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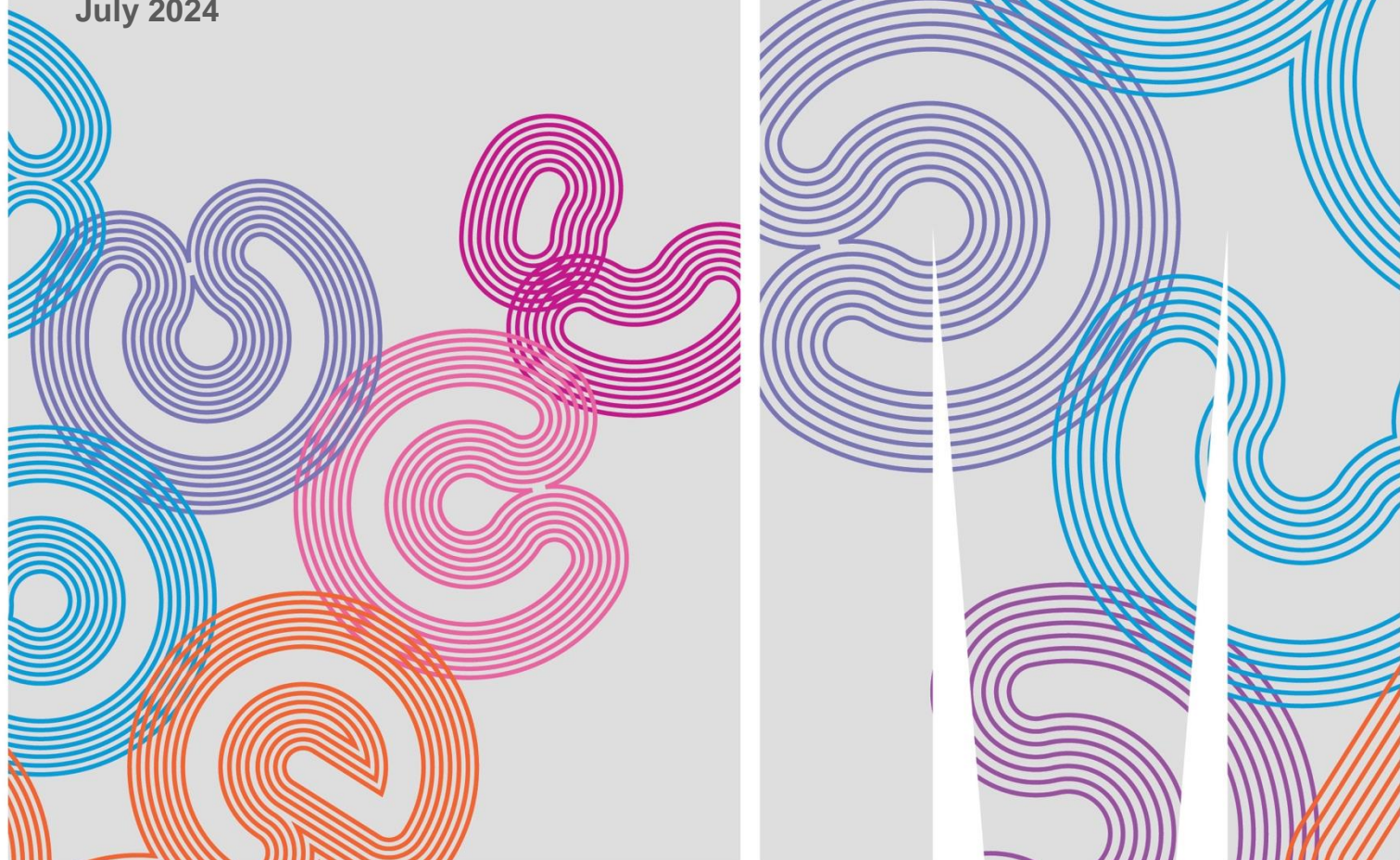
MONASH
YOUTH POLICY
AND EDUCATION
PRACTICE

YOUNG PEOPLE'S PERSPECTIVES ON MISSING OUT ON BEING YOUNG

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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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(To reflect equal contribution, YRG members are listed in alphabetical order based on first names.)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2021, when the Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) began surveying Australians aged 18–24, we realised that we were inadvertently gauging the pressures on the pandemic generation. One troubling finding was that 45% of young Australians often or very often felt like they were missing out on being young. But what it means to be young can change depending on social and economic contexts. This is particularly relevant for large, historically significant events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which has brought about new challenges for young people while exacerbating existing ones.

There is a need to examine how current contexts impact young people, and how they can be supported to live their best lives. Young people themselves must be at the centre of this discussion.

Data collected for the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer were analysed by members of CYPEP's Youth Reference Group along with CYPEP researchers to investigate what it currently means to be young and why young people feel they are missing out.

Key Findings

Young people understand being young as a complex, multifaceted and contradictory concept. Four different ways of experiencing being young were identified:

- developing one's own experiences
- navigating expectations
- undertaking a balancing act
- fielding external factors

Challenges identified by young people revolve around four key areas: finances, work, education, and long-term plans. These are closely interconnected and intricately linked to feelings of missing out on being young.



69% of young people who often or very often worried about having enough to eat ...



60% of young people who often or very often experienced financial difficulties ...



55% of young people who felt that it was unlikely or very unlikely they would have children in the future ...



51% of young people who were unemployed ...



50% of young people who thought it unlikely or extremely unlikely that they would stay in their current accommodation ...

... often or very often felt that they were missing out on being young.

Insufficient government support is also associated with feelings of missing out.



56% of young people who report there is not enough or barely enough government support for mental health ...



55% who report that there is not enough or barely enough government support for education ...



51% who report there is not enough or barely enough government support for employment ...

... often or very often felt that they were missing out on being young.

Support for young people must strike a balance between providing meaningful assistance and not restricting their opportunities to explore what being young means to them.

Key Quotes from YRG Members

“

[Being young is] discovering the world and continually building and refining a sense of identity as more experiences are collected.
- ANDREW

”

“

[Support] can also mean freedom to try new things without expectations or commitment. It can also mean making mistakes while being supported to learn from them.
- MARK

”

“

[Being young is about] learning and unlearning – perhaps viewing how your world differs from your educational environment and social structures for the first time.
- REBECCA

”

“

Being independent is an important step for young people but the cost for moving out makes it less achievable. ... Government should take some intervention to control the house price and provide financial support for renting among young people.
- CANDICE

”

“

[Young people can be] pressured to achieve things by a certain age.
- STEVEN

”

1. INTRODUCTION



Young people need to use the precious young time to enjoy life and also explore the world.

- Candice

At CYPEP, our Youth Reference Group (YRG) has direct input into much of our work. Their stellar introduction to the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer, for example, was the highlight of that report. But our YRG wanted to do more. They wanted to look at the results we had collected and respond to the implications it might have for young people. This paper is the result of such an effort.

YRG members interpreted data from the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer and led the way in reflecting on the stories this data told, with CYPEP researchers providing analytical support. The 2022 Australian Youth Barometer¹ surveyed 505 young Australians aged 18–24 and interviewed 30 more about various aspects of their lives, including education, employment, health and wellbeing, finances, housing, civic participation, and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Weighted statistics and quotes from interviews are used here.

Young people reported a range of anxieties around politics, personal safety, housing, and their ability to live a happy life. Many young people also felt the continued impacts of the pandemic on their relationships, finances, housing, work, and education. One key finding was that 45% of young Australians often or very often felt like they were missing out on being young. A similar number (42%) of young people reported the same in 2023.² This is troubling because being young is such an important stage in life. It is a time of great development, exploration, experimentation, trial and misstep, as well as success and opportunity.

As Australia, along with many countries around the world, emerges from the disruptions of COVID-19-related lockdowns,

young people face increasing pressures in their lives. In 2022, for example, 90% of young Australians experienced some form of financial difficulty. More than one-quarter (26%) thought their mental health was poor or very poor.¹ Early indicators suggest these pressures are having a negative effect on young people's experiences of being young.

For us, this raises questions about what it now means to be young. As social conditions and circumstances change, new patterns of what it means to be young are formed.³ This is particularly true for large-scale historic and global events, which can have profound impacts on shaping the experiences and future lives of young people.⁴

The notion of being young is also highly contested. What it means to be young differs across disciplines, cultures, and historical periods. Youth policymakers, media and researchers sometimes characterise young people in different and often stereotypical ways, such as:

- Figures of hope for the future: '*They are the future, they must be protected!*'
- Sources of risk or moral panic: '*They are risk-takers, addicted to social media.*'
- Agents of change: '*Their movements are redefining political change.*'
- A romantic ideal: '*Remember what it was like to be young?*'⁵

A cursory look at media reporting on young people will often evoke at least one of these characterisations. For example, coverage of the School Strike 4 Climate movement looked to young people as a source of hope for making environmental change,⁶ while also chastising students for being out of school.⁷ Reporting on increased gang-related knife violence in Victoria portrays young people as a risk to be managed.⁸ Discussions of social media often highlight new avenues for young people to participate in activist movements.⁹

At the same time, some look back wistfully at their youth, hoping that young people can keep these experiences alive into the future.¹⁰

These competing understandings point to an ongoing question: What does it mean to *be young*? A corollary of this is a potentially darker question: What does it mean to *miss out* on being young? We take these questions seriously. We also take seriously the idea that young people's voices must be central in the answers that are provided.

In this report, our YRG provides possible views on what it means to be young and to miss out on being young. Their discussion takes place at a unique time, situated within the historical context of the COVID-19

pandemic, changes to the labour force and the growing pressures placed upon young people. Their perspectives are worthy of attention from anyone who is young, along with educators, policy makers and service providers seeking to make a difference in young people's lives.

We begin by exploring the question of what it means to be young. Second, we consider what it means to miss out on being young. Finally, we discuss how answering these questions can help us better understand what it means to be young, the various challenges that face young people today, and how they might best be supported.

2. WHAT IT MEANS TO BE YOUNG



Being young means a lot of complicated and messy (and contradictory) things.

- Mark

The idea of being young as a distinct life stage is relatively new. G. Stanley Hall first defined adolescence as a life stage during which psychological and physical changes occur, generally from the ages of 13 to 24.¹¹ Conventionally, youth is now considered a life stage between childhood and adulthood, during which a person experiences physical, cognitive and psychological development.^{12,13} Taking a biological view, adolescence is a time of hormonal, physical, reproductive, and sexual changes. These occur alongside psychosocial development, including the development of identity and self-direction.¹⁴

Being young is also understood as a social process.¹⁵ Processes of being young can change according to time and place, class, ethnicity, religion, disability status, or other social variables.¹³ For example, in some parts of Africa, transition into adulthood is based on achieving financial independence or marriage, rather than reaching a certain age.¹⁶

This fluidity extends to the age categories used to define who counts as young. The United Nations, for example, defines people between the ages of 15 and 24 as youth. However, other international organisations have used different age ranges: UN Habitat uses 15–32 to define youth; UNICEF, WHO and UNFPA use 10–19 to define adolescents, 15–24 to define youth and 10–24 to define young people; UNICEF defines children as those under the age of 18; and the African Youth Charter defines youth as between 15 and 35.¹²

Importantly, not everyone experiences being young in the same way. Even though processes of physiological, psychosocial, and biological development are generally similar, these can be impacted by earlier life experiences. For example, children who

experienced maltreatment or stressful living conditions may experience an earlier onset of puberty. The onset of puberty can also impact how young people, especially young women, are treated in different cultures.¹⁴

Further, these norms continue to change. Compared with those considered dependent in the past, young people today are expected to achieve different goals, such as decision-making in education, training and employment.¹⁷ Young people today face rapid changes across their life courses and are impacted by various factors, including demographic changes and changes in family structure, peer relationships, media and technology, education systems, social norms, workplaces, economic development, and so on.¹⁸ These all shape how young people perceive what it means to be young and how other age groups perceive young people.

Young people on being young

Reflecting on the complexities of defining who is young, both YRG members and CYPEP researchers understand being young as a complex, elastic concept. The young Australians who participated in the Australian Youth Barometer shared similar views, calling for greater public discussion and more nuanced understandings:



There is ... often 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, New South Wales

Consequently, we suggest that being young can be experienced in four main ways (see Figure 1).

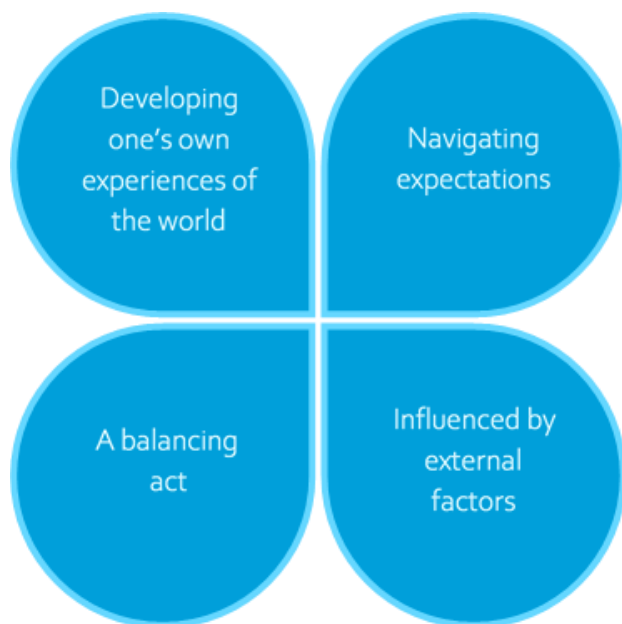


Figure 1: Four interacting conceptions of what it is to be young

Developing one's own experiences of the world

Being young can be experienced as a process of identity formation. Andrew, for example, understood it as “discovering the world and continually building and refining a sense of identity as more experiences are collected”. Similarly, Rebecca spoke of how being young involved “learning and unlearning – perhaps viewing how your world differs from your educational environment and social structures for the first time”.

These developments are connected with each individual's experiences of the world and can also vary across social and demographic groups. This can be further complicated when young people feel like they are left out of the conversations that impact them. Many participants in the Australian Youth Barometer felt that their experiences were not valued:

“ We aren't taken seriously, we're young, nobody takes us seriously. I'm part of a bunch of minority groups that are consistently spoken over from people who aren't part of

those minority groups. ... I feel like someone who's actually, like, living ... [through the experience] would know more about it than somebody who [is not].

Non-binary person, 20, Queensland

Being young is experienced as an important time of learning and developing. However, these views can often be ignored, devaluing how young people approach their own development. Without listening to young people's voices, there is a risk that these perspectives will be disregarded, and ultimately lost. This makes it even more important for young people's voices to be central to this conversation.

Navigating expectations

Being young can also be understood as navigating the expectations that others might have. Participants in the Australian Youth Barometer spoke about having to navigate other peoples' views, while also remaining true to what being young meant for them:

“

A lot of older people can be stuck in their ways ... and I think younger people ... [are] a lot more accepting of what people want to do, what they choose ... we accept them for that, and it's not our business, not our lives.

Woman, 21, South Australia

These feelings included the view that young people were often seen as not being knowledgeable about their own lives. Some young people felt that older generations did not take their experiences seriously:

“

I do find when it comes to people of a more elderly age, you're definitely not heard as frequently. You might say something that is true, but they just shut it down because you're young.

Woman, 22, Victoria

Young people themselves have their own views of what it means to be young, which

may not always match the expectations of older generations. In coming to understand themselves, young people feel that they must navigate this contested space to validate their own experiences.

A balancing act

It is important not to present a romanticised view. Being young can be a balancing act, with young people navigating work, study, and paving pathways to possible futures. Candice, for example, shared that “young people may have more freedom and more energy to explore life”, but at the same time face pressures to identify and work towards career or study goals. This means that young people must find a balance between having the time to enjoy being young while also working towards their future.

Such a balancing act presents potentially contradicting understandings. For example, a romanticised view of young people might portray youth as a time of freedom from responsibilities, such as work or study, which are seen as restricting freedom. However, the opposite may be true. Young people who were not studying were more likely to report often or very often feeling like they were missing out on being young (54%) compared to those in part-time (35%) or full-time study (46%) ($p < 0.1$). As Mark discussed, these responsibilities foster opportunities for “growing into yourself, trying new things, starting to pick up adult responsibilities”.

Given this, the act of balancing freedom and responsibility may itself be a part of being young. Rather than an idyllic freedom, being young exists between, and balances, many contradicting factors.

Influenced by external factors

Finally, being young does not happen in isolation. The experience of being young is shaped at many levels, including individual, family and community, and across many categories, such as the political, economic, and social. These presented concerns to some of the young people that were interviewed:



My main concern is that we have set up a world that doesn't actually benefit most of us ... When you look at the big issues that people are talking about – conflict, climate change, health care, disease – it all boils down to: Are we living a good life? Do we have access to the resources and the care that we need?

Non-Binary person, 22, Western Australia

As this person's account suggests, some external factors can be negative. Yet, other factors can be positive. These competing factors may create a situation in which it is harder to be young. Take, for instance, Honwana's idea of waithood, a prolongation of youth in which young people must navigate the challenges around them.¹⁹ Competing pressures may contribute to young people feeling that they are unable to make the future that they desire.

3. THE CHALLENGES OF BEING YOUNG



Young people have more burdens and more uncertainty toward the future.

- Candice

It is undeniable that the COVID-19 pandemic and the social responses to it have taken away many important life experiences from young people. Andrew, for example, told of how being in Year 12 during the pandemic meant “losing last house carnivals, formals, and graduations and making shared memories with my cohort”. Mark spoke about how he “entered COVID as an undergraduate and emerged as a full-time office worker”. Similarly, Candice reflected on how she “couldn’t work like normal because many places were not hiring people or cut off staff due to the pandemic”.

Many challenges facing young people are deeply rooted and were present before the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, although the effects of the pandemic were not experienced equally by all young people, survey respondents who felt that areas of their lives were impacted to some extent were also more likely to feel that they were missing out on being young. As Andrew noted, “the coronavirus helped to exacerbate these disparities between disadvantaged groups”.

In this section, we present some of the challenges that were identified by young people themselves. These revolve around four key areas: finances, work, education, and long-term plans. Importantly, these areas are interconnected and are linked to feelings of being young, as well as missing out on being young.

Finances

Young people aspire to be financially secure but face many challenges in achieving this. These include housing unaffordability, food insecurity and underemployment, which all contribute to the cost of living crisis and make it more difficult for emerging generations to become financially stable.

Young people who experienced financial difficulties were more likely to feel that they were missing out on being young. For example, among those who often or very often experienced financial difficulties, 60% often or very often felt they were missing out on being young ($p < 0.001$, see Figure 2).

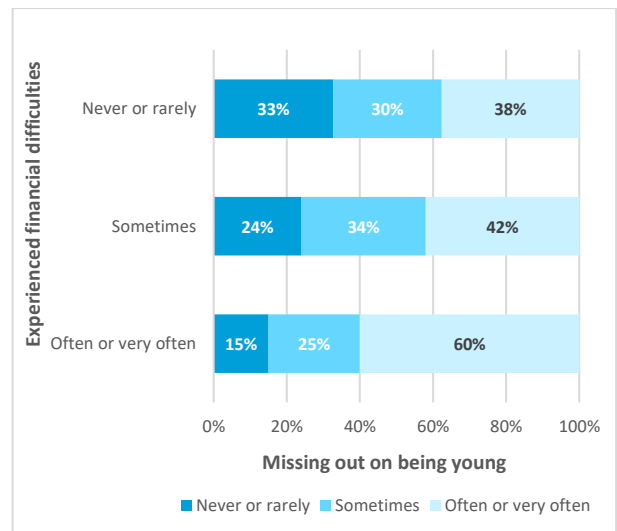


Figure 2: Experienced financial difficulties and missing out on being young

Note: percentages may not always add to 100% due to rounding. This applies to all subsequent figures.

Financial challenges are most apparent in relation to experiences of food insecurity. Among young people who were often or very often worried that they would not have enough to eat, 69% often or very often felt that they were missing out on being young ($p < 0.001$, see Figure 3).

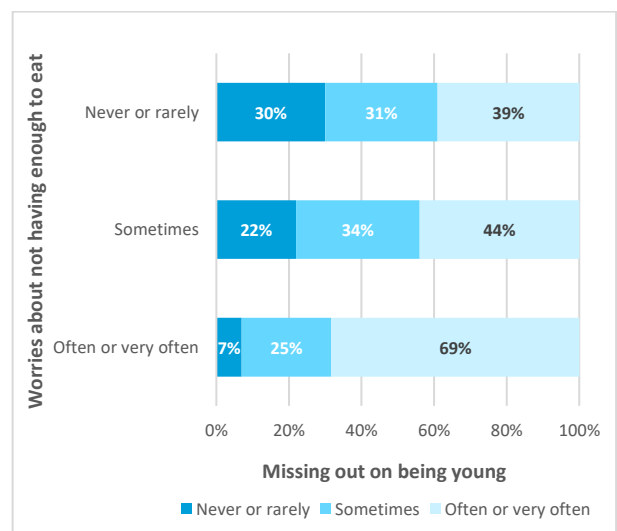


Figure 3: Worried about not having enough to eat and missing out on being young

Finances and food security also have close ties to young people’s social experiences, where not being able to afford to go out to eat affects young people’s capacity to spend time with friends and family. For example, among young people who often or very often could not go out to eat with friends or family due to lack of money, 64% often or very often felt that they were missing out on being young. This compared with 33% of those who never or rarely worried about not going out due to lack of money ($p < 0.001$).

Taken together, these factors illustrate how financial challenges can limit young people’s capacity to engage in life and lead to feelings of missing out on being young.

Work

While some new work trends have provided young people with new ways of earning money, others have presented new challenges.² For many young people, irregular and unreliable sources of income are often the only ones available. Working conditions in general can also make it difficult for young people to find the time or energy to engage with other activities, such as studying or spending time with friends or family. This may contribute to some young people feeling that they do not have the time to be young, as one young person reflected on their experiences of the workforce after finishing Year 12:

“ I just finished year 12. I was applying for jobs. I got a job at Amazon. I was driving an hour and 30 minutes to work. I woke up at 5.00 am and got to work at 7.00 am. Finish at 5.00 pm, get back home around 7.00 pm, sleep and get ready for the next day.

Man, 21, Victoria

On the other hand, experiences of unemployment are also associated with feelings of missing out. Among young people who have experienced unemployment for a period of four weeks or more in the last 12 months, 51% often or very often felt that they were missing out on being young ($p < 0.05$, see Figure 4).

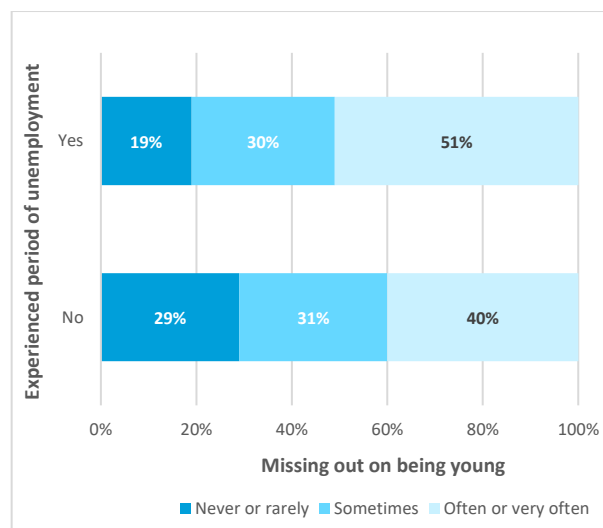


Figure 4: Experienced periods of unemployment and missing out on being young.

This might connect to young people’s views about the positive aspects of work, such as enjoying what they did and socialising with their co-workers. For some young people, being around co-workers could contribute to a sense of belonging. One participant, for instance, discussed the social aspects of their work:

“ Definitely one thing that sort of gets me excited to go to work is the people there. ... Everyone’s just working together and everyone’s just nice to each other, and you just feel like you want to be there ... they’re all sort of general[ly] about my age, so they just started uni or last few years of high school. So, I think, it’s a very young workplace.

Woman, 19, Victoria

Work can, therefore, have both positive and negative effects depending on the specific situation. For some young people, work contributed to their feelings of being young. For others, it contributed to feelings of missing out.

Education

Many young people felt that the Australian education system was failing to prepare them for adult life.² Young people who felt most

dissatisfied with how their education prepared them to cope with difficult situations, such as financial stress or making key life decisions, most often felt like they were missing out on being young ($p < 0.05$, see Figure 5).

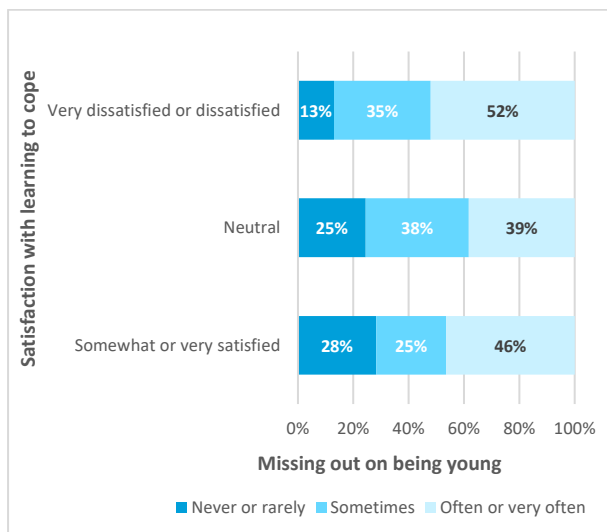


Figure 5: Satisfied with learning to cope with difficult situations and missing out on being young

Young people also face competing priorities when it comes to studying. Steven explained that young people balancing a full-time study load with supporting themselves by working can lead to situations where “you don’t have as much time to do the things you like”. Similarly, one interviewee commented on the difficulties of balancing education with their life situation:

“ [My main concern is] mostly just being able to find the balance to, and keep up with energy and motivation to, be able to study hard enough and pay enough attention to everything to get the degree, while still supporting myself to a large extent financially.

Non-binary person, 20, Queensland

Education thus presents a balancing act in which young people must focus on their long-term future and at the same time maintain their immediate needs, leaving them little time to enjoy being young.

Long-term plans

Feelings of missing out on being young also related to young people’s optimism about the

future. This is most clearly illustrated in their experiences of housing. For example, 50% of young people who reported that it was unlikely or extremely unlikely that they would stay in their current accommodation in the next 12 months also often or very often felt that they were missing out on being young ($p < 0.05$, see Figure 6).

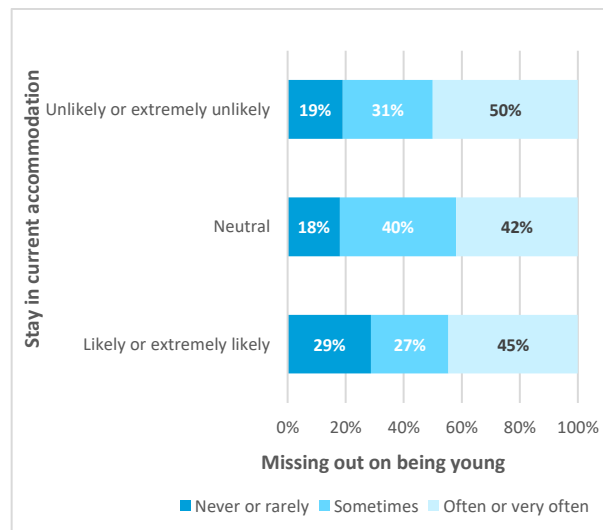


Figure 6: Likelihood of staying in current accommodation in next 12 months and missing out on being young

Results were similar for young people who felt insecure about their long-term housing situation ($p < 0.001$, see Figure 7). Among those who reported that it was unlikely or very unlikely that they would be able to purchase a property or house in the future, 56% felt like they were missing out on being young.

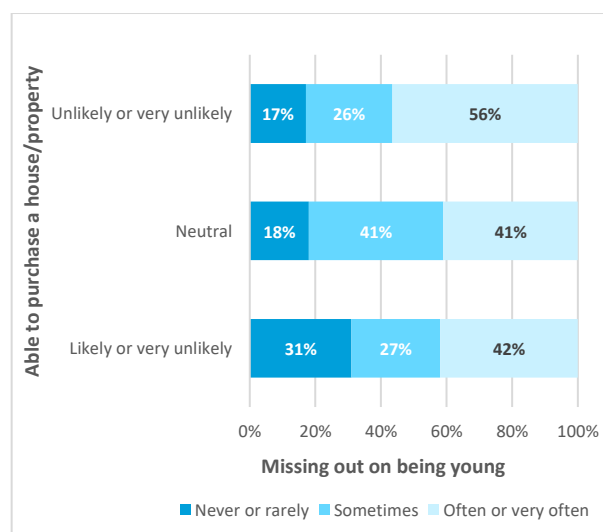


Figure 7: Expect to be able to purchase a property or house and missing out on being young

Young people who felt like they were missing out on being young were also significantly less likely to see themselves in a long-term relationship or with children in the future. For example, 21% of young people felt that it was unlikely or very unlikely that they would have one or more children in the future. Of the young people who felt this way, 54% often or very often felt that they were missing out on being young, while those who were more confident that they would have children were less likely to feel like they were missing out ($p < 0.01$, see Figure 8).

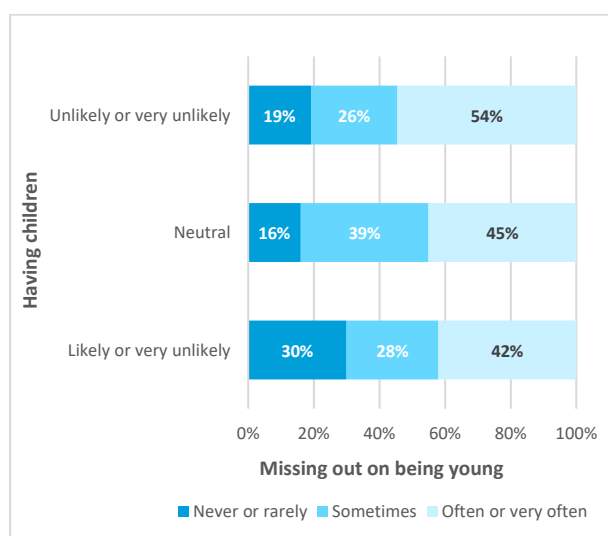


Figure 8: Expectations of having children in the future and missing out on being young

This suggests young people may not feel stable enough or have the financial resources, time and energy to make important life decisions, such as having a child. As one young person explained:

“Let us just say I was wanting to have kids or something. Or let us just say, I wanted to marry someone one day, and commit to them for the rest of my life. [First,] I would like to feel stable and healthy.

Man, 20, Tasmania

Although young people often held tempered views about their futures, this does not mean they did not feel optimistic. Connecting to the view that being young is a time to develop oneself, young people’s feelings of optimism helped mitigate their feelings of missing out. One young man from Tasmania, despite facing immediate financial and housing

challenges, explained this optimism in relation to his goals in music:

“That’s my goal. It’s going to be pretty hard, but I am going to do it. I want to make it in the music industry, so I am going to basically pump as much money as I can back into my music. Like, I am investing in my music, which is investing in myself.

Man, 20, Tasmania

However, optimism can be hard to maintain and is heavily dependent on the material circumstances that young people find themselves in:

“Because of how, like, shit everything is, it’s kind of just like ... well, will we ever be able to afford our own house? Will we ever be able to get a job that we really like? Will we be able to do any of those things? ... I guess a lot of my friends and I have, kind of, just like, joking that we’ll just never have it and that we’ll just make do.

Woman, 20, Queensland

Not being able to achieve these goals can make young people feel like they are missing out on being young. Steven, for example, pointed out how young people often feel “pressured to achieve things by a certain age”. Such things are what researchers call markers of transition, which include events such as leaving home, finishing education, being employed full-time, marrying, becoming a parent, and purchasing a home.²⁰ Many researchers now accept that these markers are taking longer for young people to achieve or are being reached in non-linear and incremental ways.²¹

Achieving these traditional markers is no longer solely thought of as an entry into adulthood. Rather, these markers are connected to present feelings of being young. Unless they feel that they can successfully navigate towards the next stage in life, young people may feel that they are missing out on being young.

4. WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT



Providing young people with the opportunities to explore the world around them, develop their sense of self and learn valuable life lessons is a strong foundation for the rest of their lives.

- Andrew

Receiving adequate and appropriate support can alleviate young people's feelings of missing out on being young. However, the most beneficial types of support are not always obvious. Providing the wrong types of support, or providing support in a patronising or condescending way, can alienate young people, as Mark highlighted:



[Being young] can mean young people are coddled or infantilised, locked out of meaningful civic participation because they're perceived as naïve. ... It can also mean a lot of heavy-handed intervention ... but it can also mean freedom to try new things [and] making mistakes while being supported to learn from them.

Support for young people, then, must strike a delicate balance between providing meaningful assistance to young people and not restricting their opportunities to explore. This balance can only be achieved by taking young people seriously, and not viewing them as naïve.

Support for health and wellbeing

Young people understand health holistically, encompassing a range of physical, mental, social, and financial aspects,²² with mental health being particularly important. Young people who felt that there was not enough government support for mental health were

more likely to feel that they were missing out on being young ($p < 0.001$, see Figure 9).

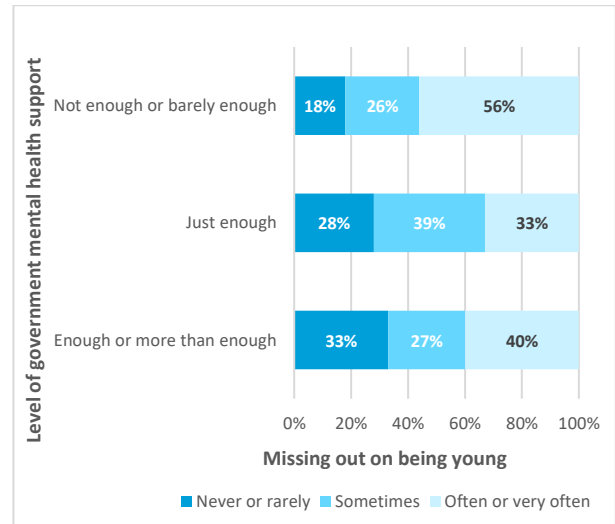


Figure 9: Perceived government support for mental health and missing out on being young

Worryingly, many young people are not receiving the mental health support they need. In 2022, 16% of young people sought mental health support but did not receive it. Notably, these young people, along with those who did receive mental health support, were significantly more likely to report that they often or very often felt like they were missing out on being young than young people who did not seek support ($p < 0.001$, see Figure 10).

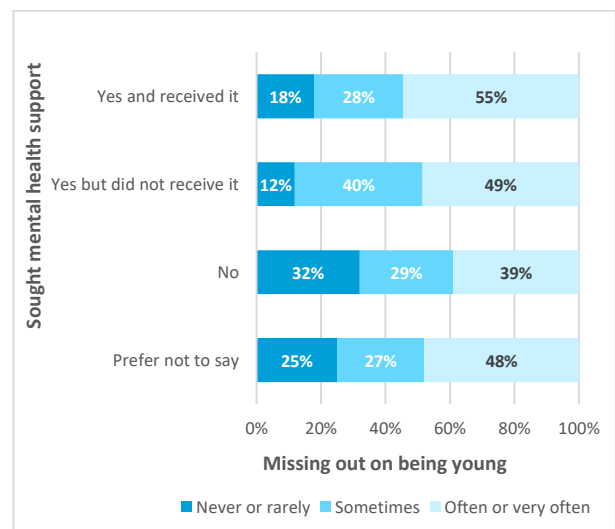


Figure 10: Experience seeking mental health support and missing out on being young.

Young people emphasised the difficulties in accessing suitable mental health support:

“ [Professional support] can be hard to find, and especially hard to afford and schedule as a younger person ... if someone does want professional mental health support especially, it can be difficult to find, both because there's a lack availability and ... lot of factors that make it even more difficult if you can find someone and afford them.

Non-binary person, 20, Queensland

Outside of professional support, many young people turned to friends, family, or significant others. Such sources of support help young people navigate the challenges that they face, which may in turn alleviate feelings of missing out on being young:

“ I think it really depends on the support that you have when it comes to mental health. I think it's a community responsibility to be able to provide those supports to people that need it.

Woman, 23, NSW

This highlights the importance of providing young people with a range of health supports, particularly in navigating feelings of missing out on being young. For young people who cannot draw on support from their immediate communities, professional support can play an important role in filling these gaps, but only if it is readily available and easy to access.

Financial support

As Candice noted, adequate financial support is important for helping young people achieve a sense of independence:

“ Being independent is an important step for young people but the cost for moving out makes it less

achievable. ... The government should take some intervention to control the house price and provide financial support for renting among young people.

Young people who felt that there was not enough government support for finances were more likely to feel that they were missing out on being young ($p < 0.05$, see Figure 11).

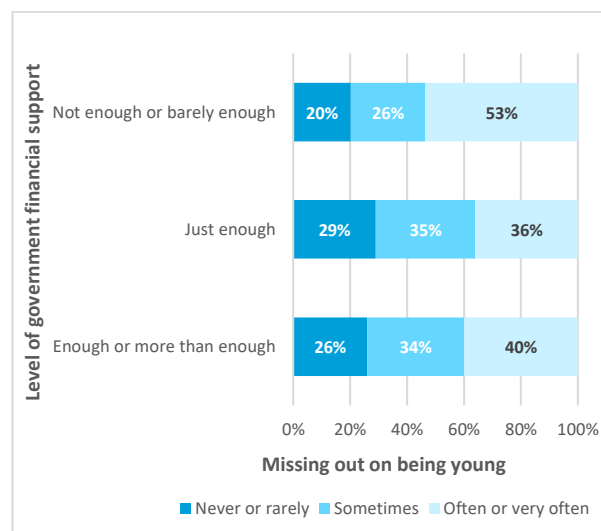


Figure 11: Perceived government support for finance and missing out on being young

Similarly, 51% of young people who reported there is not enough or barely enough government support for employment often or very often felt that they were missing out on being young ($p < 0.05$, see Figure 12).

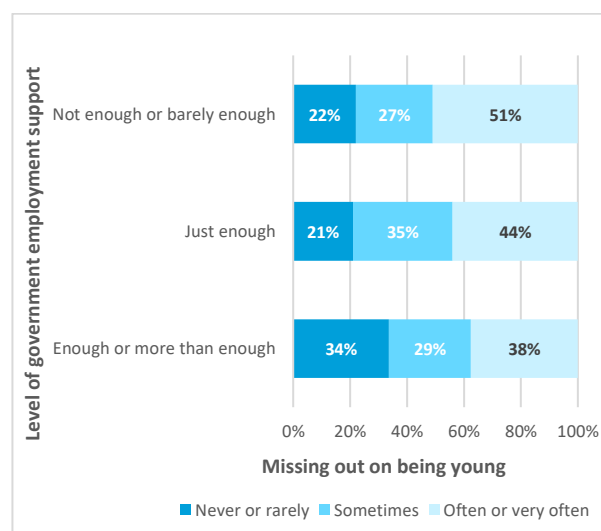


Figure 12: Perceived government support for employment and missing out on being young

Results were similar for perceptions of government support for housing ($p < 0.001$, see Figure 13).

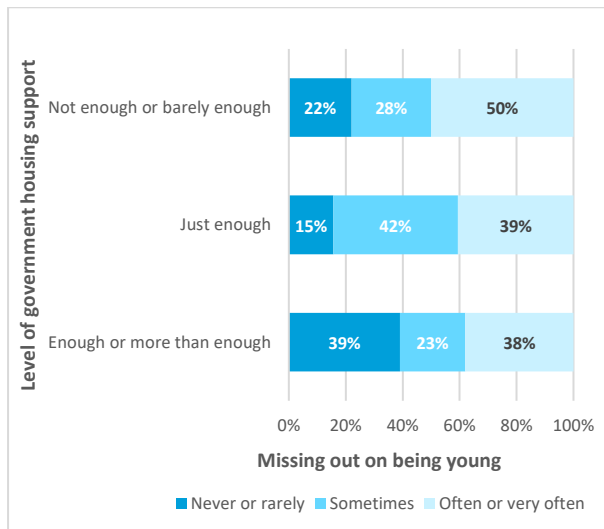


Figure 13: Perceived government support for housing and missing out on being young

While some financial support is available for young people, it can be complex and difficult to navigate. One young person discussed their difficulties in accessing Centrelink payments:

“

It’s really difficult to understand the process, and then you’ve got to gather all these different documents. I had to get a lot of help just to be able to complete that.

Woman, 23, NSW

Young people also identified a need for education about a range of financial matters, such as submitting their taxes, applying for loans, and strategies for investing. Some young people received this support from their family or those close to them:

“

I had support of going through and being educated with car loans and whatnot with my parents, which was great. If I did not have that, I don’t know what my mindset would be on it and they helped me as well, about the interest rates and whatnot.

Woman, 21, Queensland

Young people who cannot access reliable sources of financial support are left vulnerable and may struggle to become financially secure, possibly exacerbating feelings of missing out on being young.

Educational and system-wide support

Although education can present challenges for young people, there are also opportunities for educational institutions to contribute to feelings of being young. For instance, Mark pointed out: “as an important pillar of society that everyone must go through, schools need the knowledge, skills and tools to help shape future generations and their community.”

Notably, though, many young people do not think enough government support is provided for education. These views were more prevalent among those who felt like they were missing out on being young. For example, 55% of young people who felt that there was barely or not enough support for education often or very often felt like they were missing out on being young ($p < 0.05$, see Figure 14).

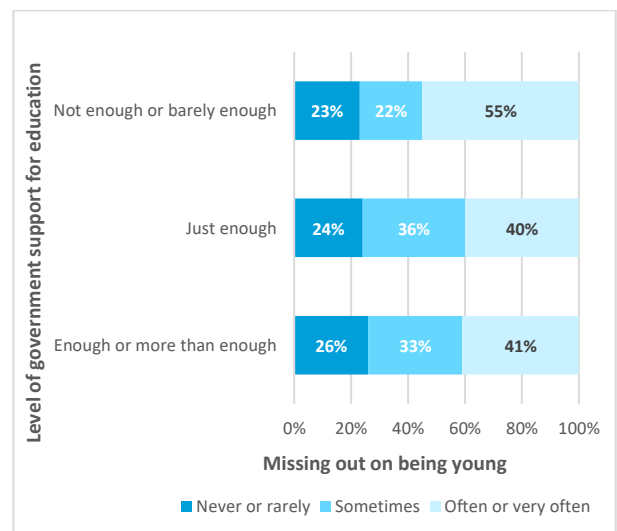


Figure 14: Perceptions of government support for education and missing out on being young

Candice reflected on the role of educational institutions, particularly at the university level:

“

Education institutions need to take care of students' wellbeing and build resilient individuals. They should provide more activities that enhance the sense of belonging for students, such as one-on-one mentor talks and club excursions. Universities should be more practical and support students for future jobs.

Done well, education can provide the types of support that young people want. However, care must be taken to provide supports fairly. As Mark noted, the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted a range of disparities between students, particularly for those from disadvantaged groups, which could make it “even more difficult for students to learn, achieve, and succeed”.

Various bodies across local, state, and federal levels also have a role to play in fostering system-wide support for young people. Many young people are dissatisfied with the levels of support they receive from the government. More must be done by governments and decision-making bodies around Australia to provide young people with the support they want and need. For instance, national government needs to be more sensitive and responsive to young people's views:

“

A lot of politicians hold very, you know, I think they hold very opposite views to a lot of young people. ... [They are] putting down young people and our ability to afford things, and making it seem like we don't know anything about finances ... a massive majority of them just think that you know, we live off of our parents or, you know, we, you know, we're not independent enough.

Woman, 22, Victoria

There are also opportunities to build meaningful connections at local and state level. Young people need to feel that they matter and, as Mark reflected, such support is powerful:

“

Youth leadership opportunities are always going to be important—and ones that don't serve adults' agendas or are bound by their expectations, but ones where young people can make decisions for themselves and their communities. Done well, that's always a really powerful thing.

5. WHERE TO FROM HERE?

In this paper, we addressed two key questions. First, what does it mean to be young? And second, what does it mean to miss out on being young? In answering these questions, we hold that young people's perspectives must be an integral part of the conversation. This is particularly important because the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young people's lives needs to be better understood and addressed.

The notion of being young is complex, multifaceted and, at times, contradictory. Being young is about developing one's own experiences of the world while navigating the expectations one encounters. It is about balancing freedom and responsibility. Importantly, being young does not happen in isolation and is influenced by a wide range of external factors.

Young people face many challenges across finances, work, education, and long-term plans, which are associated with feelings of missing out on being young. Navigating these challenges is no longer a marker of entry into adulthood but has become entwined with how being young is experienced. In navigating these challenges, many young people do not feel that they have adequate or appropriate support. Young people are calling for collaborative and targeted efforts across several areas.

Mental health: Ensuring that: i) young people can access affordable, affirming, and timely mental health support; and ii) practitioners are prepared to help young people navigate their feelings of missing out on being young.

Finances: Providing support that: i) alleviates immediate cost of living pressures and experiences of food insecurity; and ii) gives young people the skills, tools, and resources to realise a financially secure future.

Housing: Ensuring that: i) young people have access to safe, secure, and affordable housing; and ii) action is taken to break the cycles of renting that disproportionality disadvantage young people.

Civic engagement: Creating forums that: i) enable young people to express their views about the issues that matter to them; and ii) involve young people in the decisions that affect them at the local and state level.

Some forms of support are fundamental and clear-cut: secure housing, access to reliable and affordable food sources, and stable employment. Other types must strike a balance between providing meaningful assistance and not restricting young people's opportunities to explore what being young means to them.

It is important to note that this discussion is based on data from the 2022 Australian Youth Barometer. Since then, some things have changed, while others have remained stable. For example, in 2022, 45% of young Australians often or very often felt like they were missing out on being young. In 2023, this had decreased slightly, to 42%.² Yet, some of challenges we identified in this report are becoming even more dire. The number of young people who indicated that housing was an immediate issue rose from 61% in 2022 to 70% in 2023.² Further insights on these trends will be available in the upcoming 2024 Australian Youth Barometer.

As new contexts arise, young people themselves must be at the centre of discussions about what it means to be young, and what it means to miss out on being young. They must be supported to develop and enact their own lived experiences in an ever-changing world. Doing so will be crucial to achieving the balance that Mark described:

“

It's a hard thing to balance. Like, it's important to let young people be young – try new things, make mistakes, do things with their time that aren't work, work, work, work, etc. – but balance that will still afford them agency and control and voice over their own lives.

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