



BE PART OF THE RIPPLE

Listening to the voices that matter!

**PREVENTION
UNITED**

Joining forces to prevent mental health conditions

October 2024

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Acknowledgements

This survey was designed by the Prevention United Youth Advisory Group (YAG) and the report was written with their input. We sincerely thank each member for their time. We would also like to thank Future General Global (FGG) for funding this work. FGG is a philanthropic group committed to improving the mental health of young Australians. Finally, we would like to thank Ms Thea Orr for analysing the survey data for this report.



FOREWORD BY THE PREVENTION UNITED YOUTH ADVISORY GROUP (YAG)

“Nothing about us without us.”¹

If the development of policies that affect young people does not include their voices, we will not see meaningful change. Through this survey we discovered that the most impactful issues on young people’s mental health (and where they want attention focused) are not reflected by our government’s priorities.

This survey was created by us, the Prevention United Youth Advisory Group. We are a group of young people passionate about driving authentic change in the current mental health landscape for young people. Previous literature commonly overlooks youth-centred perspectives in the decision-making around mental health policy. This survey aims to inform co-design policies that address youth mental health challenges.

This survey identified the top-rated positive and negative influences impacting youth mental health as nominated by the survey participants. It also outlines activities that young people prefer to engage in to boost their mental health, as well as solutions they believe would be impactful in improving mental health at a governmental level.

From the survey data, it is clear that young people feel the undermining of personal power is a strong negative factor affecting their mental health and that being able to make a difference in the world is a positive factor. Young people want a non-tokenistic seat at the table and want to play an active role in their mental wellbeing.

The overwhelming response was a plea to listen to youth, and for decision-makers to act on young people’s ideas, giving them the agency to generate the change they wish to see.

This generation of young people is aware and motivated to protect and grow their mental wellbeing proactively. It is important to help build young people’s toolkits and nurture them to be resilient. To make sure these methods are effective, we need to look at what young people are identifying as positives and work towards making these stronger for every individual. Don’t just do what you think young people need, listen to their voices, look at the evidence, and make a real change. Let’s build a society that works towards preventing mental illness, not just treating it. This way we can create a protected future where everyone can thrive.

We want to thank the Youth Advisory Group members Alannah Sander, Chuan Huang Hii (Merry), Emily Howells, Isaac Yau, Jasmine Toronis, Katherine Georghiou, Lauren Jackson, Sumeyye Nur Gungor, Wesley Chen, and Zinny Hunt for their contribution to the creation of this survey, ensuring there is a youth-centred voice at all levels of decision making. We also want to thank the hundreds of young people across Australia for their meaningful responses to the survey and their integral contributions to the content within this report. Young people are not just the future. We are here now, we are the present, and our voices are loud. It’s time to listen to us.

¹ This phrase comes from long standing activism in the disability sector and then into the recovery movement within mental health. [Nothing About Us Without Us \(disabilitywithoutpoverty.ca\)](https://disabilitywithoutpoverty.ca). More recently it has also been used to advocate for child and youth participation in policy development “Nothing about us, without us” (who.int)

Executive Summary



This report summarises the results of the Prevention United Youth Survey which was conducted online in mid-2024. The survey was designed by the Prevention United Youth Advisory Group (YAG) who wanted to ask young people what factors they thought are having the most negative and positive impacts on their mental health, what activities they were most likely engage in to improve their mental health and what they thought could be done by Government to improve the mental health of young Australians. We received responses from 589 young Australians aged 16–25 years old.

The five highest rating negative influences on mental health were:

- Fears about the future.
- Finances (cost of living, socio-economic status).
- Loneliness.
- Global events (e.g., wars, conflicts, COVID-19).
- Family relationships and poor sleep.

The five highest rating positive influences on mental health were:

- Friends.
- A good night's sleep.
- Music and the arts.
- Greenspace and nature.
- Family relationships.

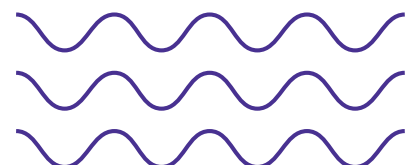
The top five programs/activities/training young people were most likely to engage in to boost their mental health were those with a focus on:

- Music and the arts.
- Handling stress better.
- Building strong relationships.
- Caring for those with mental ill-health.
- Dealing with family difficulties.

The top five solutions that young people believed that Government could implement to improve their mental health were:

- Keeping housing and rent affordable.
- Supporting young people with cost of living.
- Investing in mental health promotion and prevention initiatives.
- Paying students while on placement.
- Decreasing public transport fees for young people.

The results of this survey reflect the importance of engaging young people and hearing their voices and opinions when developing meaningful and impactful policy solutions. For example, social media was not ranked highly by young people as having a negative impact on their mental health (it was ranked 12th out of 20 factors), In contrast, the online world and proposed social media bans have had an overwhelming amount of political and media attention recently.



Introduction



The 2024 Prevention United Youth Advisory Group (YAG) comprises 10 young people with an age range of 16 to 21 years. All members live, study and work in Melbourne. The YAG was formed by Prevention United in 2023 to advise and inform our policy and advocacy work in mental health promotion and preventative mental health. The work of the YAG is funded by Future Generation Global (FGG).

In January 2024, members of the YAG told us that they were sick of hearing the same narratives – that young people lacked resilience, were “snowflakes” and that the mental health crisis affecting their generation is caused by their use of social media and exposure to the online world. The YAG wanted to reach out to other young Australians and explore, not only the real-world issues that were bothering them, but also what they felt worked and what was needed to promote positive mental health and wellbeing.

If we want to help young people, we need to hear their voices.

Across a variety of fields, including youth mental health, there is strong evidence to suggest that engagement with members of the group most impacted by any given issue is an optimal pathway to developing effective solutions. In addition, evidence suggests that participation in meaningful youth engagement activities can have a positive impact on young people’s mental health and wellbeing.¹

Accordingly, Prevention United’s work in this space thus far has been guided by the input of our YAG. Since July 2023 they have offered advice and direction on our policy and advocacy work around youth mental health. Over the course of this work, members of the group have recognised that, while their personal lived experience as young Australians provides valuable context and insight, they may not represent the broader views and perspectives of the wider Australian youth population. Therefore, the National Youth Survey has been designed in collaboration with our YAG to gain deeper insights into key issues affecting young people from a larger sample size across a broad range of demographics.

Official data shows a steep increase in the prevalence rates of depression and anxiety in young Australians. There is no single factor that causes poor mental health or is solely responsible for the youth mental health crisis. Rather, research points to a wide range of factors affecting young people (for full review, please see [Reimagining Youth Mental Health](#)).

Recent data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that in 2020–2022, almost half of females (46%) aged 16–24 years had experienced a mental health condition during the past year, compared to just over a third of males (32%).² This represents a 50% increase in prevalence since 2007) (see Figure 1).

Similarly, the most recent Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) report found that 42% of people aged 15–24 were psychologically distressed in 2021, up from 18% in 2011.³ The decrease in youth mental health over the previous decades is a global megatrend, with a recent policy brief by the Lancet Psychiatry Commission on Youth Mental Health noting that:

“Mental ill health represents the principal threat to the health, wellbeing, and productivity of young people who are in transition from childhood to mature adulthood.”⁴

Percentage of males and females aged 16–24 years with any mental health condition (anxiety, affective disorders, substance use)

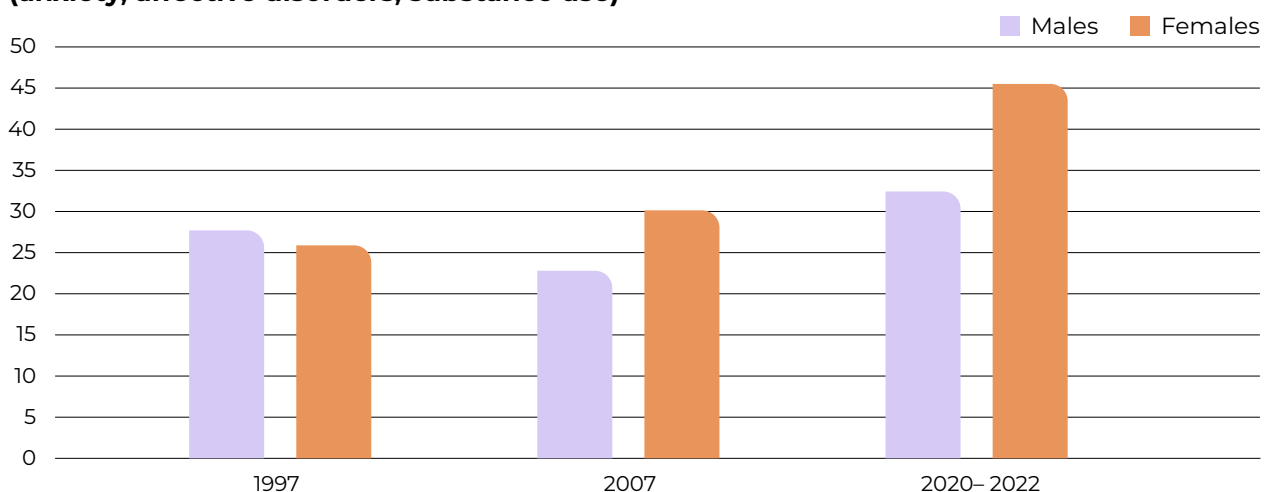


Figure 1: Data from the 1997, 2007, and 2020–2022 ABS national surveys of mental health and wellbeing showing the prevalence of depression, anxiety, and substance use conditions in young Australians aged 16–24 years.

At Prevention United, we are interested in tackling the issues that impact mental health and wellbeing. However, rather than focusing on the treatment of mental health conditions, our focus is on preventing conditions such as depression and anxiety before they occur. To do this we need to understand the range of risk and protective factors that young people are exposed to and engage with to maintain good mental health. Current approaches to solving the youth mental health crisis have an almost exclusive focus on mental healthcare services and treatment initiatives. However, on their own these are insufficient to address the decline in the mental health and wellbeing of young people. While it is important to keep strengthening Australia's youth mental healthcare system, there is much more that can be done at a population level to reduce the prevalence of mental health conditions. Current data tell us little about what can be done to keep young people mentally healthy, what they need to thrive and what we can do to best support them navigate this period of their life.

The youth mental health "crisis" has had considerable media attention in Australia, but few solutions have been proposed. To understand the solutions that can help young people before their wellbeing takes a turn for the worse, we need to understand both the stresses they experience, as well as things that help them to feel good.

It was for these reasons that the Prevention United YAG decided to develop a survey and reach out to young Australians to ask what they felt were biggest challenges they were facing in maintaining their wellbeing, and what they thought could be the best solutions for these problems.

This report reflects the voices of 589 young Australians. It is our hope that these voices will start a ripple, be heard by Government and contribute to solving some of the big issues that young Australians are facing.

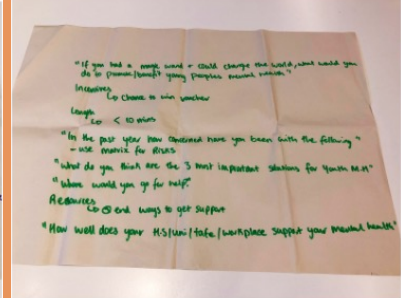
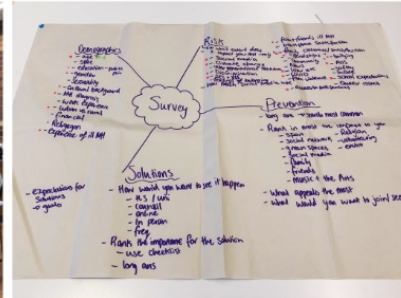
REFLECTIONS FROM THE PREVENTION UNITED YAG ON CREATING THE SURVEY

“It was the first time I've ever done something like this, so it was nice to be able to curate the questions. I'm really glad that we put in that extra section asking people to explain or give their own ideas... So, we can hear more people's ideas and perspectives and get a broader [picture]... and make a bigger ripple.”

“I really liked with the survey creation team when we first started brainstorming all different ideas, like “Oh, well, maybe this could be an option for something that's positive or negative”, and then getting inside of everyone else's brains to think of other options, and ... even [the process of] making the survey made me feel really seen and heard.”

“We started with everyone just emptying their minds of everything that they could think of. But then, slowly filtering it down to like, “How do we change this wording?”, or you think of things in a different angle, making sure that everything's clear... You don't really think about stuff like that for surveys because you're more on the reciprocating end as a teenager, not the creating end. It was really nice to be on the other side, and just have an idea, and have our voices be amplified in a way that is helpful and productive.”

“I think that is so important. And I'm sure there's not many surveys or things out there that have been designed by young people from the start. So, I think that is just important and great that it's been done.”



How we made this survey

JAN 2024

We held a 2-day summer intensive with all members of the YAG to develop a plan for the group's activities for the year. The group agreed that they wanted to hear the opinions of more young people than just the members of our group, and so we decided to embark on creating the National Youth Survey.

1

FEB-MAR 2024

The group worked in teams to develop the survey questions, and all the promotional material to advertise the survey. The survey development team looked at examples of other youth surveys, undertook training in best practice survey design, and developed the question list based on what was most important to them, and what they weren't seeing elsewhere.

2

APR-MAY 2024

Planning continued and the team working on promotion created social media tiles, newsletter copy, scripts for promotional videos, posters and flyers. Prevention United staff supported the project by preparing documentation to obtain ethics approval for the project via Bellberry Limited.

3

MAY-JUL 2024

The survey was launched on 21 May! YAG members and Prevention United promoted the survey far and wide. After noticing that the survey was not gaining much engagement with young men, the YAG members suggested running an ad campaign on Reddit, which helped improve the representation of young men's voices.

4

JUL-AUG 2024

The survey closed on 16 July, and the data was handed over for number crunching by data analyst Thea Orr. We anxiously awaited her report on the survey findings!

5

SEP-NOV 2024

After data analysis was complete, we worked together to prepare this final report. YAG members collaboratively wrote the foreword to this document, shared reflections on their experience of creating this survey (which you can see throughout this report), and reviewed final drafts to ensure it is reflective of their views.

6

Methods



The survey was conducted online. Young people aged 16–25 years living in Australia were eligible to take part. The survey was promoted via social media, paid Instagram and Reddit advertisements, physical advertisements (posters and flyers), email newsletters, direct emails to networks, website advertising, snowball sampling, virtual snowball sampling, word-of-mouth and a dedicated webpage on the Prevention United website.

The survey was open between 21 May and 16 July 2024. Participation was voluntary and informed consent was obtained before commencing survey questions. To thank them for taking part in the survey, participants were offered the chance to win one of five \$50 gift vouchers.

The survey did not collect identifiable information. Responses were anonymous and participants were informed that some responses may be quoted in a deidentified way. The survey comprised 24 questions, including a mix of question types (e.g., multiple choice and Likert scale questions, as well as open text entry questions).

All questions were optional beyond the initial screening questions used to determine eligibility. Participants were able to skip questions or close and complete the survey at any time. Given the nature of the questions, a list of appropriate national support services was provided on every page of the survey. Survey questions were broken up into four main sections: demographics, negative impacts, positive impacts and solutions. The survey took approximately 10–15 minutes to complete.

Data and statistical plan



The questions included forced choice and Likert scale questions to collect quantitative data and open text entry questions to collect qualitative data. The survey was not designed to test statistical effects, but rather to gain quantitative and qualitative insights into what young people felt were the biggest risk and protective factors for mental health and what solutions or interventions they felt would work best for them and in what setting(s).

Quantitative data analysis was performed on closed-ended questions and qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis methods with a data-driven approach, in which the thematic codes were not predetermined or assumed to exist within the data. Codes were created as each theme appeared within the data. This ensured that the identified themes matched with the messages given by respondents.

The survey aimed to answer the following questions

- Which factor/s do young Australians rate as having the most negative impact on their mental health and why?
- Which factor/s do young Australians rate as having the most positive impact on their mental health and why?
- What kinds of wellbeing/prevention programs are young Australians most interested in participating in?
- In which settings are young Australians most interested in accessing wellbeing and prevention programs or initiatives?
- What kind of policy solutions do young Australians believe would positively impact their mental wellbeing?
- How do young Australians feel about the Government's current approach to youth mental health?

Analysis Methods

Quantitative analysis

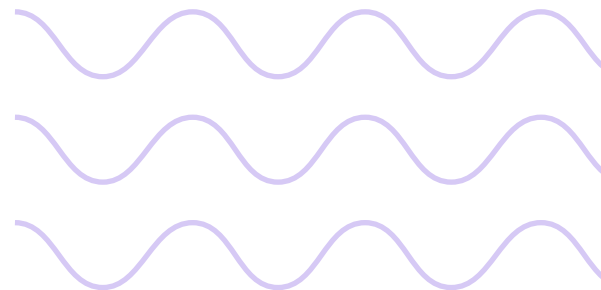
For forced-choice questions, participants rated items on a word-based scale (e.g., Mild Impact) and a numerical scale was assigned to each option. These were 0=No Impact, 1=Mild Impact, 2=Medium Impact, 3=Major Impact. From this, an overall 'Impact Score' was calculated that equated to the average/mean of all ratings on the numerical scale for each item within each forced-choice question. The population standard deviation (SD) from this average score was also calculated to demonstrate the spread of responses.

Qualitative analysis (content and thematic)

Qualitative analysis was performed on questions where participants were asked to provide additional examples of negative and positive influences on their mental health, activities and programs, Government policies and a message to Government. Responses were coded with broad level domains identifying the topics noted in the responses. These domains were described but not examined further as the intent of the questions was to identify additional, tangible influences on mental wellbeing rather than requiring an in-depth thematic analysis. For questions where participants were asked to think about the reasons why these negative or positive factors influenced their mental wellbeing, a more in-depth thematic analysis was performed to identify larger themes within the data. Thematic data will be presented in a separate paper.

Coding methods

Coding was performed using an inductive, data-driven approach. Codes were not pre-generated or defined prior to commencing the analysis but were instead created as each topic or domain appeared within the data. This allowed for codes to be modified or adapted as coding progressed to better suit the responses provided by the survey participants and limits the influence of prior expectations on the part of the researcher. The initial round of coding was then double-checked or refined as each domain was examined and an overall description of each domain is provided within this report.



Results



1. Demographics

The final sample size was n=589. The survey had an extremely low drop-off rate, with 97% or more participants answering each forced-choice question, and between 39% and 77% of participants answering each open-ended question. The age spread within the participants was well balanced with a mean age of 20.1 years. Level of education ranged from students currently in high school to individuals who had completed post graduate education. Participants were asked to broadly describe their current location to limit any possible identification. Participants living in metropolitan, regional, rural/remote and each state and territory are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2: Location of survey participants (metropolitan, regional, rural/remote).

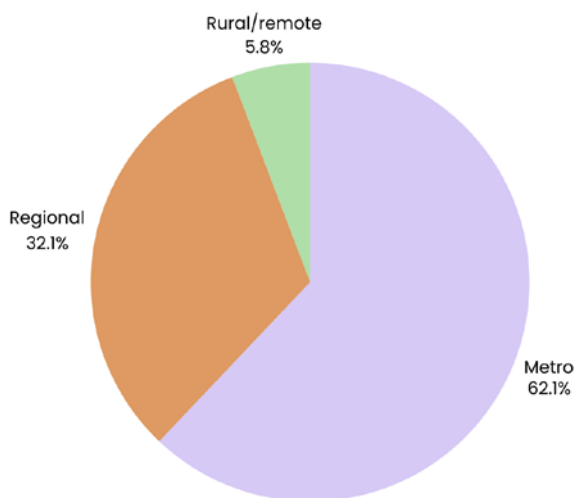
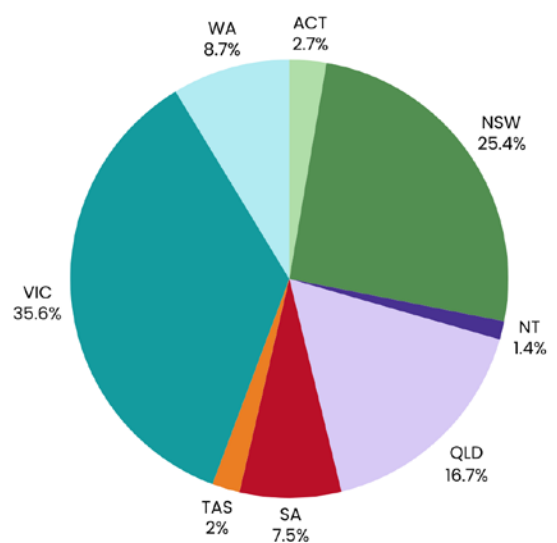
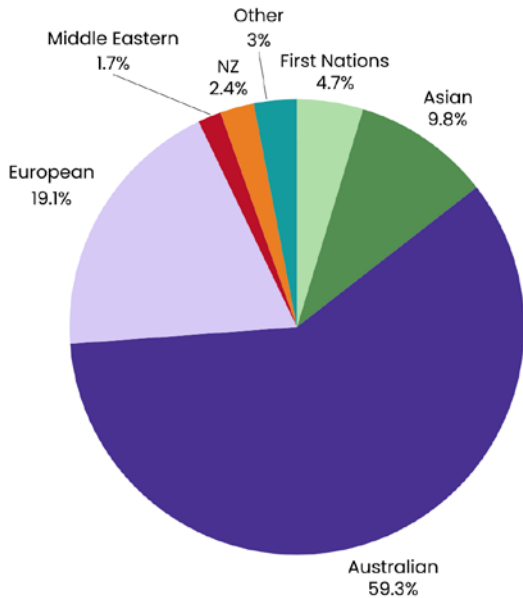


Figure 3: Location of survey participants (state and territory).



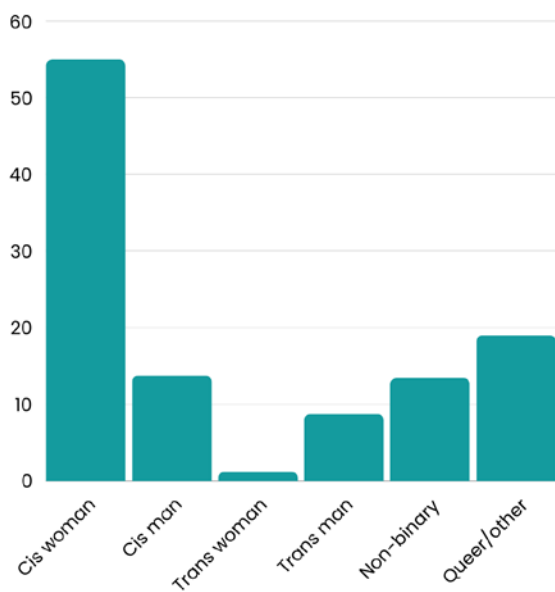
Participants were given the option of selecting one or more options when identifying their cultural background. The cultural backgrounds of participants are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Cultural backgrounds of survey participants.



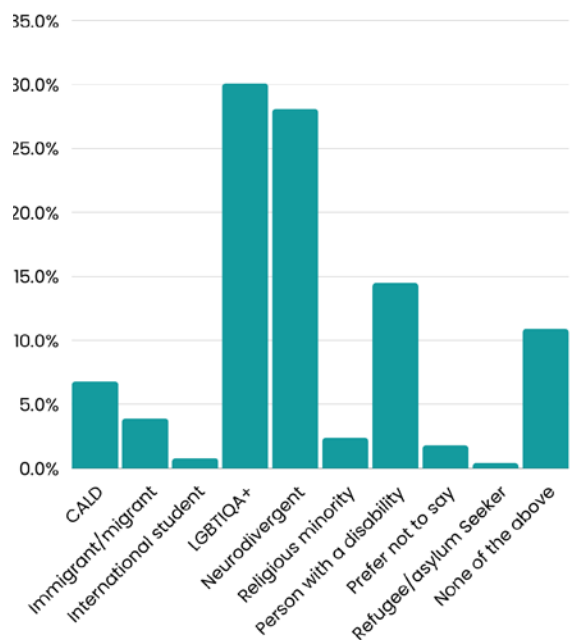
Participants were given the option of selecting one or more gender descriptions they felt best described them. Gender identity of participants is shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Gender identity of survey participants.



The majority of respondents (86%) disclosed that they have lived or living experience of a mental health condition. Participants were also asked to identify other personal characteristics related to their self-identity. These are shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6: Self-identified personal characteristics of survey participants.



2. Negative Influences on mental health and wellbeing

what we asked...



To what extent do the following impact your mental health negatively?

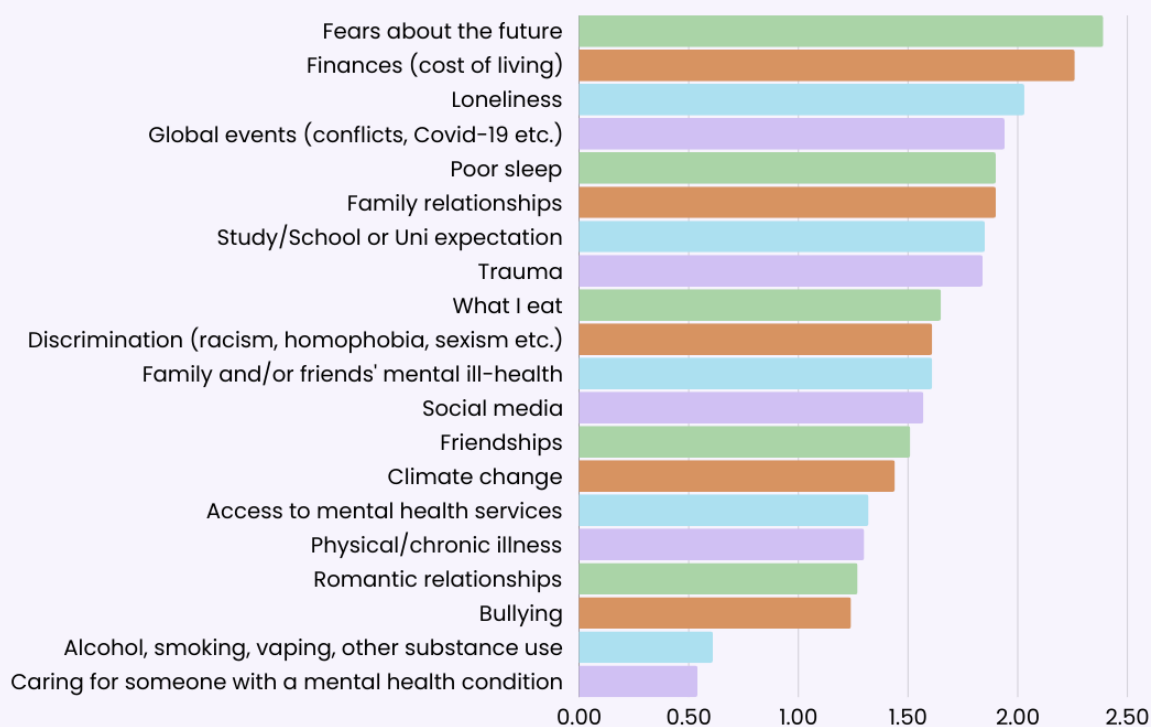
what we were told...

Young people told us that the five biggest factors that are having a negative impact on their mental health are:

- 1 Fears about the future (mean impact score 2.39, SD 0.79),
- 2 Financial concerns (mean impact score 2.25, SD 0.92).
- 3 Loneliness (mean impact score 2.02, SD 1.01).
- 4 Global events (e.g., wars, conflicts, COVID-19) (mean impact score 1.93, SD 0.92).
- 5 Family relationships (mean impact score 1.90, SD 1.06) and poor sleep (mean impact score 1.90, SD 0.99).

Negative impact factors, ranked from highest to lowest mean impact score are shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Factors identified as having a negative impact on mental health ranked in order from highest to lowest (mean impact score). *0=No Impact, 1=Mild Impact, 2=Moderate Impact, 3=Major Impact.



For the factors that you stated had a negative impact, why do you think that is?

"I think everyone who's entering adulthood is scared about the state of the world, this includes climate change, economics and wars. It's really hard to imagine a bright future for yourself when that's what's going on everywhere."

"It's hard to feel hopeful about much when the planet is dying, we're still in a pandemic, and nobody seems inclined to do much about any of it."

"I want to grow up in a world where I am safe, respected, equal and healthy and I know that, this is not possible in the current world and this certainly will not be possible in the future without major change now."

"Fears about the future and money are my biggest worry, living pay check to pay check, knowing that I'm one horrific month away from having to run back home to mum. Wondering if I'll be able to replace my car when it goes or if it goes unexpectedly because without it I can't work."

"Large impacts (eg global events, climate change, etc) demonstrate how our current political and economic system is clearly failing and likely tensions will worsen while our labour rights and health care access disappear during a housing and cost of living crisis directly affecting the conditions in which I live."

"As a young person, we have to grow up into this world and it is so incredibly soul crushing watching it get constantly destroyed by the older generation who seemingly don't care about the world they leave behind."

2.1. Other negative influences on mental health and wellbeing

digging a bit deeper, we also asked...



Are there any other factors that you think may play a negative role in your mental health?

what we were told...

Additional factors identified as having a negative impact on mental health are listed in order of the number of responses (high to low):

- Societal pressure to conform and stigma.
- Work and career pressures.
- Stress due to difficulties faced in meeting demands.
- Expectation on one-self and pressure to succeed.
- Overpowering and overwhelming demands.
- Broad environmental factors such as isolation or limited social interactions.
- Living in unsafe environments or being exposed to extreme events or harm.
- Availability and affordable of housing.
- Expectations in sporting environments.
- Grief.

3. Positive influences on mental health and wellbeing

what we asked...



To what extent do the following impact your mental health positively?

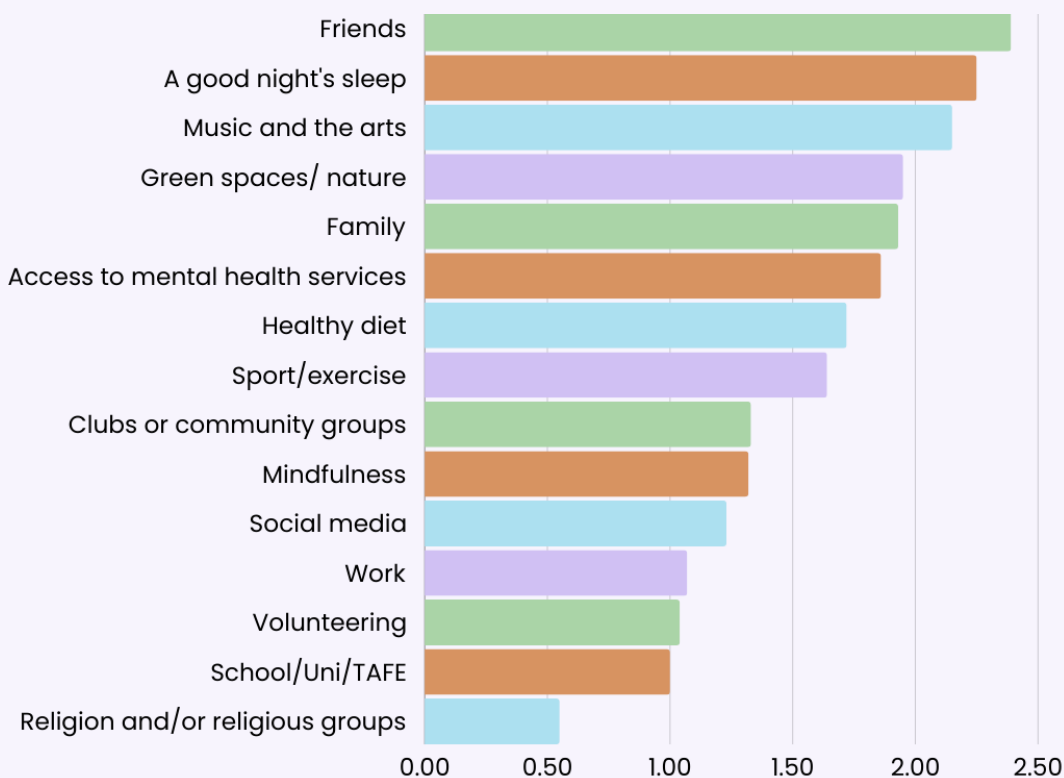
what we were told...

Young people told us that the five biggest factors that have a positive impact on their mental health are:

- 1 Friends (mean impact score 2.39, SD 0.81).
- 2 A good night's sleeps (mean impact score 2.24, SD 0.87).
- 3 Music and the arts (mean impact score 2.14, SD 0.91).
- 4 Green spaces/nature (mean impact score 1.95 SD 1.00).
- 5 Family (mean impact score 1.93, SD 0.99).

Positive impact factors, ranked from highest to lowest mean impact score are shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Factors identified as having a positive impact on mental health ranked in order from highest to lowest (mean impact score). *0=No Impact, 1=Mild Impact, 2=Moderate Impact, 3=Major Impact.



For the factors that you stated had a positive impact, why do you think that is?



3.1. Other positive influences on mental health and wellbeing

digging a bit deeper, we also asked...



Are there any other factors that you think may play a positive role in your mental health?

what we were told...

Additional factors identified by respondents as having a positive impact on mental health are listed in order of the number of responses (high to low):

- Close companionship (with a person or a pet).
- Stimulation and distraction from stress.
- Self-belief and the opportunity to take time for self-care.
- Being in positive environments, being accepted and witnessing kindness.
- Stability, financial independence, choices and future confidence.
- Medication.
- Solitude (as opposed to loneliness).
- Action on big issues, engaging in activism or seeing action by Government or corporations.

4. Types of activities/programs young people would like to participate in

what we asked...



How likely would you be to participate in the following activities/programs to promote your mental wellbeing?

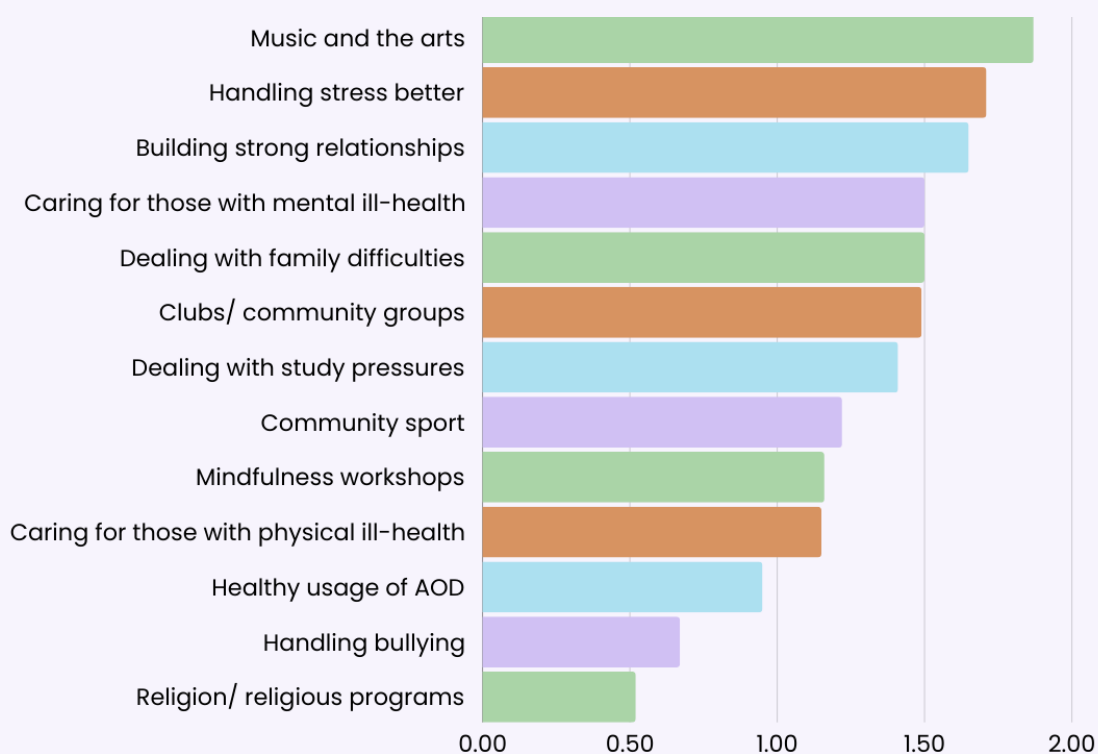
what we were told...

Young people told us that the five activities/programs/training that they would be most likely to take part in to improve their mental wellbeing are:

- 1 Music and the arts (mean likelihood score 1.87, SD 1.08).
- 2 Handling stress better (mean likelihood score 1.71 SD 1.07).
- 3 Building strong relationships (mean likelihood score 1.65, SD 1.04).
- 4 Caring for those with mental ill-health (mean likelihood score 1.50, SD 1.08).
- 5 Dealing with family difficulties (mean likelihood score 1.50, SD 1.13).

The types of activities/programs/training that young people would be most likely to take part in to improve their mental wellbeing, ranked from highest to lowest are shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9: The types of activities and programs that young people would be most likely to take part in to promote mental wellbeing. *0 = Not at all, 1 = Somewhat likely, 2 = Likely, 3 = Extremely likely



4.1 Settings that young people would like to see these offered in

what we asked...



Where would you be most likely to access these activities/programs?

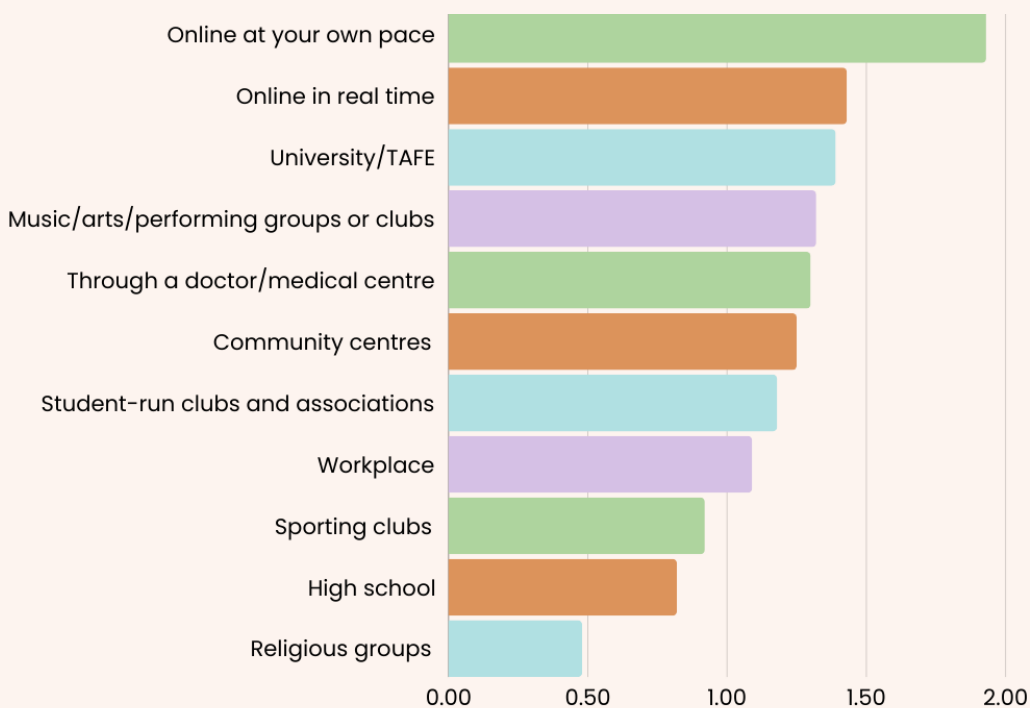
what we were told...

The top five locations or settings that young people would be most likely to access these activities, programs and training were:

- 1 Online at their own pace (mean likelihood score 1.93, SD 1.00).
- 2 Online in real time (mean likelihood score 1.43, SD 1.01).
- 3 Within university/TAFE settings (mean likelihood score 1.39, SD 1.06).
- 4 Music/arts/performing groups or clubs (mean likelihood score 1.32, SD 1.10).
- 5 Through a doctor/medical centre (mean likelihood score 1.30, SD 1.03).

Preferred locations for programs, activities or training are ranked from highest to lowest and shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10: The settings within which young people would be most likely to access activities/programs that promote mental wellbeing. *0 = Not at all, 1 = Somewhat likely, 2 = Likely, 3 = Extremely likely.



5. Potential impact of Government policies

what we asked...



If these policies were implemented, how likely would they be to positively impact your mental wellbeing?

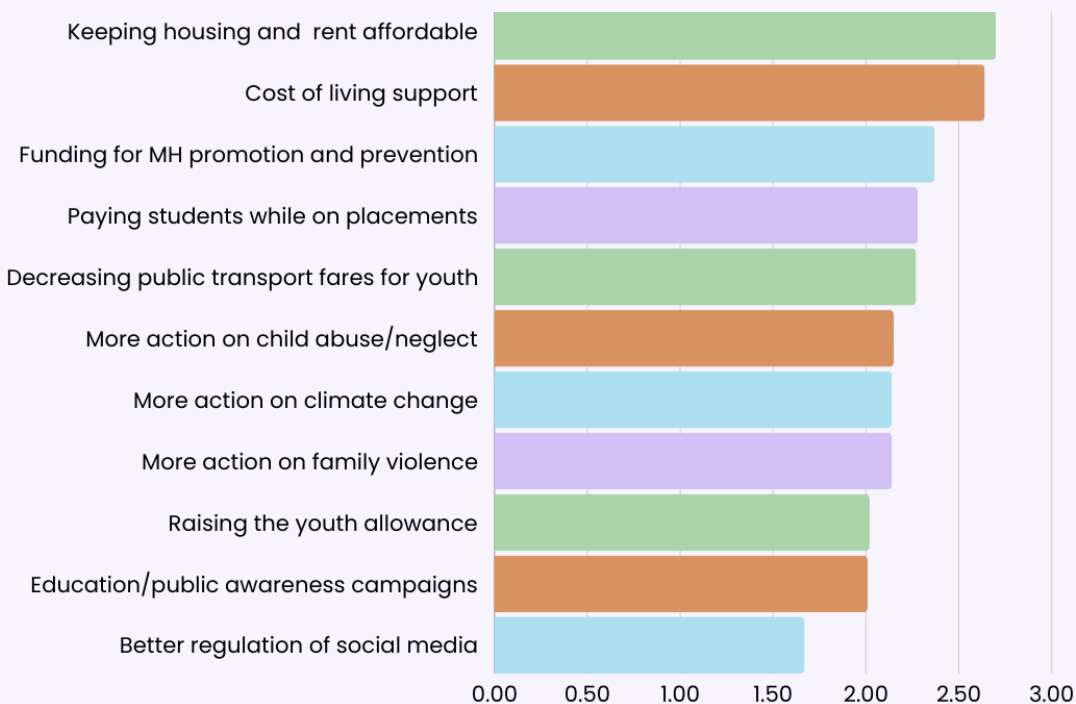
what we were told...

Young people identified five major policy changes that they believe would have a positive impact on their mental health and wellbeing. These were:

- 1 Keeping housing and rent affordable (mean likelihood score 2.69, SD 0.67).
- 2 Support with cost of living (mean likelihood score 2.63, SD 0.70).
- 3 Increasing the budget for mental health promotion and prevention (mean likelihood score 2.37, SD 0.88).
- 4 Paying students while on placement (mean likelihood score 2.28 SD 0.98).
- 5 Decreasing public transport fees for young people under the age of 25 (mean likelihood score 2.26 SD 0.99).

Policy changes that could be made by Government to improve mental health and wellbeing are ranked in order and shown in Figure 11.

Figure 11: Policy changes that Government could make to improve mental health and wellbeing.
 *0 = Not at all, 1 = Somewhat likely, 2 = Likely, 3 = Extremely likely.



6. Satisfaction with the current Government approach to youth mental health

what we asked...



How satisfied are you with the Government's approach to youth mental health?

what we were told...

Participants gave an average rating of 2.37 in response to their level of satisfaction with the Government's approach to youth mental health, where 1 = Very Unsatisfied and 5 = Very Satisfied.



7. What else can Government do to help?

what we asked...



Are there any other Government policies you think have a positive impact on your mental health?

what we were told...

Other Government policies that young people think may have a positive impact on mental health are listed below in order of the number of responses (high to low):

- Holistic/preventative measures designed to prevent or alleviate poor mental health (e.g., financial and housing assistance, lower cost of living, creating spaces for relaxation and socialisation).
- Free (or heavily subsidised) and accessible mental health services.
- Improvement of existing services (e.g., NDIS, Medicare, youth allowance, disability and homelessness support services).
- Institutional change – increasing awareness, acceptance and support within educational and government institutions for mental health conditions, neurodivergence and minorities.
- Improved safety including harsher punishment for abuse, improved child protection (and confidentiality), safer public spaces/transport, protection for young women, gender diverse, neurodivergent and minority individuals and improved preventative responses in cases of domestic and family violence.
- Alignment on national and global issues, including increased environmental conservation and anti-discrimination.
- Better education on mental health, trauma and disability within schools and wider community settings to increase awareness and learn how and where to seek help.
- Increased support and education specific to personal needs, disability, mental health conditions and neurodiversity.

Are there any other government policies that you think may play a positive impact on your mental health? Why?

"I think if the government actually listened to people who are expressing how frustrating living is and doing something about it, that would help. Things like accessibility to Centrelink, the wait times are ridiculous, accessibility to doctors, dentists, physios, education, transport etc."

"MORE THIRD SPACES!
You can't take away the biggest third space (social media) without switching it with something."

"Rent increase freezes or caps, more affordable housing purchasing schemes or opportunities for young people/people under a certain wage, capping price gouging at supermarkets like Coles and Woolies."

"More affordable lower wages living. Things are getting way too expensive and you have to work more to afford the same stuff as before, which eats away at my mental health."

"I want to see a return of the public sector providing all the necessary services of our lives if not all services so we can treat people with dignity and respect, from workers to clients. When comparing trying to create a safe living for ourselves to the past, it is clear that previous generations had it easier to access healthcare, housing and fulfilling jobs with better conditions."

"Free university education – I have years of debt ahead of me just to be able to contribute to society and work. Older generations got university for free – why can't we."

8. The changes young people want to see

what we asked...



What is your message for Government about what they can do to help young people improve their mental health?

what we were told...

Most respondents (70%) chose to answer this question, and nine key messages emerged for Government. The messages, ordered by frequency of response were:

- **MESSAGE 1:** Genuinely listen and address the factors contributing to poor mental health, e.g., fears about the future which are being driven by financial stress, cost of living, education pressures, discrimination, global events and climate change.
- **MESSAGE 2:** Provide young people with access to mental health services that are accessible and affordable.
- **MESSAGE 3:** Step up as leaders. Learn about the difficulties young people are facing and work proactively with them to solve these challenges.

What is your message for the government?

"The frameworks and the answers are there. Many solutions have already been proposed and/or discussed. All that remains is implementing them."

"Create policies that have youth in mind. We are the next generation and vote for you too."

"Be better. Stop saying that this generation is just lazy and angsty and fix what you have messed up."

"Resign. I genuinely do not think most politicians with a conscience can do anything that would help young people, except make way for more competent and capable leaders, with any amount of humanity."

"Actually listen to the statistics. Listen to us screaming for help. Why do you only care once we're hospitalised? And even then what's the goal? Just to get us out of hospital? We shouldn't have to reach crisis for you to listen. Shame on you."

"It's easier to change a young person's mental health than it is to change after the age of 25. Helping now will benefit the generation later."

- **MESSAGE 4:** Ensure that mental health professionals understand the issues that young people are facing and make sure they can access safe/confidential services (particularly in cases they have been exposed to violence or trauma).
- **MESSAGE 5:** Normalise conversations about mental health and decrease stigma around asking for help. Educate and raise awareness.
- **MESSAGE 6:** Listen to young people! Take them seriously and enable youth voices to be heard through surveys, talks and codesign.
- **MESSAGE 7:** Fund a range of comprehensive preventative mental health initiatives and programs.
- **MESSAGE 8:** Recognise that mental health services are not a 'one-size-fits-all' – enable choice and respect individual needs and experiences.
- **MESSAGE 9:** Recognise that young people are not at fault and that they are trying their hardest. Do not push the blame back onto them.

9. Discussion

The results from our survey of 589 young Australians are strongly aligned with the findings of several recent reports, reviews and surveys.

The recent publication by the Lancet Psychiatry Commission on Youth Mental Health outlined interconnected megatrends or forces, which are having an impact on young people's economic security and hopes for the future. These included high cost of living, insecure employment, declining social cohesion, global instability and climate change.⁴

Data from the 2023 annual Mission Australia Youth Survey (n= 19,501) found a significant increase in the number of young people reporting that economic and financial matters are one of the most important issues in Australia. Factors such as unstable employment, high cost of living and financial stress were recognised as having the potential to both directly and indirectly affect the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians.⁵

The 2024 Gen Z Wellbeing Index, a recent survey of 2,200 18–24-year-olds, found that the top three factors negatively impacting youth wellbeing were: figuring out their future, burn out and cost of living. The major global and societal issues concerning this cohort were cost of living, housing/rental affordability, violence and against women and mental health. The data found that financial stress significantly impacted young people's perceptions of their future. Those experiencing financial stress were less confident about achieving goals and more likely to face housing instability, poor mental health and more difficulties getting support.⁶

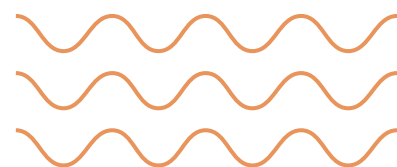
Our results strongly align with the research outlined above. The top negative impacts on mental health and wellbeing identified by participants in our survey were: fears about the future, financial stress and loneliness. Additional negative factors identified were societal pressure and stigma, feeling they don't fit in and education/work pressures. Young people report that they often face multiple challenges and feel overwhelmed trying to solve multiple problems.

Prevention United YAG member:

“Fears of the future was something we thought was relevant – it is so interesting to see that other young people really agreed.”

On a positive note, the survey data showed that young people can identify several important factors that positively impact mental health and wellbeing. These factors included friendships, a good night's sleep, music and the arts, being in greenspace or nature and positive time spent with family. While other surveys have tended to focus on factors associated with poor mental health, the current data provides us with practical solutions that can be implemented to support young people. For example, practical solutions for Government to help promote positive youth mental health could be the implementation of policies that provide young people with low-cost safe spaces to meet up with friends, listen to music – or access to outdoor or green spaces. Young people responding to this survey were very aware of the importance of a good night's sleep. Providing young people with tips and education to improve their sleep provides a practical solution to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people.

This report reflects the voices of the Prevention United YAG and 589 young Australians. Young people are asking for help and support. They want to be heard and understand that if we do not address youth mental health with constructive, long-term solutions that there will be significant implications in the future. The survey provided a wealth of qualitative data (beyond the scope of the current paper), that showed that young people are empathetic, thoughtful and creative. They know what factors are protective and associated with good mental health and what factors are not. At Prevention United, we are optimistic that youth advocacy and youth-led approaches can work, and that Government must engage with young people if they wish to improve the mental health trajectory of young Australians.





9.1. Reflections from the Prevention United Youth Advisory Group

Prevention United YAG Member:

“It is extremely validating to just see that this is stuff that we, a small group, thought about that impacted us. And then to see that like 600 other people agree. Yeah, it’s just very validating.”

Initial survey results were shown to members of our YAG in August 2024. We asked them to think back to the beginning of 2024 when we met to discuss the issues that they felt were affecting them the most. Members of our YAG felt validated that almost 600 people responded to the survey and that the results reflected their own concerns and worries. They felt less alone and isolated. They felt that they had a voice and were able to come together with other young people to understand and explore how to solve some big problems.

Members of our YAG were unsurprised to see that survey participants identified future fears, financial stress and loneliness as the biggest issues impacting their mental health. They agreed with the results showing that friends, a good night’s sleep and music and the arts were good for positive mental health and wellbeing. However, they noted that high cost of living often made it hard to see friends in person or access music and the arts (e.g., attending live venues with a high cost associated). Members were surprised at the high number of participants identifying as having lived experience of a mental health condition (86%) and the high number of neurodivergent and LGBTQIA+ young people reaching out to answer the survey and share their experiences and need for support. Empathy and the fact that young people care for others and want to see change were reflected in the thematic data.

Our YAG re-emphasised the need for Government, policy makers and mental health professionals to listen to young people and the negative impact that being ignored is having on young people. For example, social media was well down the list of factors that young people feel impact their mental health negatively (number 12 out of 20 factors). Young people are frustrated that social media has had wide media attention and political focus in the context of the youth mental health crisis, while cost of living and issues around future uncertainty have largely been ignored. It is important that investment is directed to the right places where it will have the most impact.

Prevention United YAG Member:

“All of the funding going into social media regulation ... imagine if you put that into cost of living so that people could have food on the table and pay rent – that would have a big impact.”

Members of our YAG recognised that young people are being affected by compounding issues. While they may be equipped to deal with one or two problems at a time, it is the pile up of issues that leads to overwhelm and mental distress. They were surprised that young people rated “accessing help online” so highly and found this interesting in the context of the current Government proposal to ban social media. Young people use the online world to connect, access information and find support for mental health conditions. (to learn more please see [Social media and youth mental health](#)).

Prevention United YAG Member:

“Helping out with cost of living and making sure that housing and rent are affordable. That is something important that Government could do.”

9.2 What is different about this report?

The Prevention United YAG wanted to create a survey with a point of difference. We know that the mental health of young Australians has been declining for several decades. There is a wealth of data, academic literature and reports to show that we have a youth mental health crisis. We also know that young people are being impacted by cost of living, financial stress, gender-based violence, job insecurity, loneliness, and many other factors. It was for these reasons that our YAG wanted to survey young Australians and include questions that explored the protective factors associated with good mental health. The data found that the top factors that positively impact mental health and wellbeing are friendships, a good night’s sleep, music and the arts, time spent in green space and nature and family.

Prevention United YAG Member:

“We know that mental health hasn’t been improving – no matter how much the government throws money at it, we still need more funds for treatment, and we obviously need more funds for prevention. A lot of surveys just focus on what parents or governments think is bad for young people’s mental health. They don’t also focus on the positives and the prevention side. Young people’s opinions are often left out, and that’s why it was good that we were like “What would you think is helpful on the scale of one to 3?”, “What would you want to see changed in policies?” [We took a] more prevention focus, which isn’t really touched on a lot.”

Prevention United YAG Member:

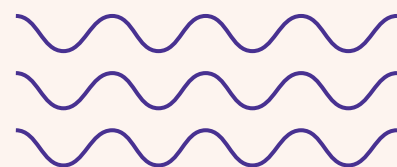
“It was nice to have a section all about promotion of mental health, where I think a lot of [other surveys are about] what’s bad. And then it’s normally things that you already know about. But it’s nice to think about what actually does help. As well as for like inner reflection being like, “Well, when I’m doing this, when I’m doing music, I feel really good.” And I don’t think we really take the time to pause with our generation to be like, “oh, this is good. Let’s do more of it.”

10. Conclusion/Next Steps

Young people are looking for help and support and the results of this survey translate to clear solutions that can be implemented by Government to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young Australians. Young people need:

- 1 Affordable housing and rent.
- 2 Help with cost of living.
- 3 Access to a range of mental health promotion and prevention initiatives.
- 4 Assistance while on placements.
- 5 Cheaper/affordable fees on public transport.

Young people are worried about their future. They want to be able to pay bills and feel secure about their future. They want friendships and to access spaces where they can enjoy the arts, nature and music, relax and socialise. They want to know that if they need support that it is accessible and affordable. They want to feel safe from gender-based violence and accepted and understood if they are neurodivergent, LGBTQIA+, or from a minority group. They want to be heard and to see Government, leaders and adults act on big issues such as climate change.





YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE A CLEAR MESSAGE FOR GOVERNMENT:

It is time to listen to young people, hear their voices and genuinely address the issues that are contributing to poor mental health. Mental health conditions are not inevitable and there many things that can be done to reduce risk factors and increase protective factors. Our young people welcome questions and further conversation.

It is our hope that the findings of this survey will start a ripple.

Prevention United YAG Member:

“ One of the final questions was about our message to the Government. One key answer was just straight up “listen”, and I feel like that’s kind of what this survey is about. Being able to hear the voices of youth and what young people find important. And have young people involved from the start, creating this survey and tailoring it towards young people, because we know what will work.”

Declarations

Investigators on this study were Dr Stephen Carbone (Chief Investigator), Ms. Matilda Houlihan (Co-Investigator), Dr Kylie Maidment (Co-Investigator), Dr Lachlan Kent (Co-Investigator) and Ms Thea Orr (Co-Investigator). For further information please reach out to youth@preventionunited.org.au or advocacy@preventionunited.org.au.

Human research ethics

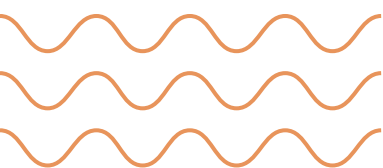
This study was approved by Bellberry Limited Human Research Ethics Committee.

Conflict of interest

All members of the research team (including persons not listed in this application) declare that they do not have any potential or actual conflicts of interest (financial or non-financial) related to this research.

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Appendix 1: Survey questionnaire



Screening and consent questions

1. How old are you? (Forced choice, mandatory)
2. What country do you live in? (Forced choice, mandatory)
3. Do you consent to participating in this study? You can download the participant information sheet <https://bit.ly/PUinfosheet> for more information about how your data will be used and how we will protect your privacy. If you have any questions about the survey, you can contact the research team at youth@preventionunited.org.au. (Forced choice, mandatory)
4. What is the first letter of the word "dog"? This question helps us make sure you are human! (Open-ended, mandatory)

Demographic information

1. What is your education level? Please tick all that apply. (Forced choice, optional)
2. How do you describe your gender? Being cis gendered is when your gender identity corresponds with your sex registered at birth. For example, someone who identifies as a woman and was born with female genitalia is a cis female. Select all that apply. (Forced choice, optional)
3. What is your cultural background? Select all that apply. (Forced choice, optional)
4. Do you identify as someone with a lived or living experience of a mental health condition? his may be described as intense feeling of worry, anxiety or fear that may interfere with your daily activities, or persistently depressed mood or lack of enjoyment in past fun activities which negatively impacts your day-to-day life. Generally, this is when prolonged intense worry, stress and/or negative mood negatively impact your daily activities. This does not have to be diagnosed by a medical professional. (Forced choice, optional)
5. I am... Select all that apply (Forced choice, optional, selection of a range of personal characteristics)
6. What state or territory do you live in? (Forced choice, optional)
7. How would you describe the area where you live? (Forced choice, optional)

Negative influences on your mental health

1. To what extent do the following impact on your mental health negatively? (Forced choice, optional)
2. Are there any other factors that you think may play a negative role in your mental health? (Open-ended, optional)
3. For the factors above that you stated had a medium to major negative impact, why do you think that is? (Open ended, optional)

Positive influences on your mental health

1. To what extent do the following impact on your mental health positively? (Forced choice, optional)
2. Are there any other factors that you think may play a positive role in your mental health? (Open-ended, optional)
3. For the factors above that you stated had a medium to major positive impact, why do you think that is? (Open ended, optional)

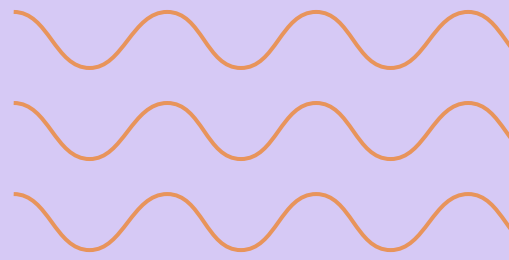
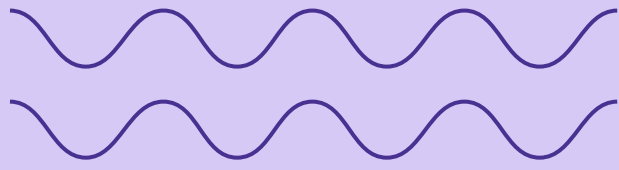
Solutions: wellbeing programs and activities

1. How likely would you be to participate in the following activities/programs to promote your mental wellbeing? (Forced choice, optional)
2. Are there any other activities or programs that you think may play a positive impact on your mental health that you would like to see? (Open-ended, optional)
3. Where would you be most likely to access these activities/programs? (Forced choice, optional)

Solutions: Government policies

1. If these government policies were implemented, how likely would they be to positively impact your mental wellbeing? (Forced choice, optional)
2. Are there any other government policies that you think may play a positive impact on your mental health? (Open-ended, optional)
3. How satisfied are you with the government's approach to youth mental health? (Forced choice, optional)

What is your message for the government about what they could do to reduce the number of young people who experience a mental health condition? (Open-ended, optional)

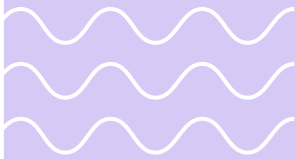
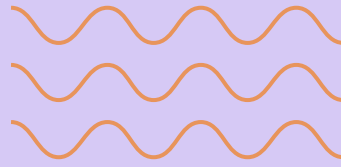


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