



MONASH  
University

**2024  
AUSTRALIAN  
YOUTH  
BAROMETER**  
UNDERSTANDING  
YOUNG PEOPLE  
IN AUSTRALIA  
TODAY

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MONASH  
YOUTH POLICY  
AND EDUCATION  
PRACTICE

## ABOUT US

The Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice (CYPEP) is a multidisciplinary research centre based in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. By focusing on issues that affect young people, and on developing policy and educational interventions to address youth disadvantage, CYPEP aims to identify the challenges to, and opportunities for, improved life outcomes for young people today and throughout their lives. Our vision is for education that creates lifelong and life-wide opportunities for young people and enables them to thrive. Our mission is to connect youth research to policy and practice. We do this by working with policymakers, educators and youth-focused organisations on research that addresses emerging needs and 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

<b>01 INTRODUCTION</b> .....	2	<b>TABLES AND FIGURES</b>	
Introduction from the Youth Reference Group.....	2	<b>Table 2.1:</b> Survey and weighted sample by descriptive characteristics.....	9
A message from the research team.....	4	<b>Table 2.2:</b> Interview sample by demographic characteristics.....	10
<b>02 ABOUT THE 2024 YOUTH BAROMETER</b> .....	8	<b>Figure 3.1:</b> Housing arrangements.....	17
Method and Approach.....	8	<b>Figure 3.2:</b> Adoption of savings and investment products.....	21
Survey.....	8	<b>Figure 3.3:</b> Adoption of credit products.....	21
Interviews.....	10	<b>Figure 4.1:</b> Industry of employment.....	26
<b>03 YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE ECONOMY</b> .....	12	<b>Figure 4.2:</b> Perceived importance of characteristics of work.....	28
Key Findings.....	12	<b>Figure 4.3:</b> Most important source of career advice ..	31
Review of Existing Data.....	13	<b>Figure 4.4:</b> Participation in activities to improve employability.....	32
2024 Interview and Survey Findings.....	16	<b>Figure 4.5:</b> Conducting different activities with different intentions.....	33
Policy and Research Implications.....	23	<b>Figure 5.1:</b> Satisfaction with aspects of formal education.....	39
References.....	23	<b>Figure 5.2:</b> Participation in informal online learning....	42
<b>04 YOUNG PEOPLE AND WORK</b> .....	24	<b>Figure 6.1:</b> Feelings of pessimism and anxiety among young people.....	49
Key Findings.....	24	<b>Figure 6.2:</b> Problems with accessing food.....	52
Review of Existing Data.....	25	<b>Figure 7.1:</b> Importance of belonging to different groups.....	58
2024 Interview and Survey Findings.....	26	<b>Figure 7.2:</b> Young people's sense of belonging in different scenarios.....	59
Policy and Research Implications.....	35	<b>Figure 7.3:</b> Perceptions of social media.....	62
References.....	35	<b>Figure 7.4:</b> Perception of gendered child-rearing and household tasks.....	64
<b>05 YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION</b> .....	36	<b>Figure 7.5:</b> Perception of gendered education and occupation development.....	64
Key Findings.....	36	<b>Figure 7.6:</b> Perceived generational changes in gender relations.....	65
Review of Existing Data.....	37	<b>Figure 7.7:</b> Major reasons for young people's most recent move.....	65
2024 Interview and Survey Findings.....	38	<b>Figure 8.1:</b> Problems that need immediate action.....	70
Policy and Research Implications.....	44	<b>Figure 8.2:</b> Volunteering in organised activities.....	72
References.....	44	<b>Figure 8.3:</b> Actions on social media for change.....	73
<b>06 YOUNG PEOPLE, HEALTH AND WELLBEING</b> .....	46	<b>Figure 8.4:</b> Perceptions of social media use for change.....	74
Key Findings.....	46	<b>Figure 8.5:</b> Perceptions of government support for young people in different areas.....	76
Review of Existing Data.....	47		
2024 Interview and Survey Findings.....	48		
Policy and Research Implications.....	54		
References.....	54		
<b>07 YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS</b> .....	56		
Key Findings.....	56		
Review of Existing Data.....	57		
2024 Interview and Survey Findings.....	58		
Policy and Research Implications.....	66		
References.....	66		
<b>08 YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY</b> .....	68		
Key Findings.....	68		
Review of Existing Data.....	69		
2024 Interview and Survey Findings.....	70		
Policy and Research Implications.....	77		
References.....	77		

# 01

## INTRODUCTION

THIS INTRODUCTION IS AUTHORED BY ANDREW LEAP, MARK YIN, STEVEN BANH AND CANDICE CHUNING ZHENG ON BEHALF OF THE CYPEP YOUTH REFERENCE GROUP

### INTRODUCTION FROM THE YOUTH REFERENCE GROUP

In physics, the first law of motion – the principle of inertia – states that an object will continue moving at pace unless acted upon by an external force. This feels like the condition young Australians are currently experiencing. Our day-to-day movements are familiar motions – we study, we work, we move (which, aptly, is Gen Z slang for 'carrying on regardless of the circumstances') – and we find enough meaning in these movements to get by.

But, we move nevertheless with a sense that our broader circumstances are beyond our control. That in some ways the course we're on as a generation has already been charted. That we are moving at pace until certain forces act to change it. The 2024 Australian Youth Barometer suggests this sense of inertia isn't necessarily in our best interests:

- More than 1 in 5 young people rate their mental health as poor or very poor.
- 98% of young Australians report having at least one feeling of anxiety or pessimism in the past 12 months.
- 86% of young Australians experienced financial difficulties in the last year.
- 62% think they'll be financially worse off than their parents.
- Just under 1 in 3 young people believe that it's likely they'll be able to afford a comfortable place to live in the next year.

This raises a troubling question: Is this path of inertia what we want for our movement as a generation? Surely we would rather break free from it in pursuit of more meaningful goals: taking that gap year, volunteering or getting more involved in our communities, moving out of our rental, learning more about ourselves and what we care about. Or perhaps we're too busy doing what we need to survive. No wonder almost 1 in 2 young people (48%) aren't ready to think about having kids in the future, or, as we highlighted in our recent report with the CYPEP team,<sup>1</sup> many young people feel like they are missing out on being young.

Yet the findings this year raise another troubling question about our relationships with formal institutions. At a time when financial security, affordable housing and mental health are key issues, this year's findings highlight a lack of trust in the government's ability to address these issues:

- 39% of young people believe that there is not enough government support for housing.
- 26% believe there is not enough financial support from the government.
- 21% believe that not enough is being done in relation to mental health.

This lack of trust in governments is compounded by election tactics and policies that fail to account for the long-term concerns and the issues that we care about. When governments appear more interested in hearing the voices of homeowners and businesses, we begin to question the value of these political institutions and their ability to break us out of this inertia:

“


**I feel like it's a little bit hard to get represented in a way when ... [we are not] the ones that are more the homeowners and the taxpayers.** WOMAN, 19, QLD

“

**Anytime I try to say anything, I find a lot of people don't listen. So I just don't try anymore.** MAN, 23, VIC

These tensions also occur against the backdrop of a larger social discourse and dichotomy between older and younger generations. Much of this discourse is seen in media spaces, which abounds with comparisons between, and criticism of, each generation's shortcomings. Why don't we just work harder to buy a house? Well, why can't they just convert a Word doc to PDF? While social media spaces can be a platform for sharing information and building connections, these spaces also reinforce biased viewpoints





This is not just about taking control of our own personal development or making change in our immediate settings; it is about working towards a collective future that looks after the planet and its future generations.

and misinformation and can be a platform for complaining rather than taking meaningful action.

In any case, we move. Or rather, we choose to move, we forge on, make the most of what we can, and this too is evident in the Australian Youth Barometer's findings. When cost of living is a key pressure, one way we move is in how we spend our money – a key theme this year in relation to young people's civic participation:



**I would say most of [all] just vote with your wallet. ... I think that's the biggest way to make change – just boycott things. ... The easiest way in a capital[ist] society [is to] just vote with your money. Money is the ultimate voice when it comes to things.** MAN, 22, NSW

But these choices will always be within the confines of broader systemic pressures, so it's important to acknowledge that these conditions will continue to be challenging over the long term unless something changes. As a start, governments need to work with young people to learn to better support us and build a relationship of trust. Importantly, this must involve a move away from election-cycle policies and towards investment in ideas that will benefit future generations to come. This includes investments in predominantly underfunded key areas such as education, housing, mental health and infrastructure such as public transport.

Governments are not the only players. Workplaces, experts, policymakers, not-for-profits and industry providers also have crucial roles to play in a collective and targeted response to the concerns that we are raising time and time again. Whether it's facilitating work experiences, delivering key government programs or supporting young people when they need it the most, the road to an even better future is not possible without partnerships between these stakeholders. We must be realistic, though, as there is no one-size-fits-all solution, nor will there be a solution that can be implemented

overnight. Now more than ever, bold and visionary leadership is essential to encourage creativity and innovation in the way solutions are developed.

Education institutions will also be pivotal in these solutions as they are a microcosm of society. Not only can they play a role in equipping us with the knowledge and skills to adapt to an ever-changing globalised world, they are in a prime position to positively influence the next generation by teaching about finances, professional work, further education, wellbeing and healthy relationships in evidence-based and meaningful ways. This cannot occur, however, without significant investment. The disparity between education experiences, particularly between public and private institutions, is deeply troubling, as is the public discourse around higher education – especially if 80% of Australians will require a tertiary qualification by 2050, as the Australian Universities Accord expects.<sup>2</sup>

Lastly, rather than just being the object of policymaking, we as young people are keen to play a role in these responses. We have the lived experience and, as the findings in this report attest, we are actively involved in our communities. This is not just about taking control of our own personal development or making change in our immediate settings; it is about working towards a collective future that looks after the planet and its future generations. There are endless examples of incredible young people making important strides towards their ideal futures, but the onus is on us all to build on, learn from and support these efforts.

There is no doubt that more can be done to support young people. We must disrupt this experience of inertia and chart a new path for us and future generations to come. These efforts, though, will be in vain unless they are approached from an evidence-informed, knowledgeable and considered position. The 2024 Australian Youth Barometer is an indispensable resource in this respect, and as CYPEP's Youth Reference Group, we invite you to engage with the findings and *move with us*.

# A MESSAGE FROM THE RESEARCH TEAM

The theme of CYPEP's work in 2024 has been young people's participation in the economy and in shaping their communities. Two noteworthy changes have been initiated by the federal government this year.

The first is that, in February, the federal government passed the *Fair Work Legislation Amendment (Closing Loopholes No. 2) Act 2024*. Among other things, this Act defines gig economy workers as employees and outlines minimum standards that digital platform companies must adhere to. These changes have implications for young people who are among the most exposed to both the benefits and, perhaps more importantly, the disadvantages of insecure work.

The National Youth Commission (2021) argued that “for many years, young people have encountered a labour market with no certainty of employment, variable pay and no annual leave or sick leave entitlements because they are employed on a casual basis, on short term contracts or are ‘gig’ workers”.<sup>3</sup> Jobs in the gig economy are typically advertised via online platforms, and employers tend to contract workers on a fee-for-service basis.<sup>4</sup> The jobs are typically short term, and gig workers can be independent contractors.

It is estimated that between 2015 and 2019, the gig economy grew more than nine times in market size, amounting to consumer spending of more than \$6 billion.<sup>5</sup> Just under one in five (17%)<sup>6</sup> gig workers reported that money earned from gig work was their main source of income, while almost one-third used gig work to supplement their income.

More than half of young people work in the gig economy. According to the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer, 50% earned income from gig work during the previous year.<sup>7</sup> This year, slightly less than half (48%) reported participating in the gig economy at some point during the last month. Compare this to 2022, when 56% of 18- to 24-year-olds reported earning income from gig work during the last year.<sup>8</sup>

Gig work is appealing because it offers flexibility (e.g. for students or people with a disability), but it can be relatively low paid, sporadic and lack protections, superannuation and other entitlements. It also offers income for those who can't get enough work: underemployed

and unemployed young Australians are more likely to be working in gig jobs.<sup>9</sup> Youth labour markets in Australia have featured relatively high levels of unemployment and underemployment<sup>4</sup> for decades.

But sometimes, young people are desperate. Australians aged 18–24 who ran out of food and were not able to buy more because of lack of money at some point in the previous year were more likely to participate in the gig economy than those who said they had not experienced food insecurity. Strikingly, 17% of young people surveyed this year experienced food insecurity in the past year. One Tasmanian respondent told us they had resorted to shooting wallabies for food. Those who reported often experiencing food insecurity in other ways, such as being unable to access healthy and nutritious food, having to skip meals or going without eating for a whole day, were also more likely to report participating in the gig economy than those who never had these experiences.<sup>9</sup>

Is gig work the tip of the iceberg of growing workforce insecurity in Australia? Whether work is becoming more insecure – and even the definition of insecure work – is debated.<sup>10</sup>

One definition posits that insecure employment “lacks regular and predictable hours; access to paid leave; predictable pay; hours that are not too long or too short; or not having a voice on pay rates and working conditions”.<sup>11</sup> Permanent part-time employment “may also be insecure when it is not preferable to an employee” but is the only position available. Those employed through fixed-term contracts could also be classified as insecure. Young people are more often working in casual positions. They face a power imbalance with their employers and may not know their rights and entitlements. The National Youth Commission heard from young people that, as casual employees and gig workers, they are “underpaid, constantly changing jobs and being fired for asking for fair treatment”<sup>3</sup>. Casual jobs also don't necessarily lead to secure work. National Youth Commission data suggest that the majority of people overall “who are casual employees in one year are still not in permanent employment five years later”. This might be through choice or because more desirable, secure work is unavailable.

Insecure work has perhaps contributed to a pervading sense of uncertainty among young people. Rising house prices and rent, climate change and disruptions such as the pandemic exacerbate this uncertainty.

For many young Australians, temporary, casual and gig work is only a temporary step<sup>12</sup> as they seek full-time employment. Movement into secure, desirable professions is less linear: “Even work that requires high-level knowledge and skills can now be contracted out, thus, breaking the traditional nexus between higher level educational qualifications and skills and stable employment conditions.”<sup>4</sup> The earning premium of many university degrees in Australia has shrunk and a substantial proportion of gig workers overall are highly qualified.<sup>6</sup> Some use gig work to add to their incomes<sup>13</sup> because there isn’t enough work in their field.

Insecure work has perhaps contributed to a pervading sense of uncertainty among young people. Rising house prices and rent, climate change and disruptions such as the pandemic exacerbate this uncertainty. Perhaps this is why 62% of our 2024 survey respondents believe that they will be financially worse off than their parents. Some young people feel that financial security is possible and desirable in the long term but is not feasible in the immediate future because of current financial pressures such as rent and student fees.

The passing of the *Closing Loopholes No. 2 Act* is a positive first step. However, more than “minimum standards” will be needed to provide casual and gig workers – many of whom are vulnerable young people experiencing insecurity and uncertainty in an increasingly precarious work environment – with pathways to financial security. The Act begins to address these concerns, but more must be done to address the intersecting insecurities many young people still face.

The second important development this year was the release of a new federal government youth strategy, *Engage! A strategy to include young people in the decisions we make*.<sup>14</sup> This is very welcome following a decade-long vacuum in government funding and policy directed at young people. This vacuum included defunding the Australian Youth Affairs Coalition and insufficient state funding to youth service providers throughout Australia.

The new strategy places young people at the centre of its engagement approach to decision-making and accounts for the diversity of young people’s experiences and circumstances. The strategy draws on data from the Australian census to point out that of the 4.7 million young people aged 12–25, 5% are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, 16.3% are born overseas, 9.3% have disability, 7.3% are lesbian, gay or bisexual and 25.9% live in regional and remote areas.<sup>14</sup>

The strategy is framed in positive terms rather than the deficit approaches often used to describe young people. Such deficit approaches include unhelpful negative stereotypes of young people as apathetic or in some way seeming entitled.<sup>15</sup> However, the situation for many young people is dire, and the strategy acknowledges the challenges young people face.

Immediate challenges include high levels of food insecurity described above and the unfolding crisis of unaffordable rental and housing accommodation. As the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute points out:

**Expensive housing costs have an impact on all segments of Australian society, but younger adults and teenagers are affected particularly badly as they have fewer economic resources to use to pay high rents (or to consider buying a property). Even younger adults ... settling into professional careers, are struggling to pay for housing in the current economic and housing climate.**<sup>16</sup>

Young people also continue to experience high levels of anxiety and mental health issues, with 21% of Australians aged 18–24 rating their mental health as poor or very poor. Less than half (46%) rated it as good or excellent in 2024, which shows some improvement on previous years.

This year, CYPEP has been seeking to deepen and extend knowledge of young people's engagement and participation in other ways. This latest issue of the Australian Youth Barometer provides some insights.

Young people see these factors as interrelated. As one Western Australian woman told us, they face weekly financial challenges:

“

I do have work and stuff, but I don't find I'm saving too much money after I buy groceries and after I pay for car stuff. It's like, where did my weekly pay check go? ... I got groceries last week ... I've gotten everything that was on the Coles specials, everything Coles brand, you know, the 90 cent pastas. That's what I'm down to.

She added, “I'm working full-time as a high school teacher and I still live in a shed.”

Another man in New South Wales noted disparities between people:

“

If you are lucky and you are in a well-blessed position then maintaining your health should not be too difficult. You have good employment, you have a decent amount of time after work to go exercising or whatever, but if you are not in that blessed position and you have to work two jobs or whatever and stuff, that can really hamper your ability to maintain wellbeing.

Longer term challenges include declining engagement with conventional avenues for shaping decision-making. As noted elsewhere, “It seems that electoral politics is becoming less attractive to the young and non-electoral politics more attractive.”<sup>17</sup> Young people's declining participation in party membership is an example. Those who join political parties when young – those who are likely to be tomorrow's decision-makers and leaders – tend to be men from highly educated backgrounds.<sup>18</sup> But what of the voices less likely to be represented in these parties?

The new youth strategy integrates a range of young people's voices into policy thinking and reflects the need for a holistic approach that includes multiple departments and supportive organisations in response to the pressures young people face. The challenge is to sustain that policy engagement and, most importantly, for those participating in the process to see results. Traditionally, policymakers' engagement with young people has been tokenistic and ad hoc. Our review of policy during the 10 years prior to the current government affirms this.<sup>15</sup> So while the new youth strategy suggests that the federal government is listening, a key question now is what will the government do with what they've heard?

This year, CYPEP has been seeking to deepen and extend knowledge of young people's engagement and participation in other ways. This latest issue of the Australian Youth Barometer provides some insights. A 21-year-old woman from New South Wales told us:

“

I'm very much like an “If there's an issue, do something about it” kind of person. ... You complain about something, but you don't do anything about it. And for me, this was like, “What's the point?” You can bitch and you can moan about something, but no one's gonna, like, politicians aren't gonna change things out of the goodness of their heart. They don't give a fuck about us. We need to be the ones to actually do that ... if we want social change.



For one young Queensland man, participation means:



[helping] out people where I can. It's just a sense of community as well. ... I think to some extent my life is going to be, I'm going to live and I'm going to die, you know, I'm not going to make much difference. ... I think volunteering [is] where I'm going to make the most difference in my life by helping someone. ... I think if I can do something, do some good I guess, I think my life might have meaning.

In coming months, CYPEP will be releasing a suite of discussion papers that explore the challenges and productive spaces in which young people can and do shape their worlds.

Stay tuned.

**Professor Lucas Walsh, Dr Zihong Deng, Dr Thuc Bao Huynh and Blake Cutler**

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# 02

## ABOUT THE 2024 YOUTH BAROMETER

### METHOD AND APPROACH

Now in its fourth iteration, the method and approach of this year's Australian Youth Barometer is largely identical to the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer. We used a concurrent mixed-methods design where data were generated through interviews and an online survey. This was complemented by a review of existing data from nation-wide studies of young people's lives in Australia, particularly studies where young people were themselves the respondents. We focused on research that included the experiences of young people aged 18–24 to align with the Youth Barometer data; however, because definitions of youth and the age ranges used in studies of young people vary greatly, we have also included secondary data that used age ranges that intersected with our 18–24 age category. We have retained the language used in the original sources that refers to gender-diverse people and First Nations peoples.

Across each of these data sources, we explored a range of topics including education, employment, health and wellbeing, finances, housing, civic participation, relationships and the impact of COVID-19. By analysing specific questions in relation to young people's responses as a whole, we aimed to develop an interconnected understanding of young people's lives.

Ethics approval was granted by the Monash University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the collection of data. Participation in the survey and interviews was voluntary. The findings are not representative of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples.

### SURVEY

The survey was completed by 623 participants aged 18–24 with an average completion time of 17.67 minutes. The questionnaire contained a mix of closed, Likert-style and open-ended questions. The analysis used probabilistic weights to make the sample representative of Australian young people in terms of age cohort, gender and region. Table 2.1 shows a comparison of survey participants' characteristics with and without probabilistic weights.

Stata 16.0 was used to conduct the quantitative analysis. All 623 respondents were included. The analysis is based on contingency tables and chi-square tests using probabilistic weights for group differences between the variables of interest and the demographic characteristics (including age, gender, First Nations, disability, socioeconomic background [SES] and location). Comparisons across demographic groups with chi-square tests  $p < 0.05$  are reported. However, this does not include categories that have an expected number of observations smaller than 5 even if they are significant. For example, "Prefer not to say" in gender, "Don't know/prefer not to say" in First Nations and "Something else" in disability have very small values, and thus, their comparisons are not reported. Results that are considered similar or consistent across demographic groups include those that are not statistically significant and those that have very small cell sizes. Note that the sum percentages after rounding up may not equal 100%.

For consistency with the 2023 Australian Youth Barometer, SES and location were re-coded based on survey respondents' postcodes. SES corresponds to the 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Index of Economic Resources (IER), which focuses on "the financial aspects of relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage", and has been re-coded as "Low" (deciles 1 to 3), "Medium" (deciles 4 to 7) and "High" (deciles 8 to 10), with a low score indicating a relative lack of access to economic resources.<sup>1</sup>

Remoteness is also based on postcode and measured according to the Remoteness Areas Structure within the Australian Statistical Geography Standard (ASGS).<sup>2</sup> The original categories were re-coded as "Remote" (Outer Regional Australia, Remote Australia and Very Remote Australia), "Regional" (Inner Regional Australia) and "Metro" (Major Cities of Australia). For postcodes that cover different types of locations, we used the largest type to represent the location of this postcode.

**TABLE 2.1: SURVEY AND WEIGHTED SAMPLE BY DESCRIPTIVE CHARACTERISTICS. SAMPLE SIZE: 623**

	NUMBER	%	WEIGHTED NUMBER	WEIGHTED %
<b>AGE</b>				
18	76	12.2	76.9	12.3
19	82	13.2	80.7	12.9
20	74	11.9	74.7	12.0
21	82	13.2	82.2	13.2
22	90	14.4	89.2	14.3
23	105	16.9	106	17.0
24	114	18.3	113.4	18.2
<b>GENDER</b>				
Woman	306	49.1	295.2	47.4
Man	304	48.8	315.1	50.6
Gender diverse	12	1.9	11.7	1.9
Prefer not to say	1	0.2	1	0.2
<b>EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT</b>				
Postgraduate degree level	25	4.0	26	4.2
Graduate diploma and graduate certificate level	17	2.7	16.3	2.6
Bachelor degree level	192	30.8	199.1	32.0
Advanced diploma and diploma level	46	7.4	46.8	7.5
Certificate level	107	17.2	97.7	15.7
Secondary education	223	35.8	225.3	36.2
Primary education	5	0.8	4.8	0.8
Pre-primary education	0	0.0	0	0.0
Other education	8	1.3	7	1.1
<b>STATE</b>				
ACT	15	2.4	14.5	2.3
NSW	188	30.2	196.2	31.5
VIC	155	24.9	164.4	26.4
QLD	117	18.8	127.4	20.4
SA	50	8.0	40.3	6.5
NT	9	1.4	4.5	0.7
TAS	25	4.0	11	1.8
WA	64	10.3	64.6	10.4
<b>LOCATION (BASED ON POSTCODE)</b>				
Metro	488	78.3	514.4	82.6
Regional	86	13.8	72.4	11.6
Remote	49	7.9	36.3	5.8
<b>SES (BASED ON POSTCODE)</b>				
Low	253	40.6	246.4	39.6
Medium	216	34.7	213.5	34.3
High	154	24.7	163.1	26.2
<b>BORN IN AUSTRALIA</b>				
Australia	536	86.0	533.4	85.6
Abroad	87	14.0	89.6	14.4
<b>FIRST NATIONS</b>				
No	560	89.9	561.1	90.1
Yes	57	9.1	55.8	9.0
Don't know/prefer not to say	6	1.0	6.1	1.0
<b>DISABILITY</b>				
No	410	65.8	415.8	66.7
A physical disability	15	2.4	15.2	2.4
A long-term illness	19	3.0	18.2	2.9
A mental health condition	104	16.7	102.3	16.4
Something else	4	0.6	4.2	0.7
Multiple conditions	54	8.7	51.5	8.3
Prefer not to say	17	2.7	15.8	2.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>623</b>	<b>100.0</b>

## INTERVIEWS

Semistructured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes were conducted with 30 young people aged 18–24. These interviews were conducted via Zoom and then professionally transcribed for analysis. Interviews were conducted with young people from all Australian states and territories, except the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) (see Table 2.2). Despite the relatively small sample size, efforts were made to engage young people from diverse cultural and geographic backgrounds. Eight interviewees disclosed that they were members of the LGBTIQ+ community, and two identified as gender diverse.

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

**TABLE 2.2:**

INTERVIEW SAMPLE BY DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS. SAMPLE SIZE: 30

	NUMBER	% <sup>a</sup>
<b>AGE</b>		
18	4	13.3
19	8	26.7
20	2	6.7
21	6	20.0
22	4	13.3
23	3	10.0
24	3	10.0
<b>GENDER</b>		
Woman	14	46.7
Man	14	46.7
Gender diverse	2	6.7
<b>STATE</b>		
NSW	9	30.0
QLD	6	20.0
VIC	6	20.0
SA	4	13.3
WA	3	10.0
NT	1	3.3
TAS	1	3.3
ACT	0	0.0
<b>LOCATION</b>		
Metropolitan	19	63.3
Regional or remote	11	36.7
<b>CURRENT LIVING ARRANGEMENT</b>		
At home with family	23	76.7
Alone or independently	4	13.3
With friends or in a share house	3	10.0
With partner	0	0.0
Homeless	0	0.0
<b>CULTURAL BACKGROUND</b>		
Anglo Australian	17	56.7
Diverse backgrounds <sup>b</sup>	12	40.0
First Nations	1	3.3
<b>CULTURAL BACKGROUND</b>		
Yes	8	26.7
No	22	73.3

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

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

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3. Hsieh H-F, Shannon SE. Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qual Health Res*, 2005;15(9):1277–1288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687>





# 03

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE ECONOMY

### KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 86% of young Australians experienced financial difficulties to some extent in the last 12 months, with 26% reporting they did so often or very often.
- 2** 62% of young Australians think they will be financially worse off than their parents.
- 3** 53% of young Australians think that it is likely or very likely that they will achieve financial security in the future.
- 4** 68% of young Australians turn to family members as the main source of financial support when running short of money.
- 5** 31% of young people think it is likely or extremely likely that they will be able to afford a comfortable place to live in the next 12 months. 60% think it is likely or very likely they will live in a comfortable home in the future.
- 6** 48% of young Australians think that it is likely or very likely that they will be able to purchase a property or house in the future.
- 7** Financial security is a core concern for many young people. Not being able to work adequate hours and rising costs of living contribute to financial stress.



# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

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

## HOUSING

The most recent HILDA survey shows 54% of young men and 47% of young women aged 18–29 remained living with their parents in 2021, which increased from 47% of young men and 36% of young women in 2001.<sup>1</sup> Eight per cent of young people aged 18–22 living with their family were required to contribute to family housing costs by paying board.<sup>2</sup> Young people living away from their families faced unsuitable living conditions, worried about rent increases or evictions and had concerns about the safety of their housing.<sup>3</sup>

Home ownership remained an important goal for many young people, with 57% of young people aged 13–28 identifying home ownership as part of the Australian dream.<sup>4</sup> However, young people were less likely than older generations to place importance on home ownership, with more young people placing importance on attaining their dream life (71%) than owning their dream home (29%). This may be due to the perceived difficulty of home ownership, with 84% of all Australians believing that it was more difficult for young Australians to purchase their own home. Around two-thirds of all Australians believed that young Australians would never be able to buy a home.<sup>4</sup>

According to the latest census data, around 28,200 young people aged 12–24 experienced homelessness on census night in 2021,<sup>5</sup> accounting for 23% of the total homeless population. This figure is likely to be an underestimation, as some types of homelessness common among young people, such as couch surfing, were not captured by the census data.

## FINANCIAL SECURITY

In 2023, young Australians aged 18–26 were more likely to feel financially stressed due to the rising cost of living, with 82% reporting feelings of stress compared with 70% for older cohorts. Young people in this age group commonly reported feeling overwhelmed (49%), not knowing where to start (42%), not knowing much about finances (32%), not knowing who to trust (31%) and feeling that finances are too complicated (29%).<sup>6</sup> Rising costs of living are also more likely to impact the financial behaviours of young people aged 18–28, with 90% reducing their spending in response to rising costs.<sup>7</sup>

Of young people aged 18–28, just 13% reported being very satisfied or extremely satisfied with their current financial situation.<sup>8</sup> Twenty-five per cent of young people aged 18–26 reported having less than \$1,000 in personal savings, including 8% who reported having no personal savings. On average, a young person in this age group is estimated to have around \$8,188 of personal debt. Twenty-one per cent of young people in this age group reported having more than \$10,000 in personal debt, and 4% reported having personal debt of more than \$50,000.<sup>6</sup>

Home ownership is closely associated with perceptions of financial security. The top financial aspirations for young people aged 18–28 were owning a home (63%), being financially independent (62%) and having good work–life balance (61%).<sup>8</sup>

## FINANCIAL LITERACY AND PRODUCTS

More than one-third (36%) of young Australians aged 18–35 did not feel confident about their financial literacy.<sup>9</sup> Young Australians aged 18–26 were also more likely to want to learn more about managing finances, with 44% wanting to improve their financial literacy compared with 22% of older cohorts.<sup>6</sup> The main source of financial information for young Australians was social media, and 56% relied on digital platforms for financial advice.

Credit and debit cards were the dominant payment methods for young Australians, with young people aged 18–29 using cards for 85% of their payments. Mobile payments were increasingly used by young Australians, with nearly two-thirds using mobile payments as their preferred payment option.<sup>10</sup> Young Australians aged 18–26 were more likely to use a buy now, pay later product, with 28% having used one compared with 21% of older cohorts.<sup>6</sup> The use of buy now, pay later products had increased among young people aged 18–28, with 64% having used one in the previous 6 months in 2023, compared with 37% in 2020.<sup>11</sup>







# 2024 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

Many of the young people interviewed did not feel that their current circumstances were financially viable.

## CURRENT FINANCIAL SITUATION

Most young Australians surveyed (86%) experienced financial difficulties at some point in the past 12 months, with 26% reporting that they did so often or very often. Greater proportions of young women (90%) and gender-diverse people (91%) reported experiencing financial difficulties than young men (83%). Young people with disabilities were more likely to report experiencing financial difficulties (over 90%) than those without disabilities (81%). Young people in regional (90%) and remote (96%) areas experienced financial difficulties more often than those in metropolitan areas (84%).

Many of the young people interviewed did not feel that their current circumstances were financially viable. A key factor was not being able to work or not working as much as they would like. Even for those who did work, high costs of living, particularly for groceries and other basic necessities, were highlighted as key reasons for not feeling financially secure:

“

[My financial situation is] terrible, awful ... I mean I haven't been working for, like, nine months now because it's so difficult to find a job ... at the moment I have, like, \$1 in my bank account, I'm not even joking. WOMAN, 18, SA

“

I do have work and stuff, but I don't find I'm saving too much money after I buy groceries and after I pay for car stuff. It's, like, where did my weekly paycheck go? ... I got groceries last week ... I've gotten everything that was on the Coles specials, everything Coles brand, you know, the 90 cent pastas. That's what I'm down to. WOMAN, 21, WA

Some interviewees were positive about their current financial positions. However, many acknowledged that their current financial stability was only possible with support from their parents, most notably by living in the family home:

“

If I lived on my own I wouldn't be earning enough to live right now but I have my mother who is supporting me ... I wouldn't be able to, like, buy food or anything so luckily she is able to support me with that and I'm able to get what money I have and save it. BI-GENDER PERSON, 19, SA

## FINANCIAL SECURITY

Financial security was a major concern for many young people, with some interviewees saying that their financial situation was always on their mind:

“

My number one goal is financial security. It's always on my mind ... [I] worry about how am I going to support myself when I'm older, and it's, yeah, I would say that's probably like, yeah, number one priority for me. WOMAN, 21, NSW

Sixty-two per cent of young Australians believed that they would be financially worse off than their parents. This was more common among young women (69%), gender-diverse people (91%) and those with mental health conditions (75%), long-term illnesses (80%) and with multiple conditions (86%). Compared with those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (52%), young people from medium (69%) and high (66%) socioeconomic backgrounds more often felt that they would be financially worse off than their parents.

In interviews, young people discussed how financial security was closely tied to stability, being able to pay for basic necessities such as food and rent, not having to worry about money and having enough money in case of emergencies, especially sickness:

“

Having a steady ... consistent income that's going to be coming in and not relying on being paycheck to paycheck. Like, for me, financially secure is knowing that if I had to take a month sick, I have enough there that I'm not going to be, you know, drowning in debts. WOMAN, 23, VIC

“

I'd like to have savings, proper savings, and be able to afford to save properly as well. You know, maybe being able to afford to get sick, afford to take the day off every so often, just stuff like that.

MAN, 23, QLD

Some interviewees had a broader view of financial security, which extended beyond their immediate income by looking to the future. For these young people, financial security was indicated by a number of key markers:

“

When you are financially stable, you should have other things as well that go with being financially stable, such as some form of housing. ... You need to be able to have savings, you need to be able to know that you are going to be safe in the future with your jobs.

WOMAN, 19, NSW

## HOUSING

More than half (58%) of young Australians surveyed lived in their family home, 16% lived in a house-sharing arrangement, 12% lived independently on their own, 14% lived independently as a family or couple and the remaining 1% lived in other situations (see Figure 3.1). Young First Nations peoples (71%) were more likely to be living in the family home than other Australians (56%). Young people from a high socioeconomic background (71%) were more likely to live in their family home compared with young people from medium (53%) and low (52%) socioeconomic backgrounds. Young people from metropolitan areas (60%) were more likely to live with their families than those from regional (52%) and remote (33%) areas.

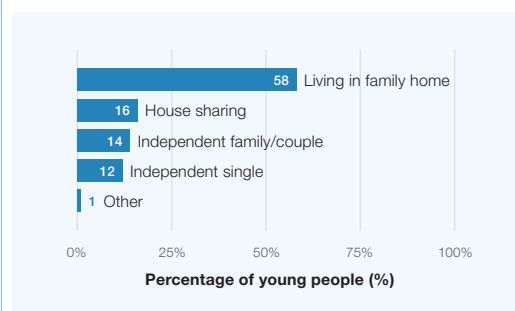


Figure 3.1: Housing arrangements (N = 623)

When faced with challenging financial circumstances, several of the young people interviewed had adopted alternative housing arrangements such as living in detached bungalows or other structures such as sheds on the family property. Some interviewees were able to afford to live on their own but faced adverse living conditions as a result:

“

I'm living in a shed effectively, that also rings testament true to the rental prices. If I couldn't even afford rent on the salary that I'm on now ... I'm working full-time as a high school teacher and I still live in a shed. WOMAN, 21, WA



“

**I live in a house by myself in one of the poorest neighbourhoods. I got really cheap rent. I'm really lucky but the house has got black mould and asbestos.** NON-BINARY PERSON, 18, TAS

Two-thirds (67%) of young Australians thought it likely or extremely likely that they would stay in their current accommodation in the next 12 months. Compared with those born in other countries (48%), a higher proportion of young people born in Australia (71%) thought it likely or extremely likely that they would stay in their current accommodation in the next 12 months. Less than one-third (31%) of young people thought it likely or extremely likely that they would be able to afford a comfortable place to live in the next 12 months.

Thinking further into the future, 60% of young people thought it likely or very likely that they would live in a comfortable home in the future. This was more common among young men (63%) than young women (58%) or gender-diverse people (43%). Young people without disabilities (68%) were also more likely to expect to live in a comfortable home in the future than young people with a physical disability (44%), a long-term illness (65%), mental health conditions (48%) or multiple conditions (42%).

Slightly less than half of young Australians (48%) thought it likely or very likely that they would be able to purchase a property or house. This lack of optimism was also reflected by interviewees, who believed that purchasing property would become increasingly difficult into the future:

“

**I hope I get enough money to even think about buying a house one day because houses are just so expensive and just even the extra costs. I mean, I don't really have an idea of a timeline in my mind ... because it's just depressing, [prices are] just going up.**

BI-GENDER PERSON, 19, SA

Despite this, owning their own property remained a key aspiration for many young people and, for some, was an important marker of financial security:

“

**I just want to buy a place to live in so I don't have to pay rent anymore. Like, I'm not interested in investment properties, not interested in any of that. I just want a place that I can live and I don't have to worry about paying rent when I'm 80 years old.** WOMAN, 21, NSW



## PLANS FOR FINANCIAL SECURITY

Just over half (53%) of young Australians thought it likely or very likely that they would achieve financial security in the future. Young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (63%) more often thought it likely or very likely that they would achieve financial security, compared with those from medium (45%) and high (48%) socioeconomic backgrounds.

The majority of the young people we interviewed looked to work as their main pathway to achieving financial security in the future. In the short term, this involved working more hours in their current roles or finding more work in second jobs. In the longer term, young people sought to find secure work by moving up in their chosen fields into roles that were more financially rewarding:

“

Once I'm in my field that I want to go, just making sure I'm climbing through the ranks there, trying to progress and seek high opportunities where I can.

MAN, 24, VIC

Young people also spoke of the importance of being frugal and not spending money frivolously so as to make the most of the income that they earned from working:

“

Well, currently I'm saving up as I work, so trying not to spend too much on random things.

WOMAN, 19, VIC

A relatively small proportion of interviewees looked to starting businesses and forms of passive income, such as investments, as pathways to financial security:

“

Definitely going to be looking towards investments and whatnot into the future, that is certainly ... going to be a part of my plan to build my wealth. I'm definitely going to be looking at diversifying ... to try and mitigate [the] risk of losing everything.

MAN, 22, NSW

Some interviewees did not have clear plans, and several expressed that achieving financial security was beyond their control. Similar to their experiences of financial distress, rising costs of living were a key factor:

“

There's not much you can control ... I don't do anything fun that costs money ... Even then, it's scary how fast everything goes. Two years ago, to fill up my car, it cost \$70.00 and now to fill up my car to the top, it costs \$90.00.

WOMAN, 21, WA

## BARRIERS TO FINANCIAL SECURITY

Young people identified a diverse range of barriers to achieving financial security. As discussed above, many barriers were related to work, with interviewees worried about their ability to find secure, high-paying work or not being able to work in their current positions:

“

**It's hard to find secure work at the moment, there is lots of casual work going around but not so much permanent or part-time which means it's hard to save up for a house and things like that and it makes it harder to get rentals and things. It's hard to find that kind of work.**

WOMAN, 20, SA

Broader barriers, such as those associated with increased costs of living, not only affected how young people saw their current financial circumstances, but also had negative impacts on their confidence in being able to achieve financial security in the future:

“

**I think barriers could be, like, day-to-day living expenses. They are going up and I think that it's all nice and easy to try and save for a house or whatever but not everyone gets that privilege to stay in a family home for a while and if you've got a lot of bills then that can be a huge barrier to actually becoming financially secure.** MAN, 22, NSW

However, some young people were generally optimistic and either did not identify potential barriers or viewed barriers as a normal aspect of life:

“

**I mean, like, life is unpredictable so I'm not really sure, things could go wrong, but I think generally I'm optimistic.**

WOMAN, 18, SA

## USE OF FINANCIAL PRODUCTS

Forty per cent of young Australians reported being often or very often able to save part of their income. Compared with other age groups (e.g. 43% of those aged 18 and 47% of those aged 23), young people aged 24 had the lowest proportion (27%) of often or very often being able to save part of their income. Young First Nations peoples were less likely to report saving part of their income (11%) compared with other young Australians (43%). More young people without disabilities (45%) reported saving part of their income compared with young people with disabilities, including those with a physical disability (29%), long-term illness (31%), mental health conditions (30%) and multiple conditions (30%). A higher proportion of young people in high (49%) and medium (44%) socioeconomic backgrounds were able to save part of their income than those from low socioeconomic backgrounds (32%).

Most young Australians (67%) reported having a savings account. Other forms of saving investment were less common (see Figure 3.2). Less than one-quarter (23%) of young Australians reported that they did not have any savings or investment product.



Figure 3.2: Adoption of savings and investment products (N = 623)

More than half (56%) of young Australians had applied for some form of loan from a bank or financial institution in the last 12 months (see Figure 3.3). The most commonly used credit products were buy now, pay later services (32%) and credit cards (31%). The most common purchases made by those who used buy now, pay later services were clothes (89%), leisure activities (86%) and entertainment (78%).

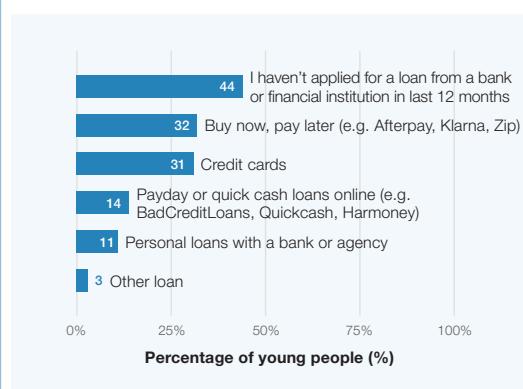


Figure 3.3: Adoption of credit products (N = 623)

When discussing their use of financial products, interviewees were ambivalent about the use of buy now, pay later services. Some spoke of positive experiences using these services for one-off purchases, while stressing that they aimed to be responsible when making purchases and keeping up with repayments:

“I was buying the phone on Afterpay ... unfortunately I had to delay one of the payments by about three days and that sort of taught me that there were like, they were lenient then when I called them up, but obviously some loan companies aren't going to just let you do that ... It's a scary sinkhole in my opinion. MAN, 22, NSW

Some young people had previously used buy now, pay later products but no longer used them. Reasons for doing so included learning more about the repercussions from debt, no longer feeling the novelty and no longer finding the services to be beneficial:

“When I was 19, I did, and then I was like, “Why?”, and so then I stopped. I was like, “I didn't have this money. I have to pay this back.” ... Everyone was using it so I was like, “Yeah, I'll get it.” And then I used it and I was like, “This is actually not beneficial at all.”

WOMAN, 21, WA

Some interviewees proposed systemic changes to ease financial pressure, with university fees being a particular area of concern.

Many young people interviewed were strongly against using buy now, pay later services. Common reasons included not being comfortable spending money they did not have, not being able to maintain control over their finances and a distrust of the companies and services provided:

“

I think it's all just a big scam ... I think it's an easy way to trap people in desperate situations ... It's just a slippery slope for a lot of people.

MAN, 22, NSW

## FINANCIAL SUPPORT

For most young Australians (68%), family members were the main source of financial support when running short of money. This was shared across most demographic groups, except for young First Nations peoples of whom 56% reported family members as their main source of support compared with 70% of other young Australians. Those with disabilities were less likely to rely on family members for financial support.

Given their current financial circumstances, it is unsurprising that the young people we interviewed felt that more avenues of financial support were needed. In particular, those who could not access familial support often looked to government to provide accessible forms of financial support to assist in paying for everyday expenses and contribute to feelings of financial wellbeing:

“

Centrelink support would be great, but I can't actually get it. So government support, that would be really helpful. Like, you know, just that extra \$100 a week would help me save up some more money, give me some more security. WOMAN, 19, QLD

Some interviewees proposed systemic changes to ease financial pressure, with university fees being a particular area of concern:

“

I think that universities should be free because it's such a formative part of our lives. Like [it] really forms our career, where we are going to work and how that will affect us being able to afford houses and to be paying off my Fee Help and also to be trying to pay off a loan just feels like, I don't know, counterproductive. WOMAN, 18, VIC



# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Most young Australians still face significant degrees of financial distress, although the proportion has decreased compared with 2023. High costs of living remain a key factor influencing young people's financial insecurity. A broad and interconnected approach to addressing system-wide concerns is needed to ease financial pressures on young people, who are more likely to bear the brunt of economic downturns and instability.
- In the face of housing challenges, many young people are resorting to alternative, and potentially untenable or unsafe, housing arrangements. Immediate support, such as support to look for properties for rent and submit rental applications, rental caps, temporary housing options and social housing for disadvantaged groups, is needed to assist young people to secure suitable and safe accommodation.
- In the long term, many young Australians still aspire to owning their own home and see this as a key marker of financial stability, but they are becoming increasingly pessimistic about their home ownership prospects. System-level actions to increase housing affordability and availability, alongside further individually targeted financial support to assist young people to move from renting to purchasing a home, are needed.
- Finding secure work represents young people's main pathway to future financial stability. Given this, support to find secure employment, such as assistance in looking for secure jobs and submitting job applications and ensuring that workplaces are safe and supportive environments for young people, may play a key role in helping them to become financially secure.
- Many young people either express ambivalence or are wary of using financial products. While recent policy measures have made good progress in regulating and securing the market for buy now, pay later products, more research may be needed to better understand young people's relationship with financial products and their reluctance to use traditional financial products such as bank loans.
- As in previous years, family remains the main source of financial support for many young people. This may present significant challenges

to young people who cannot access this form of support. While some forms of government support are available to young people, these need to be made easier to understand and access, especially as some young people rely on these supports for basic necessities.

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# 04

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND WORK

### KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 48% of young Australians reported participating in the gig economy at some point during the last 12 months.
- 2** 37% of young people experienced unemployment at some point in the last 12 months, and 52% experienced underemployment over the same period.
- 3** 63% of young people think it is likely or very likely that they will work in a job they like in the future.
- 4** High-salary/payment (78%), location (72%) and long-term contract/being in a secure job (71%) are important characteristics of work.
- 5** 83% of young Australians participate in one or more career enabling activities with the intention of improving their chances of getting a job.
- 6** Interpersonal relationships and supportive social environments are seen as positive aspects of young people's work. Conversely, working too many or too few hours and low pay are seen as negative aspects.
- 7** Key enablers of future employment success include education, practical experience and having strong support networks. A lack of educational qualifications or relevant experience, needing to move for work, concerns about the state of chosen industries and personal shortcomings are seen as potential barriers.

# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Young people were more likely to change jobs than other age groups. Among those who had considered changing jobs, increased salary was the primary motivator.

## YOUTH LABOUR MARKET

Following Mission Australia's 2023 survey,<sup>1</sup> 52.8% of young people aged 15–19 reported being in paid employment. The vast majority of employed young people were working casually (91.2%), with the remainder being employed on a permanent basis (8.8%). Only a small portion of young people in this age group were employed full-time (1.4%). Young people aged 15–24 were more likely to be engaged on a casual or part-time basis (53%) compared with other age groups (22–30%).<sup>2</sup> Of those young people who were not employed, 56.4% stated that they were looking for work and 43.6% stated that they were not looking for work.

In June 2023, 66% of young people aged 15–24 were employed, compared with around 83%–86% for those in older age brackets.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, young people experienced higher rates of unemployment (9.6%) in April 2024, compared with the rate of general unemployment (4.0%).<sup>3</sup> Long term, the rate of employment for young people aged 15–24 increased from 62% to 66% from 1978 to 2023, although this is a smaller change than in other age groups, possibly reflecting their delayed entry into the labour market.<sup>2</sup>

Young people aged 20–24 were also more likely to hold more than one job than those in higher age brackets, with 7.9% working more than one job in September 2023.<sup>4</sup> These factors make young people more likely to be affected by economic downturns. Young people aged 15–24 had the steepest fall in employment rates at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, with a fall of 10%. However, this group was also the first to return to pre-pandemic levels of employment and had the largest percentage point increase in employment rates between March 2020 and June 2023.<sup>2</sup>

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S WORKING CONDITIONS

Young people were generally satisfied with their employment. Mission Australia's 2023 survey<sup>1</sup> indicated that 66.7% of young people aged 15–19 reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their job, and 11.1% were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied. Young females (68.8%) were more likely to be satisfied or very satisfied than young males (66.4%) or gender-diverse young people (54.5%).

Young people were more likely to change jobs than other age groups. A young person aged 15–24 was 150% more likely to voluntarily leave their current job compared with a person aged 15–54, and 50% more likely to leave due to involuntary reasons.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this, research by RMIT Online<sup>6</sup> suggested that around one in four young people under the age of 30 had considered changing jobs between July and September 2023. Among those who had considered changing jobs, increased salary was the primary motivator (50%), followed by career development opportunities (33%) and flexible working options (31%). Among those young people who were dissatisfied with their current job, the main reasons were not feeling valued (60%), not having an adequate salary (55%) and not having clarity about career progression (55%).

This is reflected in research by the Australian Treasury,<sup>7</sup> which indicated that rates of job switching tended to be higher among younger workers aged 15–24. This can have some benefits, as job switching can be an effective way for young people to navigate changing economic conditions in the early parts of their careers. However, young people also often bear the brunt of weak labour markets and may be unable to find work or only be able to find work lower on the career ladder.

# 2024 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

## CURRENT OR RECENT EMPLOYMENT

More than half (56%) of young Australians were working for wages or a salary. Eighteen per cent had multiple work statuses, and 14% were not currently working or employed. The remaining 12% were doing volunteer work without pay, had a work experience position without pay, worked in a family business, performed housework and/or caring work without pay or had other work arrangements. A higher proportion of young women (58%) and men (55%) were working for wages or a salary than gender-diverse people (22%). Young First Nations peoples were more likely to be working for wages or a salary (61%) than other Australians (56%). Similarly, young First Nations peoples were less likely to not be currently working (6%) or have multiple work statuses (10%) than other Australians (15% and 19%, respectively).

Among those currently in work or employment (N = 534), 34% were in full-time employment, 27% were in part-time employment and 27% were in casual employment. Another 6% were in multiple types of employment, and the remaining 6% were between jobs. Young people in older age groups were more likely to work full-time. Young people from low (32%) and medium (40%) socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to be working full-time than those from high socioeconomic backgrounds (28%). Young First Nations peoples were more likely to have multiple types of employment (40%) and were less likely to be employed full-time (16%) or casually (12%) than other young Australians (2%, 36% and 28%, respectively).

Interviewees were employed predominantly on a full-time or a casual basis, but the distinction between casual and full-time is becoming blurred. For example, young people who were employed on a casual basis often discussed working the equivalent of full-time hours and how more permanent forms of employment could be difficult to find:

“

[I'm] employed on a casual basis but it's set hours and it's pretty much full-time now, it's just casual. MAN, 23, QLD

The most common industries among those who were currently or recently working (N = 506) are retail trade (21%), education and training (12%), other industries (11%), health care and social assistance (10%) and accommodation and food services (8%) (see Figure 4.1).



Figure 4.1: Industry of employment (N = 506)

A similar range of jobs were represented among the young people interviewed, with teaching and early childhood, hospitality and trade jobs being relatively common. Many of the interviewees had found their current jobs through employment agencies or community connections:

Young First Nations peoples were almost twice as likely to participate in the gig economy in the last 12 months than other young Australians.

“

**I got it through an employment agency. Just went there and go “I’m looking for work, what do you got?” I don’t care what it is, I’ll just give it a go and see what happens.** MAN, 22, NSW

Slightly less than half (48%) of young Australians reported participating in the gig economy at some point during the last month, last 6 months and last 12 months. Fifteen per cent reported that they had done so often or very often in the last 12 months. Our survey defined gig work as a short-term work arrangement in which self-employed workers are matched directly with customers through a digital platform such as Uber food delivery, Airbnb or MTurk. A higher proportion of people from younger age groups participated in the gig economy in the previous month, with 58% of those aged 18 having participated compared with 48% of those aged 24.

Over the last year, a higher proportion of young people from low (58%) socioeconomic backgrounds undertook gig work than those from medium (42%) and high (40%) socioeconomic backgrounds. Young First Nations peoples were also more likely to participate in the gig economy in the last 12 months (82%) than other young Australians (44%). Young people who had a physical disability (65%) had a higher proportion of participation than those without disabilities (51%).

More than one-third (37%) of young people experienced unemployment at some point in the last 12 months. Young people in younger age groups (such as those aged 18, 60%; those aged 19, 44%), young people born overseas (53%) and young people with a physical disability (72%) were more likely to experience unemployment than their peers (e.g. those aged 24, 25%; those born in Australia, 34%; those without disabilities, 31%; respectively). More than half (59%) of young people who experienced unemployment did so for less than 6 months, while 25% were unemployed for between 2 and 3 months, and another 25% were unemployed for 10 to 12 months.

More than half (52%) of young Australians had experienced underemployment at some point in the last 12 months. Similar to unemployment, underemployment was more prevalent among young people in younger age groups, those born overseas and those with disabilities such as a physical disability, long-term illness, mental health conditions and multiple conditions. In addition, young First Nations peoples (37%) were less likely to experience underemployment than other young Australians (54%). Of those who experienced underemployment, most (75%) experienced it for 6 months or less, with 34% experiencing it for 2 to 3 months, and 24% experiencing it for 4 to 6 months.

Several interviewees were unemployed at the time of the study. Common reasons for unemployment included being busy with placements for qualifications and being made redundant due to industry-wide downturns:

“

**No, I’m not doing any work. I’m just doing my placement.** WOMAN, 22, QLD

“

**I’ve recently just been laid off. There’s just a whole bunch of industry-related reasons for that ... the construction industry is in a bit of a lull.** MAN, 21, NSW

A few interviewees also reported being self-employed or engaging in nontraditional forms of work such as online content creation:

“

**I now work completely online ... I’m pretty much just streaming myself pretty often ... it’s pretty much an entertainment business, that’s how I would say it. People also sometimes commission me for art as well because I am also an artist but the main focus of the work I do is entertainment.**

BI-GENDER PERSON, 19, SA



### POSITIVE ASPECTS OF WORK

Work characteristics that were particularly important to young people included high-salary/ payment (78% ranked as important or very important), location (72%) and long-term contract/ being a secure job (71%; see Figure 4.2).

The importance of appropriate payment was emphasised by interviewees:



If you're going to spend, like, the amount of your time there then it has to be worth it. And so you don't want to be spending hours there and you're not making enough to meet your needs.

WOMAN, 19, WA

Interviewees also emphasised the importance of positive social relationships. They valued jobs where they could work in friendly teams because such relationships were seen to contribute to friendly and safe work environments. They often pointed to the people they interacted with, including managers, co-workers and customers, as the most positive aspects of their jobs. Being surrounded by good people could make less appealing jobs more positive:



A good work environment ... [involves] having a supportive environment and a good boss is really good and good co-workers, is the best you know.

WOMAN, 20, SA

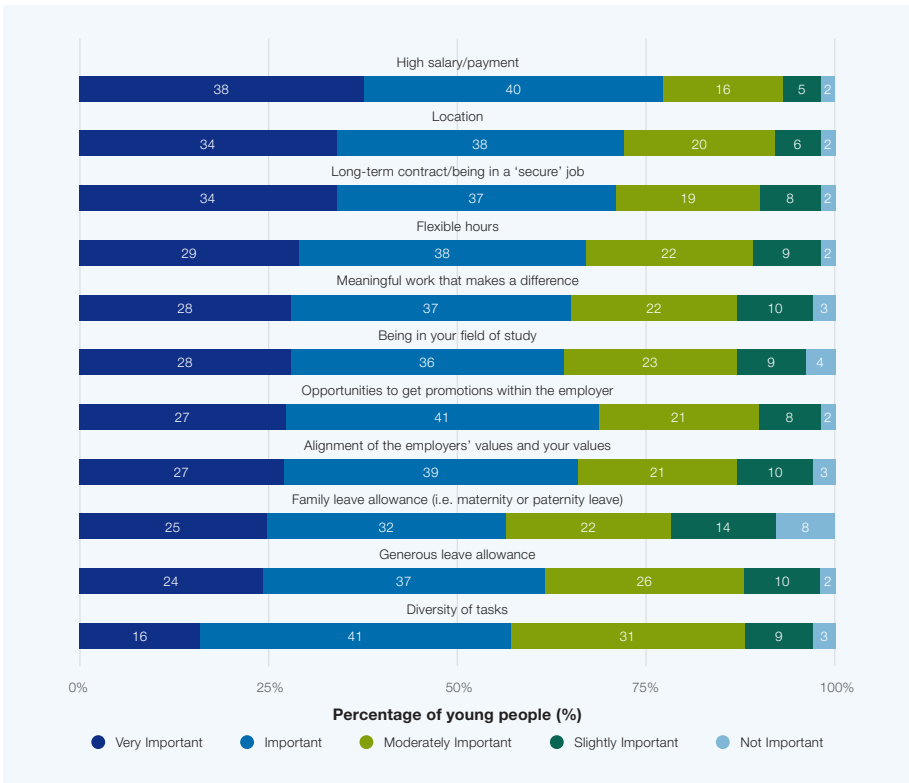


Figure 4.2: Perceived importance of characteristics of work (N = 623)

Interviewees valued jobs where they could work in friendly teams because such relationships were seen to contribute to friendly and safe work environments.

“

It's probably a pretty bad job objectively, like if you just look at it from an outsider's perspective, but the things that I enjoy about it is my co-workers are very good, my boss is very good to me.

MAN, 20, NSW

Other positive aspects of work identified by interviewees included the ability to develop skills and gain experience that would be useful in the future, being interested in the work, doing something that was valuable, the ease and convenience of the work and being able to maintain a work-life balance:

“

I feel like I'm actually making a difference to what's going on and actually improving things that are happening here. WOMAN, 18, SA

## NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF WORK

While relationships were generally seen as a positive aspect of work, interviewees also discussed how challenging interactions with other people were experienced as negative aspects of their jobs. Negative interactions included being bullied by management, a lack of diversity in the workplace, needing to deal with rude or hostile customers and being unable to build and maintain relationships:

“

Sometimes it gets a little bit uncomfortable. There's two bosses and they make sexual jokes sometimes or look at you a certain way. ... [It] gives you the creeps ... You can sort of deal with it, but probably not the best because of that. WOMAN, 19, QLD

Interviewees were also dissatisfied with the amount that they were working. Those who were employed full-time thought they were working too many hours, which could be stressful and have negative impacts on their lives outside of work. Young people who were employed on a casual basis discussed how their work was insecure and could lead to unstable incomes or loss of their jobs:

“

I feel like it's too many. Like it's 50 hours a week minimum ... you have to compromise so much of your time ... it's either like “Oh I could be doing this with friends, or we could be doing this instead,” but like, you know, you have to work such long hours just to pay the bills.

MAN, 22, NSW

“

If you are not on like a permanent contract it can be a bit unreliable at times ... if there aren't enough customers coming in then they won't be able to keep staff on for longer shifts and what not, so hours will get cut back ... I want to work but there is not [always] the ability to do so. MAN, 22, NSW

Most interviewees had clear career aspirations and were focused on pursuing careers that aligned with their interests.

Other negative aspects identified by interviewees included their work being inflexible, stressful or difficult, repetitive, confusing, or in unclean and unsafe environments. Even for young people who found their jobs to be generally positive, they were often dissatisfied with low rates of pay, which encouraged them to look for work in other fields:

“

As much as I find my work fulfilling, it's an industry that, if it continues down this path, I don't see myself staying in it, and mostly for the money. Like, if I was getting paid better, I would stay because you know it is something I'm really passionate about. ... I really love what I do, but for the amount of stress and amount of burnout that I feel it's not worth it, what I'm getting paid. WOMAN, 21, NSW

“

I also only get paid a minimum wage for a job that I've worked really, really hard to get ... I feel like I should maybe get a little bit more than minimum wage ... I get paid \$17 an hour simply because I'm not 21 and they don't legally have to. I'm part-time, I work long hours. Like I know it's not a high skilled job but I should be able to get the adult minimum wage when I'm legally an adult you know. I've got adult bills.

NON-BINARY PERSON, 18, TAS

## FUTURE CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Sixty-three per cent of young people thought it was likely or very likely that they would work in a job they liked in the future. This was less common for young people with a physical disability (44%) compared with those without disabilities (66%), with long-term illness (63%), mental health conditions (52%) and multiple conditions (64%).

When looking for work, 38% of young Australians preferred a full-time job, 37% preferred part-time work and 24% preferred casual work. The remaining 1% preferred other arrangements. As young people get older, they are more likely to prefer full-time work arrangements. For example, 58% of 24-year-olds and 55% of 23-year-olds preferred full-time work compared with 18%, 25%, and 17% of 20, 19, and 18-year-olds, respectively.

A higher proportion of young men (44%) preferred full-time work than young women (34%) and gender-diverse people (22%). Young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds were more likely to prefer part-time arrangements (46%) but much less likely to prefer casual work (13%) than those from medium (31%, 29%) and high socioeconomic backgrounds (29%, 33%).

Most interviewees had clear career aspirations and were focused on pursuing careers that aligned with their interests. For many, this involved finding work in the fields in which they were currently studying or had previously studied:

“

Well, I'm doing an earth science degree at the moment and I wanted to get into maybe a geologist sort of role or something similar ... [because] I find that interesting. WOMAN, 19, QLD

Some interviewees, particularly those working in trades, expressed satisfaction with their current employment and aspired to stay in these positions in the long term or move into higher status roles:

“

I'm, like, you know what, like, if I was to be working here for 20 years in the future and that was my job, for life then yeah, fair enough. Yeah. So I think it's something where I'm, like, if I'm here forever; if I'm in this type of industry forever, I can see it. MAN, 22, NSW

Several interviewees did not have clear career aspirations. Among these young people, some expressed vague intentions of finding work that was stable and secure or discussed how their career aspirations had changed over time. However, others were much less clear:

“

I don't really know what I even, like, what direction I want to actually go [in]. ... I would like to find something that I could aspire to be ... [but] I really don't know what I want to [do]. ... I really don't know where I'm going in life. MAN, 24, QLD

## INFLUENCES ON FUTURE CAREER ASPIRATIONS

Most young Australians (89%) had received some kind of career advice. The most common sources of this advice were parents or carers (49%), friends or peers (37%) and teachers at school (33%) (see Figure 4.3).

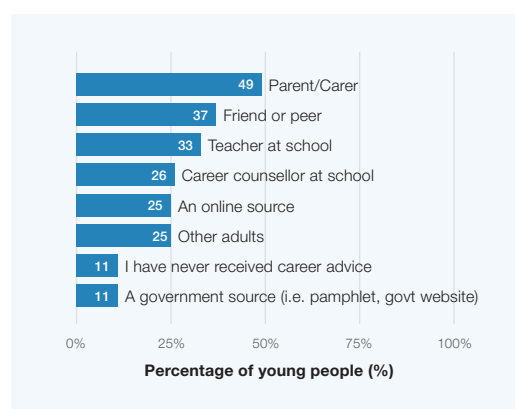


Figure 4.3: Most important source of career advice (N = 623)

This was also reflected in interview discussions, where young people overwhelmingly discussed interactions with people who were significant in their lives as major influences on their career aspirations. This most commonly included teachers who had inspired them to pursue certain fields or family members who had shaped and supported their interests:

“

I remember I talked to my mother in primary school when I was, like, little. I said, “Hey, I really want to do acting, I want to be on stage, I want to have fun.” She was like, “Okay,” and then she found a theatre for me to go to. I still go there to this day. It's been like a decade ... the biggest influence for me has been the people I've surrounded myself with since. WOMAN, 18, SA



Other than teachers and family, interviewees also spoke of personal interactions with people who were currently working in the fields that they aspired to and of being influenced by celebrities and other public figures:



Dad worked on this big construction site ... and they had all these geotechnical engineers and geologists on the work site. And he was speaking to this one lady, and she was pretty young. Probably late 20s and he was like “You need to talk to this lady.” ... I feel like that helped me shape my decision a little as well. Just another lady doing geology. WOMAN, 19, QLD



You know, Jeremy Clarkson from Top Gear. I watched Top Gear and it was a very good show and so I decided, “Hey I’ll be a mechanic.” MAN, 20, NSW

A number of interviewees discussed how their career aspirations had been shaped by life-long passions and personal interests:



I think I’ve always been somebody who wanted to be a teacher. When I was in elementary, my mum tells me stories that I used to boss around the workers and read stories for the kids. ... [In] Year 12 I was trying to figure out what I wanted to do, and then I found a little letter I wrote to my future self from Year 6. It was, “Do you still want to be a teacher?” I’m like, “There we go. I’ll just do that.” WOMAN, 21, WA

### ENABLERS OF FUTURE CAREER ASPIRATIONS

The majority of young Australians (83%) participated in one or more activities with the intention of improving their chances of getting a job (see Figure 4.4). Most often, this involved seeking advice from parents, carers or friends (42%), developing interview skills (41%) and developing job application skills (38%). The least common activity was seeking advice from a careers counsellor, which only 20% of young Australians declared doing.

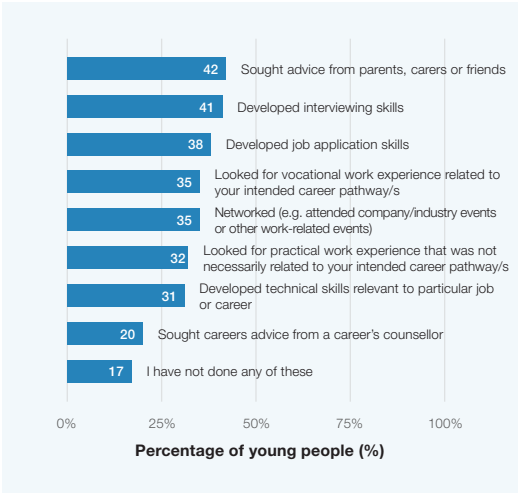


Figure 4.4: Participation in activities to improve employability (N = 623)

Slightly less than half (48%) of young people declared gaining a formal qualification with the intention of getting a job, and 49% reported choosing specific subjects in their final years of high school with the same intention. Twenty-seven per cent of young Australians reported completing a short certificate and 25% reported volunteering, with the intention of getting a job (see Figure 4.5).

Completing university qualifications was seen as a key enabler for realising specific career aspirations. Internships and other post-school training options were also valued.

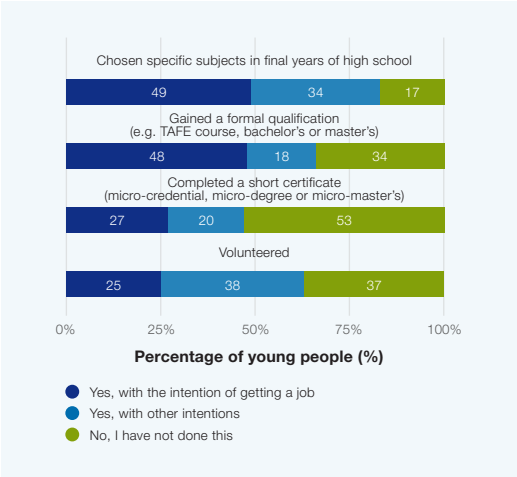


Figure 4.5: Conducting different activities with different intentions (N = 623)

Interviewees perceived completing educational qualifications as a key enabler for realising their specific career aspirations. While this often referred to achieving qualifications at a university level, internships or post-school training options were also valued:

“

[Through my] university degree I get an internship that they are going to help me achieve and I think that would be like an enabler to open me up to potentially more employers, I would be more employable with that. MAN, 22, NSW

Obtaining practical experience in their fields was also seen as an enabler of success, whether this was built as part of interviewees' formal education or through other means:

“

I guess trying to find some, like, applied experience now in that sort of field, so I can kind of get some experience in the industry from early on ... I know the uni that I go to offers some internships, and they've got us thinking about that and there's a site where we can see what's on offer. MAN, 24, VIC

Importantly, the young people we interviewed spoke of having strong support from a variety of sources and being able to form networks as key enablers of success. For a few interviewees, the internet served as a resource for career information, forming networks, and showcasing their employability:

“

Obviously, getting a job, I feel like it's good when you know a certain amount of people, like, across a range of different places. WOMAN, 19, WA

## BARRIERS TO FUTURE CAREER ASPIRATIONS

While education was generally seen as an enabler, the young people we interviewed pointed to a lack of relevant qualifications as a potential barrier to achieving their future career aspirations. While these concerns related to being able to enter certain degrees or finishing their current studies, some interviewees were unsure of the best educational pathway for their desired careers. Lack of experience was also seen as a barrier:

“

I think that education too, like it's very hard to find the education path that will give you the career that you want, aside from the internet right now. WOMAN, 19, WA

“

Experience. If I'm going to try and want a programming job, they're expecting me to have experience aren't they ... I just don't have that at the moment. MAN, 19, NT

Location was identified as a potential barrier. For some of the young people interviewed, this was due to a lack of opportunities in their area. Although many interviewees were willing to relocate to pursue a career, they often remarked that this was a significant life choice not to be taken lightly:

“

Where I live occasionally you can tell there may not be all that many employment opportunities ... if I found the right job, yes I probably would [move]. But you know it's not something that I'm wanting to [have to] do ... I've lived here my entire life. Yes, it would be a big change. MAN, 23, QLD

Interviewees also discussed how factors outside of their control could serve as barriers to their career aspirations. These included the current economic outlook of the fields that they wanted to enter or a general lack of jobs being available in their chosen careers:

“

A lot of building construction companies have fallen through ... So when the industry, you know, isn't swimming as good ... that's probably my biggest concern. MAN, 22, NSW

“

Just with I guess, where jobs are really. It's like, "How in demand [is] the job that I want to do. Are there any positions available for it?" That's probably it. Really doesn't seem to be too many from what I've looked [at]. MAN, 21, NSW

A number of interviewees also pointed to personal shortcomings or concerns as potential barriers to achieving their career aspirations. These included concerns about mental health, lack of time, lack of motivation and general trepidations about entering the workforce:

“

I'm not sure if I'm ready for this everyday commitment of work and work and work ... I think it is a little bit scary going out on your own as well after having supervisors and mentors around you just telling you you're doing the right thing. I think it's gonna be a little bit scary for the first year or two when I'm out all by myself. WOMAN, 22, QLD

# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- The reasons young people face unemployment or underemployment are often beyond their immediate control, such as industry-wide downturns or being required to complete unpaid placements. Efforts to address these, such as the recent paid placement support, must be equitable and sufficient to cover living costs if young people are to be supported to find adequate and meaningful work.
- Interactions with others in the workplace, both positive and negative, are a key consideration in how young people view their work. While friendly and sociable workplace environments may largely depend on organic development, steps need to be taken to ensure that work presents a safe, healthy and welcoming environment for young people.
- While many young people are currently working in jobs that they enjoy and find rewarding, industry conditions have caused some to question their long-term prospects. Further research may be needed to examine the viability of certain career pathways and to better understand how to attract and retain young people in work that provides value to their communities.
- Young people point to unclear educational pathways and a lack of practical experience as potential barriers to their career aspirations. This suggests the need for stronger emphasis on effective careers guidance, as well as support from educational institutions and employers to provide young people with greater opportunities to gain meaningful work experience.
- The main sources of career advice for young people are parents or carers. Varied and affordable professional sources of career advice, such as from the government, communities and job coaches, would help young people identify their strengths and develop their careers.
- Secure employment is a key factor influencing young people's financial security. Approaches to promoting young people's financial security cannot be separated from approaches to promoting young people's secure employment.

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# 05

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATION

### KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 48% of young people are studying full-time, 23% are studying part-time and 28% are not studying.
- 2** Among those who are currently studying, 24% are doing so exclusively face-to-face, 17% are studying fully online and 56% are studying both face-to-face and online.
- 3** 69% of young Australians have taken some form of online informal classes. 47% have participated in a micro-credential, micro-degree or micro-master's degree.
- 4** 59% of young people agree or strongly agree that their education has prepared them for the future.
- 5** Young people studying at universities are generally satisfied with their experiences, though some expressed wanting to have taken a gap year or that they felt pressured to attend.
- 6** Young people express a desire to engage more with their education, take subjects with more practical applications and avoid negative interactions with teachers and peers. Lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are still felt.
- 7** Outside of their formal education, young people turn to family and friends, as well as the internet, as sources of learning and information. They evaluate information based on whether it has come from a reputable source and check information across multiple sources.

# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Borrowing to finance their education played an important role in young people's major life decisions including decisions about where to live and the type of work they undertook.

## ENGAGEMENT AND QUALIFICATIONS

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics,<sup>1</sup> 61% of young people aged 15–24 were currently studying in 2023, a slight decrease from 63% in 2022 and 65% in 2021. Participation rates in study decreased as young people aged 15–24 grew older. For young people of compulsory school age (15–19), 86.2% were studying full-time, with a further 7.4% studying part-time.<sup>2</sup> Of this group, a higher proportion of young females were studying full-time (90.2%) compared with young males (81.7%) and gender-diverse young people (80.5%). Conversely, young males (10.2%) and gender-diverse young people (9.5%) were more likely to be studying part-time than young females (5.1%).

For young people aged 15–19 who were still in school, 97.2% stated that they intended to complete Year 12.<sup>2</sup> Seventy per cent also stated that they planned to go to university after school, with a higher proportion of young females (77.7%) preferring this option compared with gender-diverse young people (60.7%) and young males (60.3%). Other common plans for young people after school were getting a job (46.2%) and travelling or taking a gap year (32.5%). Young males were also more likely to report planning on starting a business (16.2%) compared with young females (7.9%). They were also more likely to report planning to get an apprenticeship (15.2%) compared with gender-diverse young people (9.2%) and young females (4.1%).

For young people aged 18–24, 50.8% were currently enrolled in higher education in May 2023, with a further 17.35% looking to enrol in higher education within the next 3 years.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, 40% of young people aged 20–24 were currently studying towards a non-school qualification at Certificate III level or above.<sup>1</sup> As of 2023, 90% of young people aged 20–24 had attained a qualification at Year 12 or Certificate III level or above, with 93% of young females holding qualifications at this level, compared with 87% of young males.

## SATISFACTION WITH EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

Young people aged 15–19 who were currently studying were generally satisfied with their educational experiences, with 62.9% reporting that they were either satisfied or very satisfied. Young females (65.3%) and young males (61.6%) were more likely to be either satisfied or very satisfied with their education compared with gender-diverse young people (48.3%).<sup>2</sup>

Young people aged 18–24 financed their post-compulsory education in a number of ways. The most common means (67%) was borrowing from government programs such as HELP (Higher Education Loan Program) or HECS (Higher Education Contribution Scheme). Other common methods included using earnings from work (39.91%), financial assistance from parents or other family members (34.44%) and using their own savings and financial resources (30.79%).<sup>3</sup> Borrowing to finance their education also played an important role in young people's major life decisions, with 43.46% reporting that it affected the decisions about where to live, and 35.12% reporting that it affected the type of work they undertook.

Higher education remains a desirable pathway for many young people. Only 5% of those who had gained a university-level qualification reported feeling regret about achieving their level of education.<sup>3</sup> However, many young people also reported being pressured to attend university, even if their career aspirations did not require a degree, which could lead to stress and mental ill health.<sup>4</sup> Prominent reasons for this pressure included a lack of adequate career guidance while in school and the wider valorisation of higher education as the most desirable post-school pathway.

# 2024 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

Young people who were currently studying at university were positive about their experiences. However, several interviewees had made the decision not to go to university, noting that they did not want to continue studying or take on debt for their degrees.

## STUDENT EXPERIENCES

Our survey indicates that 62% of young Australians have completed a post-secondary qualification. Most of the young people we interviewed had completed secondary-level education and looked back to their time in high school with mixed feelings, ranging from positive to ambivalent and negative:

“

I loved my teachers. The teachers there were really nice and like my friends were great, like the school was really good ... compared to when I hear stories from other people, I'm like “Wow, my high school was so good.”

WOMAN, 21, NSW

“

Absolutely horrible. Yeah, I hated it ... I think it was the ... teachers ... man, school sucked. Hated school.

MAN, 22, NSW

Overall, interviewees who were currently studying at university were positive about their experiences. However, several interviewees had made the decision not to go to university, noting that they did not want to continue studying or did not want to take on debt for their degrees. In relation to their choices about tertiary study, several interviewees felt socially pressured to go to university or financially pressured to continue their studies even though they were not enjoying it:

“

I'm about half way through my degree but I really just, I just don't have any passion for it anymore ... I'm having to do a lot of thinking ... as to whether I stick out the degree ... or whether it's

something that I just go and try and cut my losses where I'm currently at. But then it means that I've spent all this money and I've not got anything.

MAN, 22, NSW

“

You kind of get pushed in universities, the main thing you need to do – get an ATAR, go to uni, that was very big.

WOMAN, 23, VIC

More than half (55%) of young people gained an educational qualification after attending a mixture of online and face-to-face classes, while 10% did so only through online classes, and 20% did so using only face-to-face classes. Another 1% obtained a qualification through some other arrangement, and 15% had not gained any form of educational qualification.

Less than half (48%) of young people were studying full-time, 23% were studying part-time and 28% were not studying. Among those who were currently studying (N = 443), 24% were doing so exclusively face-to-face, 17% were studying fully online and 56% were studying both face-to-face and online.

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. Less than half (47%) of young Australians declared that they participated in a micro-credential, micro-degree or micro-master's degree, 19% said they participated in a micro-credential through online classes only, 13% did so through face-to-face classes only and 20% had a mix of face-to-face and online classes.

In terms of formal education, 76% of young Australians were satisfied (i.e. very or somewhat satisfied) with the development of critical thinking skills, 75% were satisfied with the development of problem-solving skills and 71% were satisfied with the development of group work and collaboration skills. Young people tended to be less satisfied with learning about environmental issues (52%) (see Figure 5.1).

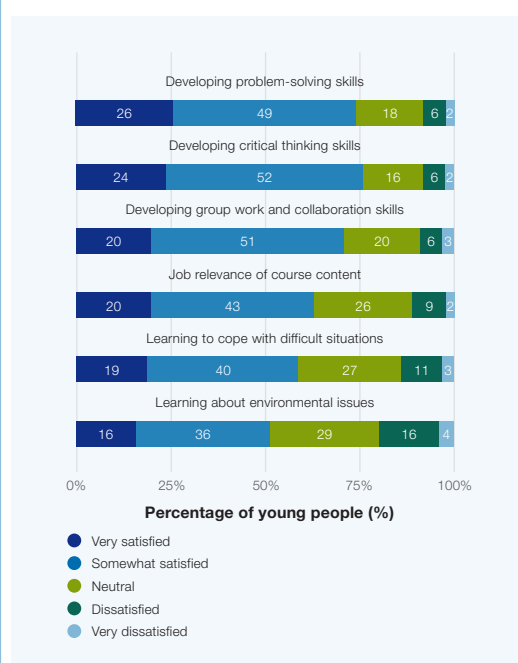


Figure 5.1: Satisfaction with aspects of formal education (N = 623)

More than half (59%) of young people agreed or strongly agreed that their education had prepared them for the future. Young people in metropolitan areas (64%) were more likely to think this than those in regional (40%) and remote areas (36%). Young First Nations peoples (72%) were more likely to feel that their education had prepared them for the future compared with other young Australians (59%). More young people without disabilities (65%) felt this way than those with a physical disability (59%), mental health conditions (43%) and multiple conditions (42%).

Overall, the young people we spoke to were ambivalent about how well schooling had prepared them for later studies, employment or life after education in general. Many interviewees discussed how the formal aspects of their education were not relevant to their current lives but that schooling had prepared them in less tangible ways such as by providing them with opportunities to socialise or to develop particular mindsets for learning:

“

I've never had to use ... sin, cos, tan ever since I left school. It's stuff like that where it's like I look back and I'm like, "Why did I learn this?" I really could have done something else. But I think also [that] school has kind of prepared you for that social aspect.

MAN, 22, NSW

“

I think the main thing you kind of get out of high school isn't so much what you learn. It's more about the process of how you learn. So it's more about figuring out how you study and what works for you ... A lot of the other stuff that I was taught, I haven't used in my life but the process of learning how to learn it, I think has been quite valuable.

MAN, 21, NSW



## CHANGES TO EDUCATION

Of the interviewees who had not completed high school, most expressed wanting to have completed secondary education. Additionally, a few of those who were currently studying at university regretted undertaking tertiary-level education or expressed how they would not have gone to university immediately after finishing high school:

“

I wish I finished high school properly because that, you know, I hate to admit it but it kind of does restrict me from time to time especially when looking for jobs. WOMAN, 18, SA

“

Just not head to university or perhaps even maybe delay it a year ... Give myself a year off from high school before jumping into uni and then see if that might have flipped things around. MAN, 22, NSW

A number of interviewees pointed to changes that they would make in how they personally engaged with their education, including not taking their studies too seriously or making more time to spend with friends or for socialising. Avoiding negative experiences with teachers or peers, wanting schools to focus less on university entry scores or desiring more support for mental health concerns were also discussed. Several interviewees pointed to broad, system-level changes that they desired for education systems:

“

I do wish I socialised a bit more, I feel like now I'm at the stage where I'm starting to socialise with more people but I feel like maybe I could have had more skill if I did that when I was in high school as well. WOMAN, 19, VIC

“

If I could do it, I would pay all the teachers more, I would fix everything. I'd make all the students be nicer to everyone. I would wish to change everything. BI-GENDER PERSON, 19, SA

The young people we spoke to also expressed a desire to have studied different subjects. This included having selected different subjects from those available or wishing that their schools had offered different subjects that were more interesting, more practical or better prepared them for life after education:

“

Particularly for schooling, I wish there was a life course, your basic search for getting out in the real world and learning how to live on your own whether it be financial or maintaining your home or coping and stuff ... I wish that kind of opportunity was there for me because I've never really had any hands-on experience. MAN, 19, NT

Notably, concerns about placement work being unpaid were raised in interview discussions, noting how these made formal education difficult to manage alongside other commitments:

“

Trying to, you know, do unpaid placement ... At the time I was living at home and trying to like put bills and stuff on top of that was just a lot ... Yeah, 40 hours of unpaid work and then going to my other to my actually paid job and do that. WOMAN, 21, QLD

Disruptions due to the COVID-19 pandemic continue to be felt, with several interviewees discussing how they felt that they had missed out on key aspects of their education experience such as being able to socialise with peers, going on school trips or excursions or having opportunities to network and find employment:

“

I mean we didn't get to go on excursions. Like senior excursions are some of the best ones ... we missed out and we never got to do big things. We are meant to enjoy ourselves for our senior year but we never got to do anything enjoyable. WOMAN, 21, NSW

A few interviewees were generally positive about their educational experiences and expressed that they would not make any changes, with some expressing their experience had shaped who they were:

“

I mean I wouldn't personally want to change anything because it has shaped me to who I am today, if that makes sense. WOMAN, 19, NSW

## INFORMAL LEARNING

When asked about skills they had learnt outside of their formal education, young people pointed to a diverse range of skills. Interviewees discussed the importance of informal learning for acquiring practical life skills such as managing finances, doing taxes, cooking, and applying for rental properties. Young people also discussed learning new languages or pursuing skills related to their hobbies or interests:

“

Cooking, I didn't really learn that at school. I self-taught myself and watched others I guess with that. Just general life skills aren't taught in school, you have to learn them through life which does make it a bit difficult. I mean another thing, car stuff I learnt that off dad so that's not something you would learn in school. WOMAN, 19, NSW

Other interviewees spoke about learning skills that were directly related to their career paths and which helped them find employment:

“

I've done a few Udemy courses on just various things that interested me. I wanted to get a construction planning job. So, I took an Udemy course on Primavera P6, which is like a planning software. And then that got me the job, which was pretty good. MAN, 21, NSW

Interviewees turned to the internet as a source of information, with Google and YouTube being popular sites of informal learning.

Outside of their formal schooling, young people predominantly turned to friends and families as a valuable source of informal learning. Interviewees stressed the importance of having a community of people they could learn from:

“

My dad and other family members are pretty good for that, or even my sister. She's younger than me, but she still has a different perception on things ... Or just my friends, I feel like I've learned so much from my friends ... Or even other work colleagues. My boss. Different lives of other people. WOMAN, 19, QLD

Interviewees also turned to the internet as a source of information, with Google and YouTube being popular sites of informal learning. A number of interviewees also pointed to other online sources such as social media or online journals:

“

I like to look at journal articles ... I'll go on to regular Google and some old YouTube videos ... once I've understood the whole view, then I can further research in specific areas that I want to learn more in depth.

WOMAN, 21, WA

This aligns with the survey data, which indicated that most (69%) young Australians had taken some form of online informal classes, most commonly through an online platform such as Udemy, Coursera or Skillshare (40%). Thirty-six per cent did so through social media (e.g. on YouTube, TikTok, Facebook or Instagram), and 27% did so through a training company's own online platform (see Figure 5.2). Young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (79%), young First Nations peoples (86%) and young people with a physical disability (86%) had higher proportions of participation in online informal learning than their peers (e.g. those

from high socioeconomic backgrounds, 62%; other young Australians, 68%; and those without disabilities, 74%).

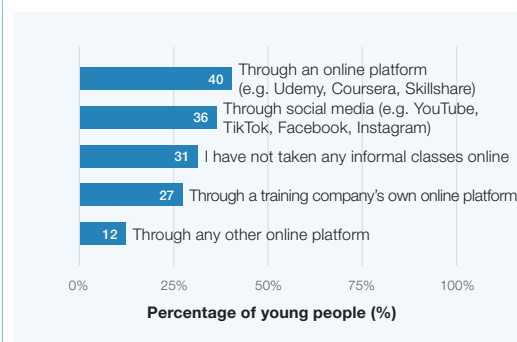


Figure 5.2: Participation in informal online learning (N = 623)

For some people, learning also took place in classes offered to the public, particularly when learning specific skills or pursuing hobbies but also in relation to basic life skills. Young people also discussed learning necessary skills while on the job and learning through trial and error or personal experience:

“

I went to an adulting class so I found out a little bit about renting and things, how to apply for rentals and stuff and I also was taught how to change a tyre and skills with cars and things like that.

WOMAN, 20, SA

Notably, some interviewees identified potential problems with informal learning such as some young people not having good role models in their lives or learning about things at an inappropriate age:

“

A lot of people like they'll kind of follow the[ir] parents' habits and footsteps and all that. So yeah, I think you just follow ... you use whoever you can, but obviously if you do that like some people aren't going to be the best. MAN, 22, NSW

## EVALUATING INFORMATION

When engaging in informal learning, particularly from online sources, young people often assessed the reliability of information by determining whether it had come from a trustworthy source. This included reputable sources such as the ABC or government websites:

“

I think there are ways you can see if it's reliable or not, especially who it's written by, to see if they are qualified to talk about it or if it's just some random person sharing information. You can search that up in certain ways. WOMAN, 20, SA

Trust could also be established if young people received the same information from a variety of different sources. As with finding reliable sources, young people stressed the importance of checking multiple sources to ensure the validity of information. Interestingly, this applied to information gained from both online and offline sources:

“

You don't go to just one [source], you go to at least four or five, if they're saying similar or the same thing, you can generally get an indication that they are not talking shit out of their arse. If you've got four people that are saying the same thing and one saying complete opposite. Process of elimination. WOMAN, 23, VIC

Some young people also judged the validity of information by comparing it to their personal experiences or assessing it according to their values and beliefs. A small number of interviewees discussed how information needed to be researched and stressed the importance of developing critical thinking skills:

“

You learn critical thinking ... by researching and doing your own homework, you have to pick out the resources that are truthful, you have to pick out the resources that are false and you have to make your own judgement and opinion on that. ... A lot of the time it can [also] just be falling over, falling for something and then realising, "It's fake." Well you learnt and it won't keep happening in the future. MAN, 19, NT

Other interviewees described how they had a general sense of what was reliable, particularly by being familiar with the online space from a young age. A few were more sceptical and expressed a degree of futility in determining if information was trustworthy:

“

I can just tell what's real and not and what's fake ... I've been, like, using computers and internet ever since I was a kid. So it's like, you know, you can tell what's real and what's fake ... I'm like, "How do people fall for that type of stuff?"

MAN, 22, NSW

“

I don't trust the information at all anymore ... I don't really trust a lot of things. I just hope that if there is enough reviews confirming that and saying this isn't dog shit. MAN, 24, QLD

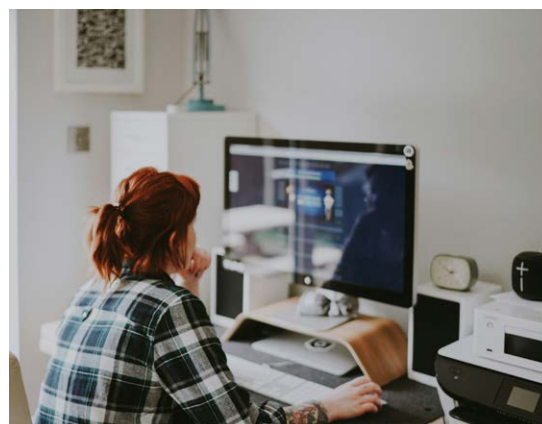


# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- While many young people are generally satisfied with their educational experiences, some also feel that their studies were outdated or impractical. Some young people also feel pressured into taking tertiary education pathways. This points to a need for better differentiated and individualised educational guidance and support, as well as better awareness of alternative educational pathways.
- When discussing their dissatisfaction with education, many young people pointed to poor interactions with peers and teaching staff, including instances of bullying. Given the rising concerns around school refusal and discriminatory cultures in schools, more research, advocacy and support are needed to ensure that schools present a welcoming environment for young people from all backgrounds.
- Compared with previous years, in 2024 a higher proportion of young people feel that their education has prepared them for the future. However, young people also continue to express that education has not equipped them with a range of basic life skills. While some young people are able to learn these skills elsewhere, more support is needed to ensure that all young people are adequately prepared for their future lives.
- Informal and online learning continue to be important sources of information for young people. Similar to previous years, young people turn to friends and family as valuable sources of information. However, young people also emphasise the importance of community-based organisations, which often face severe funding limitations. This points to a need to better understand young people's learning relationships with these community organisations so that they can be equitably and effectively resourced.
- Although young people can gain valuable information online, not all of this information is reliable and trustworthy. Accessible training and guidance can be provided for young people to assist them in developing strong capabilities for evaluating the trustworthiness of information.

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# 06

## YOUNG PEOPLE, HEALTH AND WELLBEING

### KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 21% of young Australians rate their mental health as poor or very poor, and 46% rate it as good or excellent.
- 2** 98% of young Australians report having had at least one feeling of anxiety or pessimism in the past 12 months.
- 3** 21% of young people received mental health support in the last year, 10% sought but did not receive such support and 67% did not seek mental health support.
- 4** 17% experienced food insecurity at some point in the last 12 months. When facing food insecurity, interviewees rarely access support from food services, more often turning to families and friends for support.
- 5** Young Australians view good health as being able to complete everyday tasks, maintaining a balance between work and downtime and limiting exposure to negative situations in their lives. Some interviewees struggle to prioritise their health due to the bustle of daily life.
- 6** Seeking professional mental health support is a crucial way that young people look after their mental health, although high costs and variability in the quality of available services are significant barriers to navigate.



# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Barriers to accessing support included factors such as the complexity of young people's psychosocial needs, lack of knowledge about services available, negative experiences with health professionals, fragmented communication with services, long waiting periods and limited service accessibility.<sup>6</sup>

## MENTAL HEALTH AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Young people perceive mental health as one of the most important issues in their lives. The 2023 Mission Australia Youth Survey indicated that mental health ranked as the fourth most important issue, and 30% of young people aged 15–19 identified mental health as one of the most important issues in Australia compared with 34% in 2022 and 35% in 2021.<sup>1</sup>

A total of 67.5% of young people aged 18–24 reported excellent or very good self-assessed health status, 25.1% reported their health as good and 7.7% reported it as fair or poor.<sup>2</sup> Among young people aged 15–19, 65.4% of gender-diverse people rated their mental health and wellbeing as fair or poor, which was higher than 44.8% of young females and much higher than 24.8% of young males. The mean personal wellbeing index score among young people aged 15–19 was 68.2, lower than the mean score among general adults aged 18 and over.<sup>1</sup> Young people aged 18–24 had the highest proportion (20.2%) of individuals reporting high or very high distress compared with older age groups (aged 25 and over).<sup>2</sup>

Mental and behavioural issues, such as harmful alcohol and other drug use, affective disorders, anxiety-related disorders, problems of psychological development and behavioural, cognitive and emotional problems, were prevalent among young people. Around 36.3% of young Australians aged 15–24 reported mental and behavioural conditions, which was the highest among all age groups and higher than the average of 26.1% among Australians of all ages. Specifically, young females (43.2%) more often reported mental and behavioural conditions than young males (29.8%).<sup>2</sup> Young people also experienced multiple long-term health conditions, with the majority of young people (77%) having at least one current long-term health condition. Young females (80.6%) were more likely to report at least one current long-term health condition than young males (73%).<sup>2</sup>

## IMPACTS ON AND SUPPORTS FOR HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Health and wellbeing are connected with other areas of young people's lives. Various risk factors can impact people's mental health over the life course, such as job insecurity, unemployment, socioeconomic disadvantage and poor living conditions.<sup>3</sup>

Young people's health and wellbeing can impact their study and work arrangements. A total of 42.4% of young people aged 15–19 identified mental health as the top barrier to achieving study/work goals, and 9.5% of young people aged 15–19 identified physical health as a barrier to achieving study/work goals. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people also identified mental health (45.1% selected as the top barrier) and physical health (17.2%) as barriers to achieving their study/work goals.<sup>1</sup>

Sixteen per cent of Australian young people aged 18–24 currently accessed mental health therapy, 32% had previously sought mental health therapy and 14% had not accessed mental health therapy but would like to. The health professionals consulted in the past 12 months included general practitioners (36.1%), psychiatrists (10.4%), psychologists (25.6%) and other health professionals (14.1%).<sup>4</sup>

Young people can face difficulties when accessing support services. A total of 21.1% of young people found it hard to turn to services or organisations if they needed help.<sup>1</sup> Young First Nations peoples<sup>5</sup> and gender-diverse young people<sup>1</sup> often faced significant difficulties when accessing support services. Barriers to accessing support included factors such as the complexity of young people's psychosocial needs, lack of knowledge about services available, negative experiences with health professionals, fragmented communication with services, long waiting periods and limited service accessibility.<sup>6</sup> Key types of supports desired by young people included having someone to trust to talk to (69%), access to quality information (56%), help-seeking knowledge (50%), professional mental health support (48%), connection with other young people going through a similar experience (46%), financial support to access help (39%) and access to relevant services (37%).<sup>7</sup>



## 2024 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

For young people, markers of good health include being able to complete everyday tasks, undertake their job, engage in regular exercise and get enough sleep.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HEALTHY?

Similar to the 2023 Youth Barometer, the young people we interviewed emphasised health as a concept that intersected aspects such as physical health, mental health, financial security and access to food and housing. Many of the interviewees recognised the importance of looking after their health and proactively sought to do so:

“

I feel like health is the number one priority and after that mental and physical and then after [that] it would be finance because if you are not in the right mindset, then you can't really work or study so I guess that's like the bigger aspect and then everything else comes under that. WOMAN, 19, VIC

Several young people struggled to prioritise their health and discussed how factors beyond their control, such as their living situation and environment, played a significant role in determining their health:

“

It does mean a lot to me, but I don't take care of my health that greatly. I guess I'm just too tired sometimes. I guess I really want to start now, so going into the future, it won't be a problem. WOMAN, 21, QLD

“

I also think the neighbourhood could matter. ... If you are lucky and you are in a well-blessed position then maintaining your health should not be too difficult. You have good employment, you have a decent amount of time after work to go exercising or whatever, but if you are not in that blessed position and you have to work two

jobs or whatever and stuff, that can really hamper your ability to maintain wellbeing.

MAN, 22, NSW

For many young people, good physical health was not necessarily about having perfect health and living free from any challenges. Rather, they sought to manage their health following markers of good health, which included being able to complete everyday tasks, undertake their job, engage in regular exercise and get enough sleep:

“

[I] work out enough that I'm fit and healthy and that's all I need. I don't need to show people that I work out. ... There are some things that can be handled with exercise and good routines and ways of handling yourself. I mean you can still be anxious, you can still be depressed and find ways to help yourself. WOMAN, 18, VIC

Good health was also articulated in terms of maintaining balance and stability. This included balancing how they spent their time, ensuring enough downtime and mitigating pressures that were seen to have a negative impact on young people's health:

“

It means just having a balanced lifestyle, so having enough time to yourself, to your studies, to your family and like to your friends and stuff like that. And having a balance between rest and physical activity. WOMAN, 19, WA

Several interviewees felt that they were not currently achieving this balance, often due to stressful work environments, demanding placement requirements, study pressures and unsupportive social relationships. Achieving this balance was an important goal towards feeling content and satisfied with their lives:

Around one-fifth (21%) of young people had received mental health support in the last 12 months. Ten per cent sought but did not receive such support.



You know that you're not in a stressful environment. I feel like that contributes to health. For me in the future, I would hate to be in a bad relationship or being in, like, a fucked job that I hated or even just my outlook. I just want to have like a positive outlook on my life and just eat well, sleep good, and be able to be free. MAN, 24, QLD

## MENTAL HEALTH

Around one-fifth (21%) of young Australians rated their mental health as poor or very poor, while 46% rated it as good or excellent. Young men were less likely to rate their mental health as poor or very poor (12%) compared with young women (30%) and gender-diverse people (45%). Young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (54%) and young First Nations peoples (76%) more often rated their mental health as good or excellent compared with those from medium (40%) or high (44%) socioeconomic backgrounds or other young Australians (43%). Young people without disabilities were more likely to report good or excellent mental

health (61%) compared with those with a physical disability (20%), a long-term illness (47%), mental health conditions (14%) or multiple conditions (10%).

Around one-fifth (21%) of young people had received mental health support in the last 12 months. Ten per cent sought but did not receive such support, and 67% did not seek mental health support. Gender-diverse young people were more likely to report receiving mental health support (66%) than young women (30%) or men (11%). Young First Nations peoples less often received mental health support (11%) and more often sought but did not receive support (16%) compared with other young Australians (22% and 9%, respectively).

Ninety-eight per cent of young Australians reported having had at least one feeling of anxiety or pessimism to some extent (i.e. rarely, sometimes, often or very often) in the last year. Most commonly, young people reported that they often or very often worried about their ability to live a happy and healthy life in the future (41%), felt like they were missing out on being young (39%), worried about their ability to cope with everyday tasks in the future (34%) and felt like they had lost a year of their lives (33%; see Figure 6.1). Although these were broadly shared among most demographic groups, young people with disabilities and gender-diverse young people were more likely to report having these feelings.

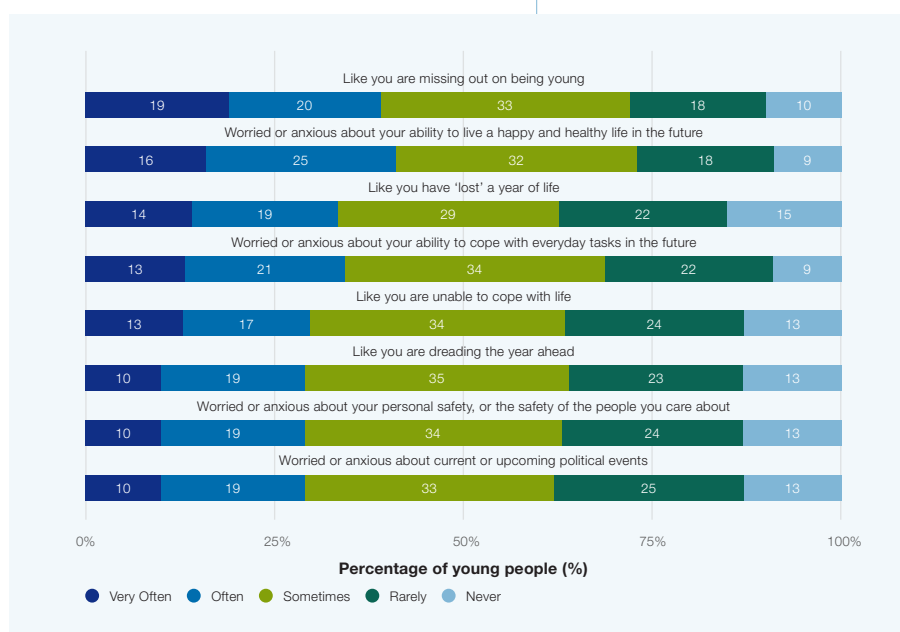


Figure 6.1: Feelings of pessimism and anxiety among young people (N = 623)

Regular physical activities not only supported young people's mental and physical health, but also provided an important source of connection to family, community and place.

## LOOKING AFTER MENTAL HEALTH

For several interviewees, mental health was not necessarily something they regularly thought about as they often saw the causes of mental health challenges as being temporary or felt that they were able to respond to the situation:

“

I guess it's not really something I think about specifically, like only when it gets worse really. ... There are times when it's gotten worse, but that has been in times of pressure and lots of stress. So they kind of ended, [I] didn't really do a lot about them to be honest. WOMAN, 18, SA

“

I don't really look into my mental health that much ... I guess [my] mentality towards it [is] like, if I ever am in a bad day ... and then if I get really hard on myself then it's just, it's game over. It's gonna be a really, really bad day out of those ones. So just yeah, avoid that.

WOMAN, 23, VIC

However, the majority of young people emphasised the importance of proactively looking after their mental health. They often did so through having a regular routine, taking regular breaks, accessing natural spaces, eating nutritious food and trying to sleep well:

“

I live really close to nice green areas. I feel like I have a lot of space. ... I feel like I have a life. I can just walk around and have a lot of time in the sun and I feel like it's good for my brain. You know, having some routine – it's a good thing, I feel like it's important to be healthy. ... [I] cook dinner each night, so the dinners are pretty nutritious. WOMAN, 19, QLD

“

I'll go to the gym, so if I've had a stressful day, even if I feel like I need a rest day, I'll still go because I know that lifts my mood. Another thing I'll do is, I won't eat like shit. MAN, 21, NSW

Regular physical activities not only supported young people's mental and physical health, but also provided an important source of connection to family, community and place:

“

Exercise allows you to clear your mind from a lot of troubles. I personally prefer cycling and if you are cycling you get to move your legs, you get to actually go in the wind, you get that feel[ing] ... and I think it's a combination of both exercise and nature that's really healing to the wellbeing and soul. MAN, 22, NSW

Seeking professional mental health support was important, with many emphasising how professionals had supported them during crises and in navigating day-to-day life.

A few interviewees discussed how they were exploring ways to ensure that these activities were not lost in the bustle of daily life:

“

[I am going] to try something called activity scheduling, where essentially, each day you schedule something that you enjoy ... so you have something to look forward to. MAN, 23, VIC

Notably, several interviewees looked after their mental health by limiting their exposure to negative influences. These included distancing themselves from unproductive habits such as doomscrolling; situations they did not want to be in or struggled to navigate; and people who did not have a positive influence:

“

I've dropped friends and other things just because, you know, like I don't like the way they treat people or [the types of] situations ... I don't want that in my life, so I'll just drop it. MAN, 21, NSW

Seeking professional mental health support was important for interviewees, with many emphasising how professionals had supported them during crises and in navigating day-to-day life. Yet they also spoke about major challenges in accessing this support, including the cost involved, small numbers of subsidised sessions and a perceived variability in the quality of support on offer. In a small number of cases, interviewees spoke about experiences with health professionals who were openly dismissive of their concerns:

“

Oh this is horrible to say, but a lot of free therapists are not very good ... [and for my subsidised access program, at a certain point, the program structure] decides you are fine and they kick you out. Because I mean it makes sense because they need more room for new patients ... At that point in my life, I was 16 I think, I was not in a state to be kicked out from my therapist. BI-GENDER PERSON, 19, SA

In light of these challenges, several young people pointed to other forms of mental health support such as public health lines, young people's organisations and general medical practitioners. Even then, they recognised that many of these services faced resource shortages:

“

I think accessibility for a psychologist is pretty hard, your waiting times are going to be a couple months. ... [As an alternative] I always think “Lifeline, give them a call.” And even that, sometimes I've had to wait up to nearly an hour ... I don't feel there's enough resources for everyone. MAN, 22, NSW



## FOOD INSECURITY

Less than one-fifth (17%) of young Australians had experienced food insecurity at some point in the last 12 months. Higher proportions of young people living in regional (24%) and remote (28%) areas reported experiencing food insecurity than those in metropolitan areas (15%). Food insecurity was also more prevalent among young people born in Australia (19%) than those born in other countries (5%), as well as among young First Nations peoples (30%) compared with other young Australians (15%). Higher proportions of young people with a physical disability (56%), young people with a long-term illness (36%), young people with mental health conditions (30%) and young people with multiple conditions (41%) reported experiencing food insecurity than young Australians without a disability (16%).

At least once in the last 12 months, 66% of young Australians had eaten only a few kinds of food, 60% had eaten less than they thought they should, 58% had been hungry but not eaten, 58% had been unable to eat healthy and nutritious food, 54% had worried they would not have enough food to eat, 52% had to skip meals, 45% lived in a household that ran out of food and 41% went without eating for a whole day (see Figure 6.2). Young people with disabilities were more likely to experience all these situations.

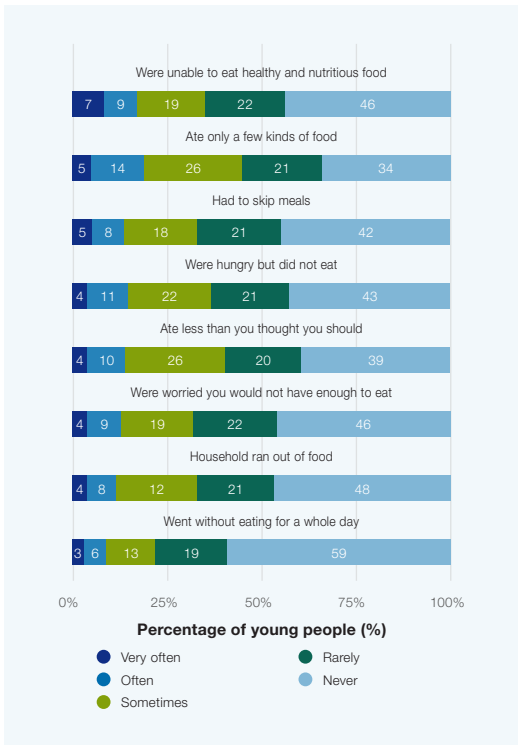


Figure 6.2: Problems with accessing food (N = 623)

Lack of money also prevented 70% of young Australians from going out to eat with friends or family. Around half (49%) of young Australians shopped for food more than an hour away from home, and for 68%, the food that they wanted to buy was not available where they lived.

Approximately half of interviewees were currently experiencing food insecurity or had done so in the past. Overwhelmingly, this was a result of financial pressures, where competing expenses took priority:



I really struggled financially and I was living in the city at the time in a studio. But obviously being in the city is so expensive ... and sometimes food was a lower priority, obviously like rent and bills comes first. WOMAN, 21, NSW

In these cases, financial pressures were often compounded by additional factors such as a lack of time to purchase food, lack of access to food nearby, health factors and insecure housing:

“

It was a combination of I didn't have enough money ... and it was also at that time I was going through a really bad eating disorder. ... I was [also] couch hopping ... luckily the people that I was staying with, they did help me out with that, but sometimes I'd just have to go like several days without anything because I would just be like outside or something. WOMAN, 18, SA

Interviewees very rarely spoke about receiving specialised support from food services, often because they did not want others to know they were struggling or felt that it was a sensitive topic. Rather, it was more common for them to receive ad hoc forms of support such as when their parents or friends visited:

“

As much as we had issues, [my mum] always wanted to make sure I was eating so she would sometimes come by and drop food off, but I'm not the kind of person to really tell people about, like, "Oh, I'm having this struggle like I need help," so she would only just stop by whenever. WOMAN, 21, NSW

A small number of interviewees who experienced severe food insecurity shared how they accessed food through alternative means:

“

I actually have to go to my grandparents, shoot a wallaby for me ... [and then] all I need is one potato ... they [also] give away little meat pies and like really nutritious stuff in the little snacky section [at blood banks], so I'm like, "Oh my God, if I donate blood I can get some protein." NON-BINARY PERSON, 18, TAS

While the interviewees who had not experienced food insecurity often remarked that they felt lucky, they also acknowledged the importance of family support, strict budgeting strategies or frugal shopping habits, especially in light of recent cost-of-living pressures.

# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- As in previous years, young people take a holistic view of health as intersecting across aspects such as physical health, mental health, financial security and access to food and housing. However, young people also point to factors that are beyond their control, such as their environments, as having impacts on their health. This points to a continued need for holistic and system-wide approaches to supporting young people's health and wellbeing.
- Faced with various life stresses and challenges, young people can lack the time, energy and motivation to actively engage in daily routines for promoting their health. Friendly and safe spaces can be created across areas such as schools, universities and in workplaces to help young people look after their health and wellbeing.
- Mental health remains of great importance to young people, with many adopting a diverse range of activities to promote their mental health. Yet, with growing mental challenges among young people, there is a need to ensure that practitioners understand young people's pressures and are funded appropriately to provide the accessible and affordable care that young people require.
- Beyond professional mental health support, there is a need to build alternative types of mental health support that is tailored to young people's needs. The availability of support services must be better communicated and advertised to young people.
- Food insecurity for young people continues to be a major cause for concern. While some are able to turn to family or friends, these may not be available for all young people. This points to a need to build awareness of food support services for those who experience food insecurity. Beyond this, structural changes, such as addressing high costs of living, are needed to support young people and improve their living conditions.

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# 07

## YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR RELATIONSHIPS

### KEY FINDINGS

- 1** 59% of young Australians are single, 34% are in a relationship and 5% are casually dating. 62% think it is likely or very likely that they will live in a long-term relationship.
- 2** 52% of young people think it is likely or very likely that they will have children in the future.
- 3** In the last 12 months, 62% of young Australians often or very often felt like they belonged when they spent time with family, 56% felt this way when they spent time with friends and 46% felt this way at work.
- 4** 46% of young people agree or strongly agree it is easier to connect with others online than talking in person.
- 5** 63% of young people have not moved within Australia in the past 5 years. For young people who have moved, the top three reasons were educational opportunities (25%), family reasons (23%) and affordable housing (17%).
- 6** A majority of young Australians believe that who does most child-rearing and household tasks is not determined by gender, but who does household repairs is determined by gender.
- 7** The majority of young Australians think gender influences the type of career pathway young people choose (59%), the ways junior workers are treated by senior staff in the workplace (59%), the opportunities to progress and advance career pathways (58%) and the amount of money young people get paid in the workforce (55%).
- 8** Belonging is seen by young people as an important part of maintaining good mental health. Most young people feel that they belong when with friends and family, at school and work, and while participating in sports and hobbies.
- 9** Young people are ambivalent about the role of social media, believing that it can help to connect people but does not serve as a replacement for real-life relationships.

# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

## RELATIONSHIPS AND SUPPORTS

The proportion of young people living with their parents tends to decrease as they grow older. For example, 75% of young people aged 15–19 were living with others in private dwellings, as were 83% of young people aged 20–24. This is followed by living in a non-private dwelling, including 20% of young people aged 15–19 and 8% of young people aged 20–24. Five per cent of young people aged 15–19 and 9% of young people aged 20–24 lived alone. Young adults living in capital cities, non-Indigenous young people, and young people with disabilities were more likely to live with their parents. One per cent of men and 2% of women aged 15–19 and 13% of men and 22% of women aged 20–24 were living with a partner (married or de facto). The proportion of young people living with their parents is increasing, with young men being more likely than young women to live with parents at all ages.<sup>1</sup>

The top four sources of support for young people aged 15–19 were friends (72.8%), parent(s) or guardians (66.3%), relative/family friend (41.9%) and brother/sister (39.4%).<sup>2</sup> Yet some young people experienced challenges accessing these supports. Among young people aged 15–19, 29.3% found it difficult to turn to friends and family when they needed help, and 25% reported that their family's ability to get along was fair or poor. Stronger social relationships were identified by young people aged 16–25 as a key support, including opportunities to spend time with family and loved ones, build better or more meaningful peer relationships, and talk to someone. For example, 69% of young people selected "Someone trusted to talk to" as the support they had needed to deal with their stresses over the past year.<sup>3</sup>

Relationships and support also impact other domains of young people's lives. Family responsibilities (13.0%) and lack of family support (9.1%) were two barriers to achieving study/work goals for young people aged 15–19. In addition, 16% of young people were extremely or very concerned about family conflict, with these concerns being more prevalent among gender-diverse young people (31.4%) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (21.0%).<sup>2</sup>

## LONELINESS

Loneliness is prevalent among young people and is negatively associated with their health and wellbeing.<sup>4</sup> More than half (57%) of young people aged 16–25 identified feeling lonely as one of their main issues. Twenty per cent named feeling lonely as their most concerning issue, and 82% noticed a moderate or major impact of feeling lonely on their wellbeing.<sup>3</sup> According to the 2023 Mission Australia Youth Survey, 20.8% of young people aged 15–19 felt lonely all or most of the time, with a higher proportion of gender-diverse young people (44.9%) expressing loneliness than young females (22.9%) and young males (15.3%). A total of 29.7% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reported feeling lonely all or most of the time, including 30.5% of females and 24.3% of males.<sup>2</sup>

A total of 28.5% of young people aged 15–19 found it hard to fit in and socialise at school, work or socially, including 32.6% of young females, 20.4% of young males and 52.4% of gender-diverse people. Further, 32.9% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people found it hard to fit in and socialise compared with 28.4% of non-Indigenous young people.<sup>2</sup> Of Australian youth aged 18–24, 52% felt they connected enough with friends, and 52% felt they connected enough with family.<sup>5</sup> Sixty-six per cent of young people aged 18–24 reported sometimes or often feeling isolated from others, which is more prevalent than older age groups.<sup>6</sup>

## INTERCONNECTION AND THE ONLINE WORLD

Among Australians aged 16–25, 79% noticed that social media use had a moderate or major impact on their wellbeing, and 57% had relied on digital platforms or social media to cope with stress in the last 12 months. Slightly more than one-quarter (26%) of Australian young people aged 18–24 reported that social media was negatively influencing their wellbeing.<sup>5</sup> Young people reported that they desired greater connection with people, with 37% of young people rarely or never feeling closely connected to others.<sup>3</sup> People who felt lonely (16%) were more likely to report being addicted to social media than those who were not lonely (9%), with 27% of young people aged 18–24 reporting social media addiction overall, which is higher than older age groups.<sup>7</sup>

# 2024 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

## IMPORTANT RELATIONSHIPS

More than half (59%) of young Australians were single, 34% were in a relationship and 5% were casually dating. The remaining 1% had another relationship status. Looking towards the future, 63% of young people thought that it was likely or very likely that they would have a supportive social network, 62% thought it was likely or very likely that they would live in a long-term relationship with someone and 52% thought it was likely or very likely that they would have a child/children. Young people with disabilities were less likely to feel these ways. Gender-diverse young people were less likely to feel that they would have a supportive social network around them or have children in the future.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BELONGING

Most (75%) young Australians thought that it was quite or very important for them to feel like they belonged to their family. Seventy-four per cent felt this way about their friendship group, and 59% felt this way about their work. In contrast, feeling like they belonged to a religious community or to their neighbourhood were less important (see Figure 7.1).

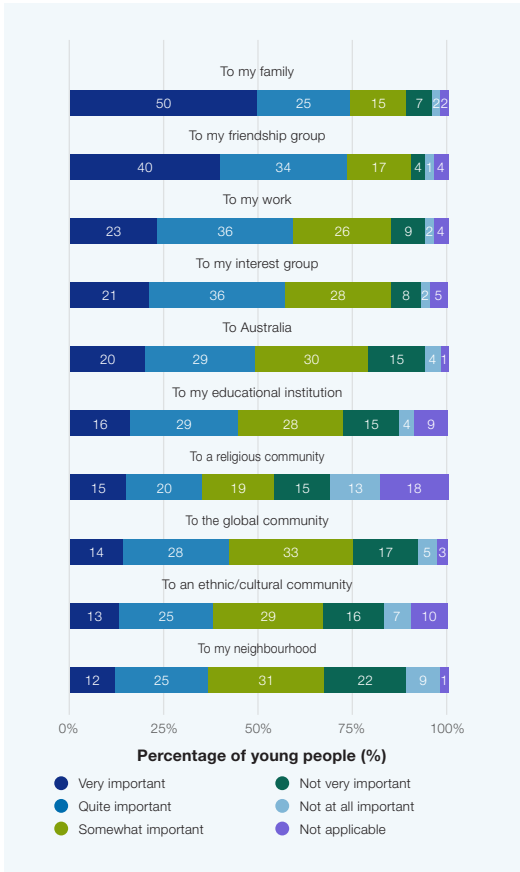


Figure 7.1: Importance of belonging to different groups (N = 623)

Similar to the survey results, interviewees discussed how a sense of belonging was important to them. Belonging was a crucial contrast to loneliness and a key component for maintaining positive mental health:

“

You would feel horribly lonely if you didn't feel like you belonged in any circumstance with anyone else and I feel like having a sense of at least a group of people that at least understand you is very important for general human wellbeing. WOMAN, 19, SA

Young people saw friends as key areas for belonging, where they felt welcomed and could have meaningful interactions. For some young people, they viewed these friendships as a second family.

Some interviewees placed less emphasis on the importance of belonging, discussing how belonging was not a major consideration in some environments such as work or school:

“

In some situations, no, I don't really care. Like work, no, I don't care ... everyone's just there to get money and go home. Most people don't like the job that they're doing, they're just doing it because it's a means to an end. WOMAN, 19, WA

In the last 12 months, 62% of young Australians had often or very often felt like they belonged when they spent time with family, and 56% had felt this way when they spent time with friends. Less than half (46%) of young Australians reported feeling like they belonged when they were at work. Resolving problems with others and facing challenges with others (43% and 37%, respectively) helped young people to feel like they belonged, and 32% felt they belonged when they were involved in organised sports (see Figure 7.2).



Figure 7.2: Young people's sense of belonging in different scenarios (N = 623)

Most (73%) young Australians who were currently studying agreed or strongly agreed that they felt like they belonged at their educational organisation. Young people from low (79%) and high (75%) socioeconomic backgrounds more often felt this way than those from a medium socioeconomic background (63%). Young people who identified as First Nations people more often felt this way (89%) compared with other young Australians (71%). A higher proportion of young people without disabilities (76%) felt that they belonged at their educational organisations than those with mental health conditions (62%) and multiple conditions (64%).

Reflecting on the survey findings, the young people we interviewed saw friends as key areas for belonging, where they felt welcomed and could have meaningful interactions. For some young people, they viewed these friendships as a second family. Friendships were also seen as a vital source of support, with young people pointing to the importance of reciprocal relationships:

“

I definitely sense that I belong with my best friend ... He's my person, I'm his person and we know each other very well and it's just like he's just my family at this point. ... I get such a loving feeling of just like, "Wow I'm so grateful that this person is in my life, like I'm so happy to have him." WOMAN, 18, SA

Similarly, interviewees highlighted the importance of family as a place of belonging and support and a place where they felt understood, even in light of occasional tension between family members:

“

It's just so nice to have like siblings that I can talk with and have fun with and joke with and even if we get angry at each other it always works out. So I feel like being at home just always feels like you belong. WOMAN, 18, VIC

As with the survey findings, interviewees pointed to school and work as places where they felt like they belonged. Related to how young people valued the people they worked with as discussed above, some interviewees valued work as a place where they could socialise with like-minded people, learn from peers or receive support:

“

It would be in school as well. We've got teachers and lecturers that are telling us how much potential we've got or how good we are doing and actually giving us support on how we are going, so it's really beneficial to mak[ing] us feel that we actually matter. MAN, 19, NT

“

My co-workers are so good at my current centre, just really, really supportive even when we're struggling and having a really stressful day ... I actually have such a great group of people I'm around right now, so it's really supportive and I do really feel like I belong with them. WOMAN, 21, NSW

Interestingly, interviewees placed a much greater emphasis on sports and hobbies as sites of belonging, compared with survey participants. Such spaces allowed young people to take part in achieving a common goal, form new friendships and connections, regularly meet with others and develop bonds of trust:

“

When I was doing cheerleading, I belonged in it ... because we all had the same goal. And that's when my friendship group with them was really strong. WOMAN, 23, VIC

A few interviewees also spoke of cultural and religious organisations, where they could connect with others and feel a strong sense of belonging:

“

I guess people at the mosque who also speak my language. So I speak Arabic, so having to meet a few people who spoke Arabic really felt like I belonged.

WOMAN, 22, QLD



Worryingly, many of the young people we spoke to discussed being made to feel like they did not belong due to discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, race or age.

## NON-BELONGING AND EXCLUSION

Although school was a key site of belonging, many interviewees pointed to previous educational experiences as instances where they did not feel like they belonged. Reasons for this included being bullied, not being able to make friends at school, a lack of diversity and not having supportive teachers:

“

I got bullied a fair bit back in school ... I got friggin' chunked and I got my lunch like pretty much and my tuckshop money always taken in school, so I got thrown in the toilet a couple of times, that wasn't very fun. MAN, 24, QLD

“

University is a bit of a hit or miss. Like I've only got a few mates there. ... I didn't really click with a lot of people at university. MAN, 21, NSW

Several interviewees also discussed how they did not feel like they belonged in their families or at work. This was often because they found it difficult to communicate with family members or co-workers:

“

Sometimes at home. You might feel a little out of place. If you do something that you know your parents, your family doesn't really agree with you, then you might feel out of place. WOMAN, 19, QLD

“

But you know, with people at work it's, they've known each other for ages and I've only just started in the last month so I don't know too much and yes, it's hard for me to communicate. MAN, 21, NSW

Some interviewees also expressed not feeling a sense of belonging when they were with their friends because they occasionally felt left out, felt like their friends no longer suited their current circumstances or felt trapped in friendship groups because there were no other options:

“

Like there would be a lot of drama between the group members and somehow I'd find myself in the middle of it all ... So that was really difficult and I felt like, I don't know, I kind of felt trapped in that friend group because I didn't really have anyone else to flee to.

WOMAN, 19, VIC

Worryingly, many of the young people we spoke to discussed being made to feel like they did not belong due to discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender, race or age:

“

Some groups of people tend to take the piss almost at like the whole gay thing, especially straight guys. Like even though, it's just like the little jokes that are so immature and unfunny ... you have to force a laugh. MAN, 18, QLD

“

It was so hard to find rent and my dad was with me at that time and my sister ... we were another race ... It was saying that ... “We would rather not have you here.” WOMAN, 22, QLD

For some interviewees, gender and sexual orientation were key sites of tension with regard to feelings of belonging and exclusion. For some, these aspects contributed to feelings of exclusion, especially with family members or other significant people in their lives. At the same time, though, gender and sexual orientation allowed them to share experiences with others and to form strong connections of belonging:

“

It's [a] tension, would definitely be a little bit more of how I would describe that, especially with my mum. That was one of our worst struggles, I came out to her ... and her kind of initial response to that for a long time, years, was, “No, you're not.” WOMAN, 21, NSW

“

I feel like, oh when I was in, I moved to another school and this can be a situation for anything, they were like, they had open meetings with just hangouts for LGBT people so they could find similar people and that really helped with everyone being able to find people that were similar to them.

BI-GENDER PERSON, 19, SA

A few interviewees also pointed to personal reasons for feeling like they did not belong, such as being shy and fearing failure, or expressed a general sense of not belonging:

“

I never really feel like I do truly belong in any community really ... I don't know if it's just me, but you don't always just fit in easily ... You never do. WOMAN, 19, NSW

## RELATING WITH OTHERS ONLINE

More than half (53%) of young Australians agreed or strongly agreed that they pictured the other person in their mind when they read their email or messages online, 46% believed that it was easier to connect with others online than talking in person and 45% felt that they could communicate on the same level with others online. However, 14% of young Australians agreed or strongly agreed that writing insulting things online was not bullying, and 17% felt that there were no rules online (see Figure 7.3).

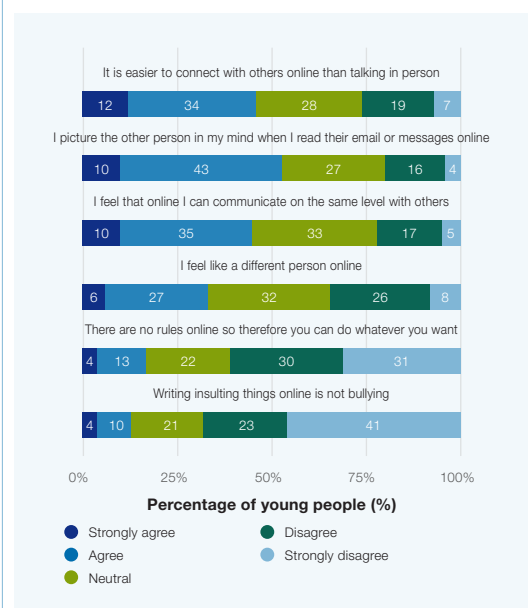


Figure 7.3: Perceptions of social media (N = 623)

The young people we interviewed were largely ambivalent about the role of social media in promoting a sense of belonging, stating that it had both positive and negative aspects:

“

So a bit of a two-headed question. Social media has made it, I feel, harder to become good friends with somebody, but it's easier to make friends with people now. It's easier to keep in contact with friends, but, the level of friendship it is, I feel like social media has limited it ... I guess it does keep friendships, but it doesn't make really meaningful ones. MAN, 21, NSW

“

Social media is practically my whole life at this point since I'm pretty stuck at home. But without social media, when I was younger, I would have felt way more alone than I did ... I met some of the most important people in my life through that medium so I feel like it was more good than bad. BI-GENDER PERSON, 19, SA

Other interviewees were less positive about social media, stating that it could be addictive and a waste of time. In terms of belonging, many interviewees saw social media as having a negative impact due to the relationships on social media being seen as fake or superficial, and being unable to replace relationships in the physical world:

“

It's a fake sense of belonging ... It's fake because you don't know any of the people you are talking to or any of the people you see, you know, so it's not real. MAN, 20, NSW

“

It's kind of like a facade. In a way where it's social enough to take the pain away from being alone ... but it will never fully replace genuinely meeting with people in the real world. MAN, 21, NSW

## GENDER RELATIONS

According to the majority of young Australians, the distribution of child-rearing and household tasks such as paying bills (59%), teaching children discipline (57%), organising the household money (56%), washing the dishes (55%), household shopping (54%), homeschooling children during school lockdowns (54%) and looking after children when they were sick (51%) were not determined by gender (see Figure 7.4). However, who did household repairs (56%) was more likely to be perceived as being somewhat or completely determined by gender.

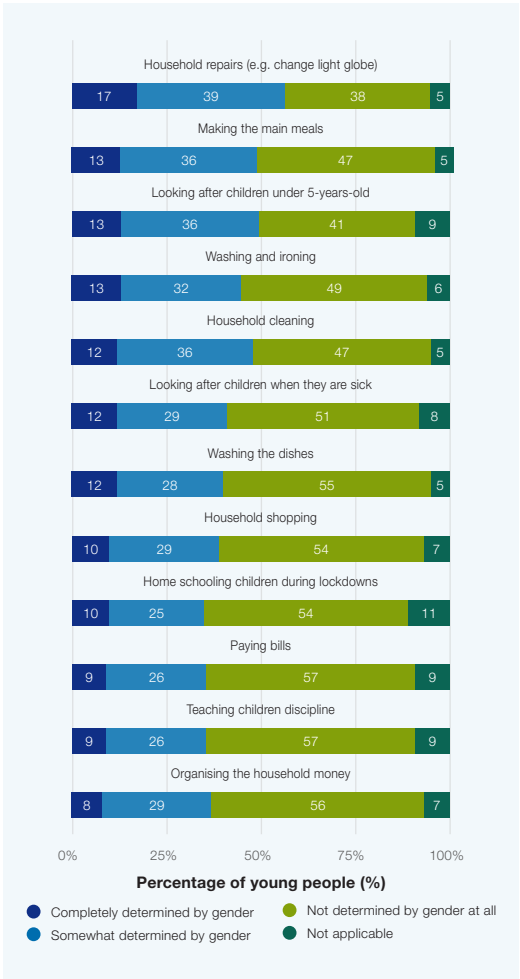


Figure 7.4: Perception of gendered child-rearing and household tasks (N = 623)

The majority of young Australians thought that aspects related to their education and work were somewhat or completely determined by gender (see Figure 7.5). These included the type of career pathway young people chose (59%), the ways junior workers were treated by senior staff in the workplace (59%), the opportunities to progress and advance career pathways (58%) and the amount of money young people were paid in the workforce (55%).

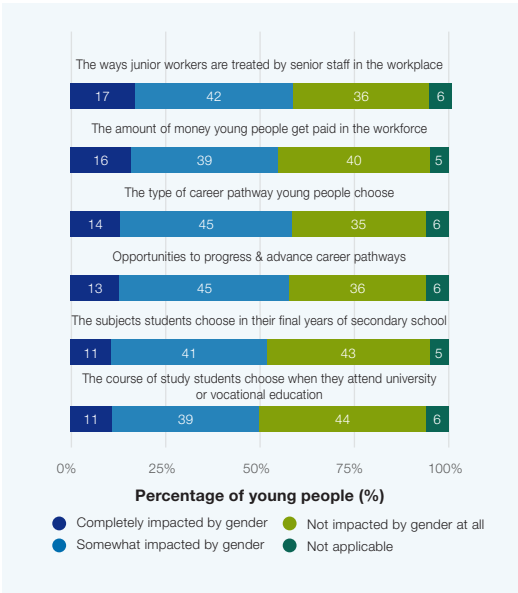


Figure 7.5: Perception of gendered education and occupation development (N = 623)

Comparing gender relationships between their own and their parents' generation, the majority of young people thought that gender relationships had become more or much more equal in education contexts (65%), at work or in employment (63%), in the household (63%), in peer relationships or friendships (62%), in finance (59%), in intimate or romantic relationships (58%) and in mental and physical health care (58%). This pattern was less prevalent for politics, with 50% thinking that gender relationships had become more or much more equal.

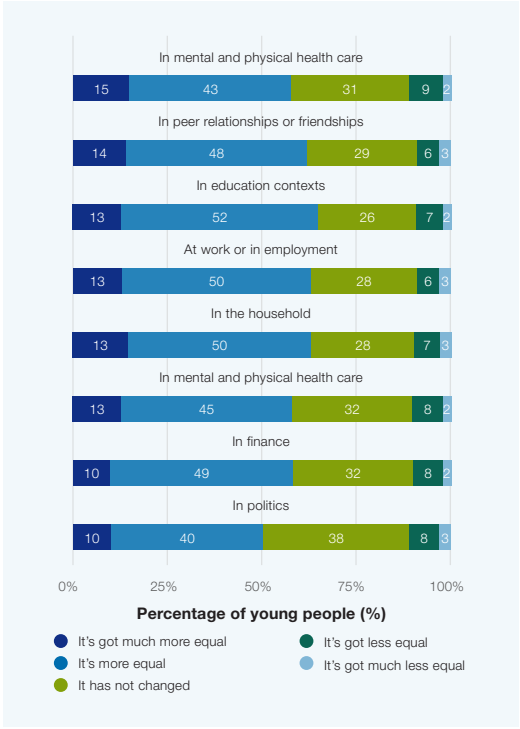


Figure 7.6: Perceived generational changes in gender relations (N = 623)

## GEOGRAPHIC MOBILITY

Young people have varying experiences of geographical mobility and relationships to place. Sixty-three per cent of young people had not moved within Australia in the past 5 years, 15% had moved within the same city or town, 5% had moved from regional areas to capital cities, 5% had moved from capital cities to regional areas, 4% had moved between capital cities, 5% had moved between regional areas and 4% had multiple types of geographic mobility. For young people's most recent move within Australia, major reasons included educational opportunities (25%), family reasons (23%), affordable housing (17%), employment opportunities (13%), relationship with romantic partner(s) (11%) and a different lifestyle (5%) (see Figure 7.7).

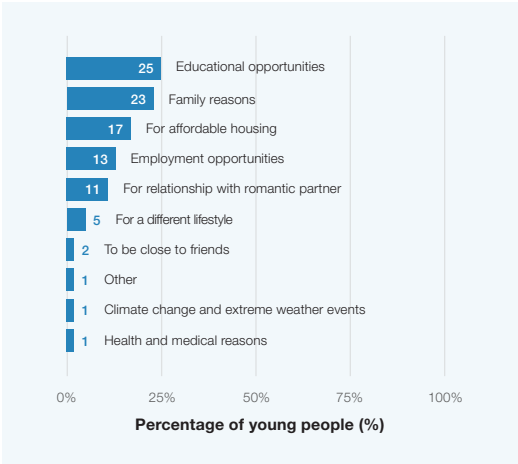


Figure 7.7: Major reasons for young people's most recent move (N = 239)



# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Feeling that they belong remains a cornerstone of young people's health and wellbeing. As in previous years, friends and family provide pillars of support. However, these supports may not be available to all young people, pointing to the importance of helping young people build strong social support networks.
- Community-based organisations, particularly those based around sports, arts and other interests, play a key role in young people's sense of belonging. Additional resourcing and support to build positive cultures in these organisations may enhance their capacity to foster feelings of belonging among young people from many backgrounds.
- As in previous years, young people express ambivalence about the role of social media in promoting feelings of belonging. Stronger guidance may be needed to promote positive behaviours and deter inappropriate perceptions of social media such as writing insults online and cyberbullying.
- Some young people, particularly women and those from minoritised communities, continue to face unacceptable discrimination and harassment. Policy initiatives and collective social action must be taken to ensure that all young Australians feel safe and supported. These initiatives need to focus across all levels of society but are particularly important in schools where young people learn about and develop initial social bonds.
- Young Australians believe progress has been made towards more equal gender relations compared with previous generations. Positive progress in addressing gender balances in workplaces should be encouraged and supported. More support can be provided for young people, especially those from minoritised communities, who may be interested in different forms of political participation.

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# 08

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY

### KEY FINDINGS

- 1** Affordable housing (73%), employment opportunities for young people (52%) and climate change (40%) are the top three issues identified by young people as needing immediate action.
- 2** 70% of young Australians volunteered in organised activities at least once in the last year, most commonly in welfare-related care and services (50%), arts and cultural services (49%) and environmental-related activities (49%). 88% feel that there is something preventing them from being involved in volunteering.
- 3** 34% of young Australians believe that it is likely or very likely that climate change will be combated in the future.
- 4** 39% of young people think there is not enough government support for housing, 26% think there is not enough support in finance and 21% think that there is not enough support for mental health.
- 5** Young Australians often feel unable to make change on a broad scale and see efforts to do so as somewhat futile. This contributes to a greater interest in individualised forms of political action such as joining special interest groups or voting with their money.
- 6** While social media is seen as a way to share information, build support for a cause and keep others accountable, young Australians are concerned that online spaces are often biased, drive the spread of misinformation and are a platform for complaining rather than taking meaningful action.
- 7** Young Australians overwhelmingly feel that their voices are not well represented nor listened to in political discussions, in part due to their lack of representation in government and their relatively smaller economic footprint. As a result, some have stopped trying to make their voices heard.

# REVIEW OF EXISTING DATA

Young adults had low trust in government, with 32% of people aged 18–24 reporting that the government in Canberra could be trusted to do the right thing almost always or most of the time.

## IMPORTANT ISSUES IN TODAY'S AUSTRALIA

Young people aged 15–19 identified the environment (44%), equity and discrimination (31%), the economy and financial matters (31%) and mental health (30%) as the top four most important issues in Australia today.<sup>1</sup> Views about the most important issues varied across different demographic groups, with gender-diverse people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people paying more attention to discrimination. Many young people (89%) aged 16–25 noticed a moderate or major impact of discrimination about gender or sexuality on their wellbeing, and 90% of young people aged 16–25 noticed the impact of discrimination about disability or mental health on their wellbeing.<sup>2</sup>

Eleven per cent of young people aged 16–25 identified climate change as the most concerning issue, and 61% noticed a moderate or major impact of climate change on their wellbeing.<sup>2</sup> A poll of young Australians aged 13–24 showed that 90% of young people believed they had a right to a healthy environment, and 74% thought climate change would make their lives harder. Further, 74% of young Australians thought the federal government should do more to address the problem, and two-thirds felt the federal government should pay more attention to their views on climate change.<sup>3</sup>

Half of young people aged 15–19 were positive or very positive about the future. This varied across demographic groups, with 47.2% of young females, 56.3% of young males, 30.5% of gender-diverse young people and 42.2% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people feeling positive or very positive about the future. Ten per cent of young people aged 15–19 felt that they had no or almost no control over their lives. These figures were higher among gender-diverse young people (28.9%) and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people (16.9%).<sup>1</sup>

## PARTICIPATION, TRUST AND COMMUNITY

According to the 2023 Mission Australia Youth Survey, 88% of young people aged 15–19 were involved in activities in their communities, most often including participating in sports (67.0%), spectating sports (49.7%), volunteering with organisations (40.7%), cultural and artistic activities (29.4%), student leadership activities (28.6%), youth groups (18.2%), religious groups (15.4%), environmental groups (7.5%) and political groups (3.4%). Of these young people, 12.4% were not involved in any of these activities.<sup>1</sup> Contrasting these statistics, another survey painted a different picture, where only 13% of Australian young people aged 18–24 did volunteer or charity work.<sup>4</sup>

Young adults had low trust in government, with 32% of people aged 18–24 reporting that the government in Canberra could be trusted to do the right thing almost always or most of the time. This proportion was lower in comparison to older age groups and decreased from 38% in 2021. Further, the proportion of young people aged 18–24 who thought “Australia is a land of economic opportunity where in the long run, hard work brings a better life” decreased from 83% in 2021 to 66% in 2022 and 59% in 2023. The proportion of young people aged 18–24 who had a sense of belonging in Australia increased from 29% in 2021 to 34% in 2022 and then decreased to 26% in 2023.<sup>5</sup>

Among young people aged 15–19, 60.1% felt proud to be part of their community, 62.5% believed that their community had the things they needed for a positive and thriving future, and 44.4% reported that young people in their community had a say on issues that mattered to them.<sup>1</sup> These figures were slightly lower among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people aged 15–19, where 46.7% felt that they were proud to be part of their community, 45.3% believed that their community had the things they needed for a positive and thriving future and 34.1% reported that young people in their community had a say on issues that mattered to them.<sup>1</sup>



# 2024 INTERVIEW AND SURVEY FINDINGS

## ACHIEVING CHANGE

For a majority of young Australians, affordable housing (73%), employment opportunities for young people (52%) and climate change (40%) were the three most pressing issues needing immediate action. Race relations and racial inequality (32%), gender inequality at work and in public places (29%), LGBTIQ+ discrimination (21%) and gender inequality at home (20%) were also considered a priority by a smaller proportion of young people (see Figure 8.1). Just over one-third (34%) of young Australians believed that it is likely or very likely that climate change will be effectively combated in the future.

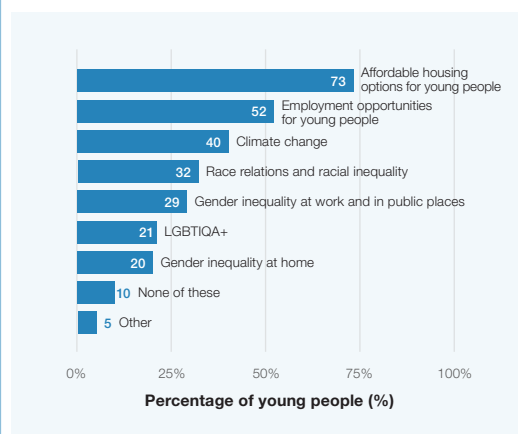


Figure 8.1: Problems that need immediate action (N = 623)

A majority of interviewees questioned their ability to make change in issues that mattered to them. These views were not necessarily due to a lack of interest in political and social matters. Rather, they were underpinned by doubts about the impact of individual actions in light of broader societal conditions:



You know, it's not like my opinion alone is going to change anything. I've just gone "You know what, this is how it is." And if you just accept it and just move on ... All you can do is just do your best to manoeuvre and work with it. MAN, 22, NSW



I'd say [making change] is quite difficult to do. I mean definitely young people being able to affect change in the past ... but I don't know, it feels very difficult at the least, if not nearly impossible, to do so at the moment. Just because of ... the way of how things are set up it seems like a lot of what we can do we can try to do doesn't really matter. MAN, 22, NSW

Several young people spoke about how they actively made changes in their immediate context. However, due to broader social conditions, they perceived investing their time and effort in trying to make large-scale change as somewhat futile:



I can do little things to maybe make my home life better and better for the people around me. ... [But] I guess the most you can do and the most that you should do is adopt responsibility for the part of the problem you can ... and it's just like setting realistic expectations.

MAN, 21, NSW

Traditional forms of political participation, such as voting, petitioning and speaking with governmental representatives, were often seen as important for enacting change in young people's immediate communities. However, at the broader societal level, several interviewees felt disenfranchised by politics, a perspective that some tried to resist:

“

Who we vote in is a big factor for us. ... [But some young people] just don't care. They'd rather go into a blind and be like, "Oh yeah, it is what it is. ... No matter what, there's always gonna be a shit person in charge." But, it's like, "No, no, one could be shitter than the other." WOMAN, 23, VIC

In light of these views, interviewees more often spoke about seeking change through information and individualised ways. These included protesting and taking part in activities organised by special interest groups:

“

I think one of the most effective ways for change is creating or just supporting our local unions and social groups that we've already created. Social groups like for example, the Young Feminist Group ... do a lot of work with either rallies or they do a lot of protests. ... [They] talk about how to achieve systemic change and how to actually apply that in today's [context]. WOMAN, 18, SA

Interviewees also spoke about the value of "voting with their money", either by boycotting certain brands or directing their money towards companies that invested in positive social causes. These choices were seen as easy and

impactful ways to oppose actions that did not align interviewees' values, while supporting those that did:

“

I would say most of [all], just vote with your wallet. ... I think that's the biggest way to make change – just boycott things. ... The easiest way in a capital[ist] society [is to] just vote with your money. Money is the ultimate voice when it comes to things. MAN, 22, NSW

“

[I make sure that] the companies that I'm giving my money to aren't using it for things that I don't believe in ... they don't invest in weapons or fossil fuels, things like that. ... It's just the whole thing about them using my money for things that I believe in is more important to me. MAN, 18, QLD

Key to the value of these more informal means of civic participation is that interviewees felt that they were not only voicing their concerns but taking direct action:

“

I'm very much like an, "If there's an issue, do something about it" kind of person. ... You can bitch and you can moan about something, but no one's gonna, like politicians aren't gonna change things out of the goodness of their heart. They don't give a fuck about us. We need to be the ones to actually do that ... if we want social change.

WOMAN, 21, NSW

In the survey, almost three quarters (70%) of young Australians volunteered in organised activities at least once in the last year.

Several interviewees also described how they engaged in regular volunteering. This was seen as a means for achieving change in their local communities and bringing personal benefits such as feeling rewarded and giving their life meaning:

“ I volunteer because it's a very good way to create or support more community-run events ... [I do it] because it's right to. It's also selfishly a very rewarding feeling, knowing that you've contributed at least something to something good or something better. WOMAN, 18, SA

“ I like helping out people where I can. It's just a sense of community as well. ... I'm going to live and I'm going to die, you know, I'm not going to make much difference. ... I think volunteering [is] where I'm going to make the most difference in my life by helping someone. ... I think if I can do something, do some good I guess, I think my life might have meaning so yes. MAN, 23, QLD

In the survey, almost three quarters (70%) of young Australians volunteered in organised activities at least once in the last year. A higher proportion of gender-diverse people (89%) volunteered compared with young women (65%) and men (75%). Young people from low socioeconomic backgrounds (75%) were more likely to volunteer than those from medium (67%) and high socioeconomic (66%) backgrounds. Young First Nations peoples (96%) were also more likely to volunteer than other Australians (67%).

Among all young people, the most common volunteering activities were welfare-related care and services (50%), arts and cultural services (49%) and environmental-related activities (49%) (see Figure 8.2).

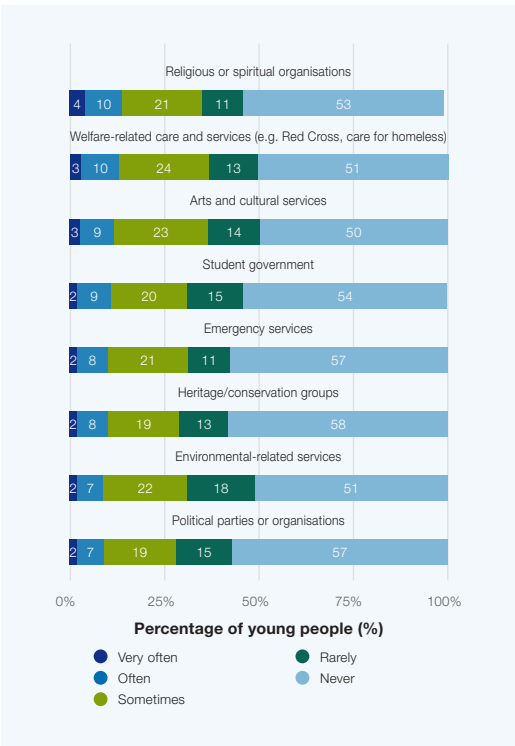


Figure 8.2: Volunteering in organised activities (N = 623)

Most young Australians (88%) felt there was something preventing them from being involved in volunteering. The most common barriers were how time consuming (36%) and expensive (28%) the activities were, along with a lack of interest (28%). Further, 17% of young people said they did not participate in organised activities because they did not think they could make a difference by being involved, and 23% were not sure what they could do.

When using social media in this way, interviewees were less focused about posting and creating their own content, tending to support, comment and engage with others online.

ROLE OF DIGITAL MEDIA IN CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Forty-two per cent of young Australians said they had used their social media profiles in at least one of the ways presented in Figure 8.3. Twenty per cent used their profiles to encourage others to take action on issues that were important to them, 20% participated in an online group related to an issue or cause and 17% updated or amended their profile picture to indicate support for a particular cause.

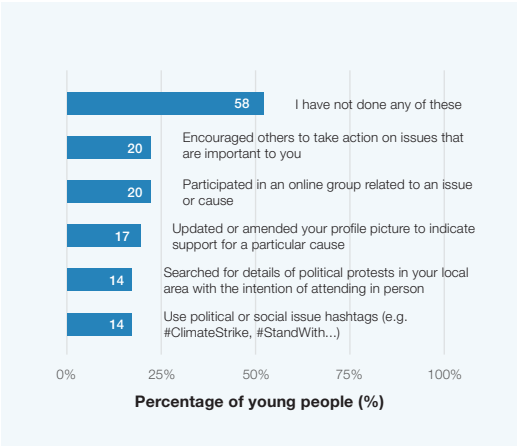


Figure 8.3: Actions on social media for change (N = 623)

Young people saw digital media as contributing positively to social change because of how it enabled information to be quickly and easily shared. Many interviewees saw digital spaces as their primary means of accessing information and recognised the large role that these spaces played in many people's lives:

I think social media activism is actually quite important. And even though I'm not very active on social media, I'm very appreciative of the people who are, because I think that that's really important and a really good way to spread a message. WOMAN, 21, NSW

If you want to change, if you want to reach people, there [are] more people on their phone than outside in the real world. So, if you are only talking outside then you are going to miss everybody who is on their phones. MAN, 20, NSW

Several interviewees spoke about the capacity for social media to build support and solidarity for a cause. When using social media in this way, interviewees were less focused about posting and creating their own content, tending to support, comment and engage with others online:

I haven't really been a big advocate for anything but I feel by showing support in comments and also having discussions with people through comments has helped me make change I guess. WOMAN, 18, VIC

Young people also viewed digital media as an opportunity to keep others accountable, especially when they felt that politicians or celebrities were getting behind causes in performative ways:

It sort of holds people accountable in a way. Like people will ... pretend to be interested in something ... [but because they are online, they will] be a bit more aware or politically aware of what they're saying because of where it started on social media, for people like calling people out and getting cancelled and that type of thing. WOMAN, 19, QLD



At the same time, young people were also ambivalent about social media. Sixty per cent of those surveyed thought that people became sidetracked from important issues because of social media, and 60% thought that people who thought they were making a difference using social media were not always doing so. At the same time, 54% of young people thought people with power could be held accountable more easily on social media, 57% thought that social media helped underrepresented groups amplify their voices and 58% thought that social media meant that important issues received attention they might not get otherwise (see Figure 8.4).

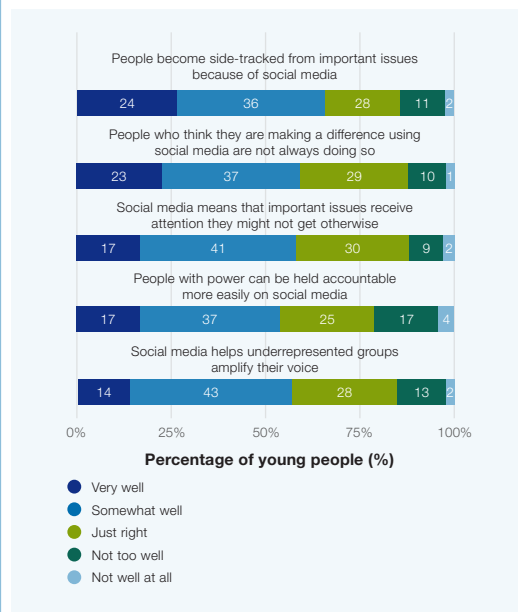


Figure 8.4: Perceptions of social media use for change (N = 623)

These more tempered views were also evident in the interviews, where young people saw the value of using social media to spread information but also recognised that this required others to take notice of them. In these cases, interviewees felt that their ability to foster change online was limited by the size of their following and who would genuinely listen to them:

“

It's just such a non-genuine way of going about making a change. I feel like you're just reposting something and yes, it gets people knowing about it, but then it's like, "How much further does that go if you only have a couple of hundred followers from high school, you know?" WOMAN, 19, QLD

“

It can help because your voice could be so much bigger. But it just depends on who's going to listen. I mean it's just hard to get your message across. It's like you can put your message out there, but not many people might listen to it, even though it's good. MAN, 24, VIC

On the other hand, interviewees strongly felt that digital spaces could inhibit positive social change because of the large amount of harmful content shared online. These concerns often centred on how online spaces were biased, graphic content was not policed, and how easily misinformation could be shared:

“

The internet is not going to be [swayed] one way or another from showing you stuff that is dangerous and stuff like and just to completely not knowing the truth. Like a bunch of young boys got into ... [Andrew Tate and it] is just terrifying how much these boys were manipulated by this man on the internet. BI-GENDER PERSON, 19, SA

Digital media was also seen by some interviewees as a space where people came simply to complain, without wanting to take meaningful action or thinking critically about the issues they were discussing:

“

I think nowadays with the internet, people don't make change in their area. They complain about it on the internet, go to Twitter, “I hate the new President Trump.” Whatever, but no actual change happens. MAN, 22, NSW

## YOUTH REPRESENTATION IN PUBLIC DISCUSSIONS

Overwhelmingly, the young people we interviewed did not believe that they were appropriately represented in civic life and did not feel that their voices were listened to. They felt that young people were often stereotyped by older Australians, who were seen as overlooking generational differences and being quick to judge. This was particularly prevalent in political spaces where there were few young people present and where youth engagement was often seen as performative and tokenistic:

“

There are a lot more older generations in the government, maybe we do have less of a say because they say, “Oh, you're young, you're naïve, you haven't lived” ... at the same time they're also stuck in the generation of what they had and it's different. WOMAN, 23, VIC

“

[Governments] always have a little group of young people that can talk, but they never really actually listen, which I find is a thing, they do it just for show ... it just gets to a point where even when we're begging for someone to listen we just get shut down at that point. NON-BINARY PERSON, 18, TAS

Several young people also attributed this poor representation of their voices not only to being outnumbered by older Australians, but also to having less economic influence. As a result, they felt that political decisions were not made with young people's best interests in mind:

“

It's not just the population in my opinion ... the political parties want to satisfy not just the biggest population group, but the biggest money group because that's where the taxes come from.

WOMAN, 23, VIC

“

I feel like it's a little bit hard to get represented in a way when ... [we are not] the ones that are more the homeowners and the taxpayers. WOMAN, 19, QLD

In the survey, 39% of young people thought that there was not enough government support for housing, 26% thought that there was not enough government support for finance and 21% thought that there was not enough government support for mental health (see Figure 8.5). Gender-diverse young people were more likely to think there was not enough government support for mental health (65%) than young women (24%) and men (16%), as were young people with mental health conditions (40%) in comparison to young Australians without a disability (12%).

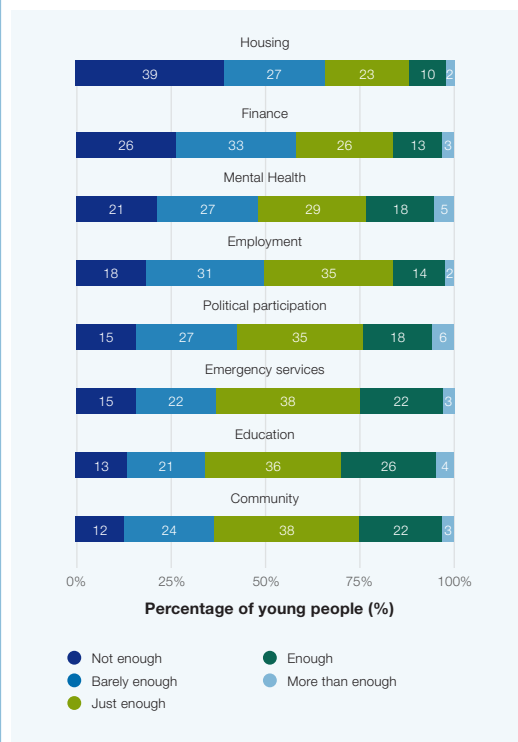


Figure 8.5: Perceptions of government support for young people in different areas (N = 623)

In light of feeling that governments did not provide enough support for or listen to young people, several interviewees remarked how they had stopped trying to make their voices heard:

“

I don't really speak up because I know it's probably just a waste of time anyways ... [and for] other people that do, they just get treated like idiots. MAN, 24, QLD

“

Anytime I try to say anything, I find a lot of people don't listen. So I just don't try anymore. MAN, 23, VIC

Notably, a few interviewees felt that it was hard for their voices to be heard because of their positionality such as their gender and where they lived. For these young people, finding avenues for their voices to be heard, such as at work, with family or with friends, was important:

“

I think it's a bit hard for a woman sometimes to share things or to be properly heard like when sharing opinions that really impact us and stuff. So that makes it a bit, society makes that a bit hard for us, yes. WOMAN, 20, SA

“

Not like collectively, as you know, young adults, but my voice in general, like at work, at home. I feel like my voice is heard but not, you know, as collectively as young adults to the government.

WOMAN, 21, QLD

# POLICY AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

- Young people want to engage in issues that are of interest to them in ways that may not be captured by formal measures of participation. This desire to engage should be acknowledged, and the informal means of engagement that appeal to young people, such as unions and volunteering opportunities, should be recognised in measures of civic participation and supported.
- Similar to previous years, affordable housing remains a major concern for many young people. Policy solutions to address increasing rent prices and tenants' rights to protect young people from unsafe, insecure and unsustainable housing conditions are a priority for policy development.
- Although young people express little interest in formal politics, they are clear about wanting forums to engage with political issues. These alternative forms of engagement should be researched and supported, including options such as direct-to-government consultation, active participation in consultation and other forms of research, and project-based direct participation around key issues or interests.
- Volunteering remains a key aspect of young people's participation, which brings benefits to both themselves and their communities. Volunteering organisations can be better supported in terms of finances and resources, along with support for mitigating the barriers that prevent young people from participating. This is especially important for promoting young people's awareness of available volunteering opportunities and the impact of their involvement.
- Young people are ambivalent around the role of social media for participation, citing that while it can be beneficial, it can also have harmful effects. This points to a need to better understand and invest in online safety mechanisms and education to support young people, their peers and their families to navigate online spaces and counter harmful content.

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