



Mission Australia

In their own words: Insights into the concerns of young Australians

Snapshot
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Foundation

In 2008 Mission Australia conducted its seventh annual *National survey of young Australians* with over 45,000 young people aged 11-24 years. The survey aimed to identify the important and emerging issues for young people through a series of questions on what they value, their issues of concern, where they turn for advice and support and who they admire.

Young people from diverse communities in each state and territory across Australia participated. About half of the surveys were from young people aged between 11 and 14 years, a further 47% were from those aged 15 to 19 years and just under 1,000 were from young adults aged 20 to 24 years. Just over half of the surveys (56.6%) were completed by females, 2,500 responses were received from Indigenous young people and a further 6,800 from young people who spoke a language other than English at home.

Young people who completed the survey online had the opportunity to provide comments on their issues of concern and close to 1,000 responses were received. These comments form the basis for this publication. The insights they provide complement the numerical data collected through the survey and offer a richer understanding of the current and emerging issues for young people in Australia today.

The issues of concern to young people

Respondents were asked to rank the issues that concerned them from the list of options set out in Table 1. The top three issues were *body image*, *drugs* and *family conflict* with each of them of significant concern to around a quarter of respondents. There was no one 'standout' issue, with nine issues being of major concern to at least one in five respondents. Young people's concerns are explored in further detail below, based on the comments received online.

The direct 'voices' of young Australians

Body image

Body image was the top issue of concern for young people who responded to the 2008 national survey. It was particularly an issue for the young adult group with one third of them, compared to one quarter of those aged 11 to 14 years, identifying it as a major concern. One in five male respondents and one in four females indicated it was a significant issue.

The online comments reflected young people's concern about the media (and other) representations of the 'ideal body' and its effect on young people.

It's hard to realise that nobody is perfect when you're constantly bombarded with such unrealistic representations in the media...people need to realise that it's having a negative impact on the way we view ourselves (Female, 18 years).

The media's ideal body image is based on stick thin models... it should not be about how little you weigh but about being healthy (Female, 21 years).

I chose body image as the first concern. Due to body image, many girls, also some boys, revert to self harm through cutting and not eating. Some of this even leads to suicide. This can also cause things like alcohol abuse etc. (Male, 17 years).

While some respondents expressed a desire to change their own appearance or body shape, many of the comments regarding body image were related to their concern for friends or others.

I'm very concerned about the way girls and boys see themselves against other celebs and peers (Female, 15 years).

I am concerned about the number of young people from age 10 upwards being worried about the way they look and what other people think of them (Female, 12 years).

Research suggests that internalising the 'ideal body' presented in a range of media contributes to body dissatisfaction amongst adolescents, as achieving that 'ideal' is generally not possible (Knauss et al., 2007). The online survey comments suggest young people are keenly aware of the links between poor body image and diminished self esteem.

Body image is my number one concern and plays a major role in most of my other insecurities... (Female, 21 years).

There are too many females out there who hate what they look like and it saddens me to think that people cannot love who they are (Female, 21 years).

Table 1: Issues of concern to young people, 2008

	%
Body image	26.3
Drugs	26.0
Family conflict	25.9
Suicide	24.6
Personal safety	22.9
Bullying/emotional abuse	22.6
Physical/sexual abuse	22.6
Alcohol	20.9
Coping with stress	20.4
School or study problems	18.6
The environment	18.4
Depression	17.8
Self harm	13.7
Discrimination	12.6
Sexuality (relationships, health, identity)	12.2

Note: Data is aggregated and includes items ranked one, two or three by respondents.

Drugs

Drugs was the second top issue of concern for respondents to the 2008 youth survey, with over a quarter of young people overall indicating it as a significant concern. The level of concern varied considerably with age, with around a third of those aged 11 to 14 years significantly concerned about drugs compared to only 16.6% of those aged 20 to 24 years.

The 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey found that 23% of young people aged 15 to 24 years had used an illicit drug during the last twelve months (AIHW, 2008). An earlier survey in 2004 showed that only 8% of 12 to 15 year olds had tried an illicit drug in the 12 months prior to the survey (AIHW, 2007).

Identifying drugs as an issue of concern does not necessarily reflect usage, and as the figures above indicate those most likely to be concerned about the issue (that is, the youngest group) is the group least likely to have tried or used drugs. The online comments reflect that young people's concern about this issue tends to focus on the potential negative impact of drugs on friends, family and the broader community, as well as a personal concern about making the wrong decision about drugs.

I am mostly concerned about the amount of drugs people take in their lives... drugs affect everyday life, not to just the person taking them but the people surrounding them (Female, 12 years).

I'm concerned that my friends will get badly hurt by taking drugs or alcohol when they are older (Female, 12 years).

I have to deal with a sister who self harms and is heavily involved with drugs and alcohol. It just puts pressure on the rest of the family (Female, 14 years).

I'm worried when I'm out at a party I might make the wrong decision and take something I know I shouldn't and it will harm me (Female, 13 yrs).

Some of the young adult group wrote about their lack of concern about drugs, despite relatively higher usage rates amongst this group.

Some of my least concerns are alcohol and drugs. I think the government and society blow the issue way out of proportion... I think it should be about harm minimisation and moderation, rather than placing emphasis on not doing these things at all (Female, 20 years).

Family conflict

Family relationships have a significant effect on a young person's wellbeing. In a recent longitudinal Australian study, teenagers who had better quality relationships with their parents tended to display higher self-esteem, fewer behavioural problems, greater sense of identity and be more socially skilled and optimistic about the future than teenagers with poorer-quality relationships with their parents (Smart et al., 2008).

Family relationships were highly valued by over three quarters of survey respondents and the rates were high for all age groups and both genders. Family was also the top group identified by respondents when asked to name the three people or organisations they most admired.

At the same time, *family conflict* was a significant concern for over one quarter of young people and this included both genders. It was a major concern for one fifth of the young adult group and a quarter of those aged 11 to 19 years. The online comments displayed an acute awareness of the pervasive effects of family conflict across young people's lives:

I feel awful when I have family conflict cause it makes me feel depressed (Female, 13 years).

I think that family conflict is a major issue because if you're having a really bad time at home then you're not very likely to be having a great time anywhere else. Family conflicts need to be resolved quickly and help needs to be given to the families that need it the most (Female, 12 years).

I think that family conflict can ultimately result in a lot of the other issues. I think that parents are not really aware of the impact they are really making on their children (Female, 19 years).

Some young people commented on the lack of support available to assist in dealing with family conflict.

The youth of today need to be aware that there are facilities available for them if they have issues. Somewhere they can go to talk without their parents...they just need a place to feel protected and safe and be able to get the help that they need (Female, 19 years).

Mental health

A number of issues of concern listed in Table 1 relate to mental health, such as *suicide*, *coping with stress*, *depression* and *self harm*. Comments received online from young people ranged from personal stories of their own struggles with mental health, to advocating for a greater response across society as a whole.

I have a deep concern about the mental health of young people. I don't think enough work is being done with the "average" young person to develop resilience to battle issues such as those listed (Male, 20 years).

The mental and emotional security of young people is vital so that they grow up feeling confident and without the need to use drugs or abuse themselves (Male, 21 years).

I'm mostly concerned with the challenges youth face - being themselves, being accepted for who they are, stress and mental health (Female, 22 years).

Suicide is the second highest cause of death among young Australians (AIHW, 2007). However, the number of young people who commit suicide is relatively low compared with the number of young people who self harm. In 2005-06, there were over 7,000 hospitalisations of young people aged 12 to 24 years due to intentional self harm (AIHW, 2008). The rate for females was consistently at least twice as high as for males over this period. There were a significant number of online comments including young people's own stories and their concern for friends at risk of suicide or self harm. They point to the need for more supports to assist young people who need help.

I've got depression and have been self harming and had thoughts of suicide (Female, 14 years).

There have been several occasions where I was worried about a friend possibly committing suicide and once I had to contact a friend's parents in the middle of the night in order to stop someone (Female, 19 years).

I am not concerned that I am going to do any self harm but am worried many others might (Female, 12 years).

A lot of my friends find self harm and hurting themselves cool but I think it's stupid, coz I love my friends and don't want them hurting themselves and I'm scared that they need more help but aren't sure where to get it (Female, 13 years).

There aren't enough places out there for harmers and it feels like it's up to us to set up and run websites to help each other... It really feels like a case of it takes one to understand one and no one is willing to try to understand us (Female, 18 years).

Everyone who self harms these days is immediately in the 'emo' stereotype. Unfortunately, this is a huge issue and the fact that they are stereotyped makes the individual feel worse (Female, 15 years).

I have a great deal of concern surrounding the issues of self harm and suicide. Dealing with self harming issues myself I have found services limited and public systems with a lack of understanding and compassion, shattering any remaining self worth of the individuals who seek such help (Female, 24 years).

Coping with stress was a significant concern for one in five young people who responded to the survey. It was particularly a concern for the young adult group, with 31% indicating it was a major issue. In 2003, anxiety and depression were the leading cause of burden of disease for young Australians (AIHW, 2007), with nearly 23% of 16-24 year old Australians classified as having an anxiety, mood or substance use disorder (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). The online survey responses show that the sources of stress in young people's lives are varied, with school, university, future career prospects and money frequently mentioned.

I don't like all the stress at school with homework and assignments and stuff because all they do is stress us out (Female, 13 years).

There is heaps of homework and it's hard to keep up (Male, 14 years).

School is so stressful; how well you do in year twelve can determine what you do for the rest of your life... some of us only get one shot at it (Female, 16 years).

I just generally worry about money and getting good grades at school so I can go to university (Female, 17 years).

Being a Gen Y, I believe I have achieved a lot for my age. I have learnt to work hard, reap the benefits, but not how to deal with stress... (Female, 24 years).

Depression was a significant concern for 17.8% of all survey respondents but close to 30% of those aged 20 to 24 years. The majority of comments received from young people indicated that they were concerned about friends or family who were depressed, or depression within the Australian community in general. Some young people shared their own

struggles with depression and the need to raise awareness within the community.

I have depression and it bleeds into every aspect of my life. A lot of people don't really understand depression. They might be aware of it, but unless you have it or have had it, it's hard to understand that it influences if you exercise, if you do assignments on time, if you are late for work or how you act with your friends (Female, 23 years).

I went through depression and am now out and fine. I want to raise awareness (Female, 17 years).

I am concerned about friends' depression which then leads to talk of suicide; talking to me helps them but causes sadness and depression for myself which is difficult (Male, 18 years).

I am concerned for my Dad's health because my Mum died two years ago and he has depression and can't really talk to me about the way he is feeling (Female, 18 years).

Myself, as well as several friends are receiving treatment for depression (whether it be medication or counselling). I find this concerning as I am 22 and my friends are between 20-24 years. ... Why are so many people in my age group depressed and requiring medication at such a young age? (Male, 22 years).

Personal safety

Personal safety was included in the list of issues of concern for the first time in 2008 and it was identified by one in four respondents as a major concern. It was an issue for both genders and all three age groups. Nearly 90% of comments received online about personal safety were from females. Their responses reflect a general sense of vulnerability, particularly when they are out in the community.

Personal safety is a big issue for young women. For me to walk home alone, especially at night, is a big deal and I want to feel safe when I do that (Female, 20 years).

I am deeply afraid of being hurt, kidnapped or killed. This is usually at home when I'm alone or during the night (Female, 15 years).

I am concerned of something happening to me when I'm walking back from school at about 5:00pm from after school activities (Female, 12 years).

Ensuring young people's safety is a crucial part of their overall wellbeing. However a disproportionate level of fear can result in young people limiting their participation, reduce their quality of life and sense of confidence, as well as impact on the community's social fabric by decreasing levels of trust and social capital. Recent research with adults showed that almost all respondents (more than 98%) overestimated the proportion of crimes that involve violence (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 2008). This in turn could contribute to young people's heightened concern about personal safety which is identified in the youth survey, as could the portrayal of violence and crime in the media. The challenge is to help young people to strike the balance between developing good personal safety habits whilst simultaneously encouraging them to actively participate in their community.

Bullying/emotional abuse

Around one in four respondents to the survey identified *bullying/emotional abuse* as a major issue. Similarly, other research suggests one in four Year 4 to Year 9 students frequently experience bullying in Australian schools (Child Health Promotion Research Centre, 2009). Bullying can involve psychological, emotional, social or physical harassment. More attention has recently been given to 'covert' bullying, such as cyber bullying. The rise of social networking sites, online chat spaces and mobile phone usage among young people has increased the risk of exposure to this type of bullying, with one in five teenagers thought to have received a hateful message through an electronic medium (Lodge and Frydenberg, 2007). The comments young people made online about bullying reflect the long-term effect that it can have and that schools are a critical place for addressing this issue.

I have been a victim of bullying and have had to move schools in my final year because of it (Female, 17 years).

I have clinical depression because of the abuse and bullying I receive at school (Female, 16 years).

Bullying is also a concern of mine. A few older girls have teamed up against me at school calling me names, and I'm too scared to tell a teacher about it (Female, 12 years).

I am concerned about bullying because it can hurt people for the rest of their lives and they may never recover. Bullying can put people's self confidence at rock bottom (Male, 14 years).

Alcohol

Alcohol was a major concern for a fifth of all respondents to the 2008 survey and a quarter of those who were male. In 2007 almost one-third of 12 to 24 year old Australians drank alcohol in amounts that put them at risk or high risk of alcohol-related harm (AIHW, 2007). Recently, the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) changed the alcohol related harm guidelines to reflect research that indicates alcohol may adversely affect brain development in young people and lead to alcohol related problems in later life. The guidelines recommend that 15 to 17 year olds delay the initiation of drinking for as long as possible (NHMRC, 2009).

Comments received online from young people expressed a particular concern about the availability of alcohol and the prevalence of underage drinking.

I am very concerned with drugs and alcohol and the effects that it can have on people and how addictive they can be (Female, 13 years).

I think it is really bad how so many young people are taking drugs and drinking alcohol and that is so easy to access (Female, 13 years).

The growing amount of youth who are binge drinking is increasingly dangerous (Female, 19 years).

Teenagers need to realise that getting drunk is not the only way to have fun (Female, 17 years).

The environment

Whilst *the environment* was not ranked as one of the top concerns for young people who responded to the survey, it

featured heavily in the online comments. Many respondents indicated that the environment was a serious concern and expressed an urgent need for governments and communities to take decisive action on issues such as climate change and sustainability. A high level of anxiety and frustration regarding inactivity came through some of the comments.

I am quite worried about our environment and I hope that people can learn more about how to help it (Female, 12 years).

The only issue that really concerns me on that list is the environment. The rest are all irrelevant to me (Male, 16 years).

I'm concerned about Global Warming. THE ICE CAPS ARE MELTING! DOES THAT NOT SCARE ANYONE ELSE? (Female, 12 years)

I worry constantly about the environment. My friends tease me when I tell them they're wasting water because the tap is running, but I tell them I'm dead serious because everything counts (Female, 19 years).

I am concerned about global warming and depletion of unrenewable resources... (Male, 22 years).

Sexuality

A small number of comments were received online regarding *sexuality*, with most highlighting the discrimination and prejudice that same-sex attracted young people face in their daily lives. Research suggests that same-sex attracted young people experience significantly higher mental health issues compared with heterosexual young people (Beyondblue, 2008). Other comments about *sexuality* pointed to a general concern about young people's sexual behaviours and attitudes.

My main concerns in my own life are, well I'm gay, and small towns are very homophobic and can make life hell (Male, 21 years).

At my age there is a lot of bullying toward bi-sexual and gay people. I hang around with a couple of bisexuals and they are always treated differently out of the group. It's very disturbing and emotionally traumatic... (Female, 15 years).

I am very, very worried about being gay. I like both boys and girls and can't decide (Female, 14 years).

Sexuality is a big issue as sex has become more of an object today, and a lot of people take uncalculated risks (Female, 15 years).

A lot of young people these days really don't understand the results of their actions when it comes to sex (Female, 18 years).

Financial security

Financial security was not a concern listed in Table 1 but has been included in this publication due to the number of comments received online regarding the issue. It is interesting to note that the comments were collected in April to July 2008, when the global financial crisis was first coming to the attention of the community. Many comments reflected the financial stress families were experiencing as well as the difficulties experienced by young people making the transition to financial independence.

Financial stability is the high priority right now. Most people are struggling at the moment with all the prices being raised. My family is struggling to pay bills and buy food and petrol (Male, 16 years).

It didn't have this here, but affordability is a biggie. I was sick of going hungry when Mum was on a disability pension (Female, 19 years).

...when mum says "we don't have enough money" I blame myself and it really does concern me (Female, 16 years).

I struggle financially to support myself when I am paid 55% of the adult wage because I'm 17... I work multiple jobs to pay expenses. I have to put off uni and future plans so I can have a roof over my head and eat (Female, 17 years).

Connections between issues

Many of the comments made by young people reflected the clear links they saw between their issues of concern and the need to provide holistic responses that aim to improve young people's wellbeing and stop the 'snowball' effect of one issue leading into another.

Abuse leads to depression, depression leads to self harm, self harm leads to SUICIDE! END THE CYCLE! (Male, 16 years).

If we can stop the smaller stresses in our lives then maybe we can prevent the big ones like suicide from ever happening (Female, 16 years).

I chose body image as the first concern. Due to body image, many girls and some boys revert to self harm through cutting and not eating. Some of this even leads to suicide. This can also cause things like alcohol abuse etc. Most problems can be linked back to a central issue. Through finding out what this issue is, we can begin to fix the 'root' issue and begin to fix the problem as a whole (Male, 17 years).

Discussion and conclusion

The online youth survey comments offer some unique insights on the major concerns of young Australians. In some cases, such as in the area of *body image*, the direct voices of young people may suggest a somewhat different interpretation from that gained from the numerical data alone. The online comments suggest that much of young people's concern about body image stems from their being 'bombarded' by unrealistic images of the 'ideal body' and they appear critical of such images.

Similarly, the level of concern regarding *drugs* appears from the online comments to reflect young people's concern about the negative impact of drugs on friends, family and the broader community, rather than their own usage. The degree and nature of concern about this issue expressed by 11 to 14 year olds suggests the need to review current drug education campaigns to ensure that they are evidence based and equip young people with the skills to effectively deal with the issue, and keep safe and healthy, if and when they come across drugs. Young people need to be able to apply the knowledge they learn through such programs in the specific social contexts in which they mix – providing them with information alone will not be sufficient.

The online comments reflect the deep impact *family conflict* can have on young people and echoes the high value most young people place on *family relationships*. Skilling up parents, other family members and friends to openly communicate with young people, including through times of family stress and change, is critical. Early intervention strategies that work to avoid conflict escalating are also important.

A significant number of the comments received online relate to mental health issues. Young people are particularly impacted by this issue with over 75% of mental illnesses beginning between the age of 15 and 25 years of age (Hickie et al, 2004). Early intervention, including supporting those who young people are most likely to turn to when they have a problem, namely friends, parents and other relatives and family friends, is critical. The ongoing development of integrated and youth-friendly mental health services as well as a deeper understanding and response to the issue of self harm are also required.

The level of concern expressed by young people regarding *personal safety* was significant and appeared to particularly relate to their sense of safety in the community. Balancing good personal safety habits with the goal of young people's active participation in the community remains a challenge for young people themselves, their families and the wider community.

A number of national strategies are currently being developed and implemented regarding *bullying/emotional abuse* and the use of *alcohol* by young people. The online comments confirm the concern that some young people feel regarding the impact of both these issues and the importance of such initiatives. The role of schools in addressing bullying is particularly significant given that it is often in this environment that bullying takes place.

For some young people *the environment* is clearly a major issue and one which causes them significant anxiety. They appear to be looking both for national leadership and local action on this issue. For other young people discrimination on the basis of *sexuality* is a significant reality and one which can be very isolating and potentially have long term negative impacts on their wellbeing. This is perhaps an under-identified issue with limited policy and programmatic responses.

Young people's concerns about *financial security* may reflect the early impact of the global financial crisis but they also indicate both the financial struggles some young people experience in the transition to adulthood as well as the personal burden they take on when their family is struggling.

Young people's clear identification of the links between various issues should serve to sharpen efforts to support them in a holistic way – whether this is at home, school, in the workplace or through other more formal health, community and employment services. The call from one respondent to find the 'root issue and begin to fix the problem as a whole', provides a clear guiding principle to inform government, community and other initiatives aimed at enhancing the wellbeing of young people.

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Thanks

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*Inspired by Jesus Christ, Mission Australia exists to meet human need and to spread the knowledge of the love of God.
Our vision is to see a fairer Australia by enabling people in need to find pathways to a better life.*

 <p>Macquarie Group Foundation</p>	<p>The Macquarie Group is a diversified international provider of banking, financial, advisory and investment services. Through the Macquarie Group Foundation, Macquarie supports a wide range of community organisations. The Foundation has formed a major partnership with Mission Australia, to enhance its research into key social issues. This research guides Mission Australia's policy development and advocacy, ensuring its employment programs and community services continue to deliver to those most in need.</p>
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For more information contact:

Anne Hampshire, National Manager,
Research and Social Policy, Mission Australia
Telephone: (02) 9219 2000
Facsimile: (02) 9264 3713
Website: www.missionaustralia.com.au
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