research is needed to understand the barriers to young people becoming involved in politics and what support young people need to overcome them.
- Housing solutions for young people should be a priority area for government initiatives. Young people should be consulted to gain a better understanding of their priorities and needs, and be included in developing and implementing solutions.
- Young people are aware of the opportunities and threats afforded by the use of social media for social change, especially its limited ability to effect change. Greater understanding of how young people translate social media initiatives into social action is needed.

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