



Economic Disadvantage

Mission Australia's
Youth Survey 2020
Sub-Report

MISSION
AUSTRALIA | Youth Survey
2020



Acknowledgments

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of lands throughout Australia and we pay our respects to the Elders past, present and future for they hold the memories, culture and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We recognise and respect their cultural heritage, beliefs and continual relationship with the land and we recognise the importance of the young people who are the future leaders.

A special thanks to the organisations that provided valuable input, especially Anti-Poverty Week, Australian Council of Social Service, Australian Youth Affairs Coalition, Brotherhood of St Laurence, Foundation for Young Australians, Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network, The Smith Family and Youth Action.

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We would like to acknowledge the Mission Australia staff who contributed to this report by providing helpful insights, clarity and examples of current and past programs that support young people. Their insight serves to remind that behind the data, figures and words are young people, with their own families, experiences, culture and backgrounds. We would like to thank Aileen Lacey, Aimee Smith, Anita Hartley, Jurek Stopczynski, Kelly Vale, Laura Oliver, Lily Jin, Ludmila Klianov, Mario Peters, Megan Boshell, Melissa Brennan, Melissa Previtara, Phil Flint, Robyn Johnson, Troy Crellin and Wendy Marston for their valuable time and for their ongoing support of young people in their programs.

CEO Message

Young people aged between 15 and 19 are at an important transition phase in their life as they move into adulthood. While tackling a range of life experiences, we must recognise there are many young people in Australia experiencing economic disadvantage which adds an extra layer of unique challenges at this crucial time of change. These are young people who have already been put on the back foot, simply because they and their families are worse off than their peers.

As an organisation that serves people in need, Mission Australia has published this report to gain a better understanding of what our Youth Survey 2020 data collected during the pandemic can tell us about the experiences and challenges for young people with the least financial resources.

By investigating how their experiences differ to those young people from more advantaged backgrounds in this report, we have recommended solutions that will improve these young people's and their family's lives and help end youth deprivation, poverty and disadvantage in Australia.

Perhaps unsurprisingly for Mission Australia staff who work alongside young people and their families, the findings show that a significant number of young people in Australia are living in deprivation and are going without many of life's essentials.

Positively, our research showed us that despite this, young people experiencing disadvantage have strong aspirations and are optimistic that they will be able to achieve their post-school goals.

However, we found that young people without a parent or guardian in paid employment and their families were far more likely to have been unable to pay for essentials like bills, car or petrol expenses, the rent or mortgage and have gone without one or more meals.

I was disturbed that our report revealed these young people are more likely to have experienced family

conflict or violence. They are also experiencing greater psychological distress, more than double the proportion feel sad about their lives, and they're facing more unfair treatment than their peers, particularly due to their financial background.

These results underscore the very real and potentially damaging impact that unemployment and economic disadvantage can have on young people, particularly in the wake of the pandemic. A young person's experience of 'going without' can erode their wellbeing and life for years to come.

We are very concerned that COVID-19 will cause ongoing challenges across many aspects of these young people's lives. Policies and supports must be put in place so that young people facing deprivation are adequately supported to achieve their goals and families are assisted during challenging times where parents or guardians are not in paid work.

First and foremost, there is a clear and pressing need for a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach to solving youth issues in Australia, with the roadmap and goals set through a government-led response.

With young people more likely to be adversely affected by unemployment stemming from the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, now is the time for the Federal Government to step up and develop a national youth employment strategy to better coordinate efforts to help young people transition to work at this challenging time.

Increasing household income is imperative to ensuring that young people and their families can afford the essentials of life. For work-ready parents and those who are supporting families, access to high quality, secure employment is vital. We need to make sure that people have access to decent, stable work options, that minimum wages are set at an adequate level and that people are offered appropriate assistance to obtain and maintain employment. We also must ensure working-age income support payments are set at a level that enables recipients and their families to pay for the essentials of life during periods of unemployment.

CEO Message (CONT)

There also remains a clear gap in availability of evidence-based education support programs and alternative education pathways available to the young people experiencing disadvantage. With access to these programs, young people can achieve strong educational and work outcomes.

Sufficient early intervention programs are sorely needed to support young people and their families through periods of tension and conflict, such as the Reconnect program which promotes positive relationships within families and should be expanded.

The safety of children and young people experiencing domestic violence is paramount, and these findings further point to the urgent need for more therapeutic interventions for young victim-survivors that prevent or address negative outcomes arising due to domestic and family violence.

While there was government investment in mental health initiatives in 2020 in response to COVID-19, we know that more funding and strategies are essential to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people experiencing economic disadvantage in Australia as we move toward recovery. The Government must make sure that young people can receive free mental health and pastoral care through their school or other community resource, and ensure other resources are available for those not at school or who need more intensive support. Additionally,

to combat unfair treatment faced by young people due to their financial background, governments must signal that bullying is not okay by making sure that all schools have developed and implemented an evidence-based strategy to address bullying, harassment and discrimination.

Corporate sector and philanthropic organisations also have an important role to play in helping these young people to thrive. Promoting employer contacts for young people at school and developing recruitment pathways will go a long way in helping young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to secure and remain happy and healthy at work.

In the meantime, Mission Australia and other organisations will continue to deliver services to young people, especially those from families experiencing economic disadvantage and communities. This vital and effective work would have more lasting impact and lead to greater change for young people in Australia if it were delivered within a well-understood, consistent framework as part of a whole-of-society approach.

Thank you for reading our report. Please take note of the inspiring stories of resilience and drive shown by these young people and think about how you might engage with these recommendations and solutions to better support young people to thrive.



A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read 'James Toomey'.

James Toomey
CEO, Mission Australia

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Executive summary

As an organisation that works alongside people in need, Mission Australia is particularly interested in interrogating Youth Survey data to understand the experiences and challenges for those with the least financial resources. This report considers the similarities and differences between two groups of young people who took part in the Mission Australia Youth Survey 2020: those who reported they had no parent/s or guardian/s currently in paid employment, and those who reported at least one parent or guardian in paid employment, whether full- or part-time.

For the purpose of this report, those in households without a parent or guardian in paid employment are classified as 'economically disadvantaged'. It should be noted that economic advantage/disadvantage cannot easily be segregated using this indicator alone as the circumstances, characteristics and experiences of those facing economic disadvantage are more complex than the Youth Survey can determine. However, a measure based on parental employment is the best indicator available to us from the Youth Survey. While young people without a parent or guardian in paid employment are likely to be among the most disadvantaged in Australia, the findings and implications of this research are expected to be more broadly applicable to other young people living in circumstances of economic disadvantage.



Key findings

Demographics

- A total of 1,125 (4.6%) young people who took part in the *Youth Survey 2020* reported that neither guardian was currently in paid work.
- Over half (53.0%) of economically disadvantaged respondents were female, around four in 10 (41.2%) were male, 3.9% were gender diverse and 1.9% preferred not to say.
- A total of 13.2% of economically disadvantaged respondents identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
- Close to one in five (18.2%) economically disadvantaged young people indicated they were born overseas.

Aspirations for study and work

Economically disadvantaged respondents were mostly *studying full-time* (77.7%) and half reported plans to *go to university* (51.0%). However, compared with young people with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work:

- Smaller proportions were *studying full-time* (77.7% compared with 87.7%);
- Double the proportion were *not studying* (12.2% compared with 6.2%);
- Smaller proportions were *satisfied or very satisfied* with their studies (56.1% compared with 68.2%);
- Double the proportion were *not planning on completing year 12* (5.8% compared with 2.4%);
- A smaller proportion planned to *go to university* after school (51.0% compared with 65.6%);
- A slightly higher proportion planned to *go to TAFE or college* after finishing school (13.3% compared with 9.9%); and
- Smaller proportions were *very or extremely confident* in their ability to achieve their post-school plans (42.3% compared with 49.2%).

Issues of personal concern

Compared with respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work, economically disadvantaged young people

reported much higher levels of personal concern about:

- *Financial security* (26.8% compared with 13.5%);
- *Family conflict* (25.3% compared with 15.1%);
- *Domestic/family violence* (15.3% compared with 7.0%);
- *Personal safety* (21.7% compared with 14.9%);
- *Bullying/emotional abuse* (18.6% compared with 11.9%); and
- *Suicide* (18.4% compared with 12.2%).

Financial concerns

Greater proportions of economically disadvantaged young people than respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work experienced issues because of money concerns. In particular, the biggest gaps occurred for:

- *Could not pay bills* (31.1% compared with 10.1%);
- *Sought assistance from welfare organisations* (28.0% compared with 7.1%); and
- *Could not pay for petrol or car expenses* (25.6% compared with 6.5%).

Greater proportions of economically disadvantaged young people also went without a number of experiences compared with respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work. The biggest gaps occurred for, not going:

- *On a holiday with family* (48.9% compared with 28.2%);
- *For a meal out with family once a month* (34.6% compared with 16.2%); and
- *Out with friends* (33.1% compared with 14.8%).

Employment

- A much smaller proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported they were working part-time (28.1% compared with 41.7%).
- A greater proportion of economically disadvantaged respondents reported that they were looking for work (42.8% compared with 33.8%).

Key findings (CONT)

Experience of unfair treatment

- Over one third (36.0%) of economically disadvantaged young people reported they had been treated unfairly in the past year. This was much higher compared with respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work (26.3%).

A notably higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported they have been treated unfairly due to their:

- *Financial background* (21.5% compared with 7.7%);
- *Mental health* (37.8% compared with 24.8%); and
- *Disability* (16.3% compared with 6.4%).

Unfair treatment witnessed

- Over half (53.5%) of economically disadvantaged young people reported they had witnessed someone being treated unfairly in the past year (compared with 55.3%).

Of those who had witnessed unfair treatment in the past year, the most reported reasons among both cohorts were:

- *Race/cultural background* (59.6% compared with 62.4%);
- *Sexuality* (49.5% compared with 49.6%); and
- *Gender* (44.0% compared with 40.5%).

What issues do young people think are the most important in Australia today?

- The top three national issues identified by economically disadvantaged young people were *COVID-19*, *mental health* and *equity and discrimination*.
- These were the same top three issues for respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work; however, economically disadvantaged young people reported lower levels of concern overall.

Participation in activities

- Compared with respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work, much lower proportions of economically disadvantaged young people took part in *sports (as a participant)* and *sports (as spectator)* (52.9% and 45.3% compared with 72.2% and 63.5%).

Lower proportions of economically disadvantaged young people were also involved in *volunteer work* and *student leadership activities* (34.7% and 27.9% compared with 44.0% and 34.7%).

Sources of support

- *Friend/s*, *parent/s or guardian/s* and *relative/family friend* were the three most cited sources of help for all respondents. However, economically disadvantaged young people were less likely to report they would seek support from these sources (74.5%, 61.6% and 48.6% compared with 84.2%, 72.7% and 55.6%).
- A higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people indicated they seek support from a *community agency* (15.4% compared with 10.6%).

Family's ability to get along

- A much lower proportion of economically disadvantaged young people rated their family's ability to get along positively (38.2% *excellent/very good*, compared with 55.9%).

Wellbeing, happiness and the future

- A higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people felt stressed either *all of the time* or *most of the time* (49.1% compared with 42.3%).
- More than double the proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported feeling *very sad/sad* with life as a whole (20.8% compared with 9.9%).
- Economically disadvantaged young people experienced psychological distress at a much higher rate than young people with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work (38.1% compared with 25.6%).

Introduction

Economic stability and financial wellbeing are critical to ensuring young people have the available resources and opportunities to live well and experience the best possible transition into adulthood. Many people in Australia experience economic disadvantage at some point in their lives. For most it is temporary, however, for some it is longer term and can lead to entrenched economic disadvantage.

Economic disadvantage can be defined as having an income lower than one on which it is deemed reasonable to live, but it can also refer more broadly to material deprivation and social exclusion.¹ Each of these definitions provide a deeper understanding of economic disadvantage and its impacts. It is generally recognised that living in a family without parents in paid employment is one of the biggest risk factors for economic disadvantage.² Whether experiencing unemployment or being out of the labour force, the effect of joblessness can be profound on both the person experiencing it and the young people living in these families.

Over the past 10 years unemployment in Australia has fluctuated, peaking in late 2014 at 6.4% before beginning to decline.³ Prior to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, unemployment was at one of the lowest points since 2010.⁴ However, over the same period the duration of unemployment has continued to rise, reaching an average duration of close to one year.⁵ In 2019, 64% of people receiving unemployment payments had received them for more than a year, notably higher than the 1990s levels of 40%.⁶ While the average duration of unemployment dropped during 2020, this was driven by the large number of people who rapidly fell into unemployment as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions. In November 2020 Australia saw a record high number of jobs available, yet for every job vacancy there were four unemployed people vying for the position, leaving a majority of those jobseekers without paid work - a burden more heavily felt by people experiencing long-term unemployment.^{7,8} When also considering underemployed workers, the number of people competing for jobs increased to around 12 people per vacancy.⁹

Underemployment is defined as someone who desires, and is able to work additional hours.¹⁰ Since 2010 underemployment has risen from 7.8% to 9.0% in January 2020.¹¹ While the COVID-19 pandemic saw underemployment surge to a record 13.6% in April 2020, this was almost exclusively driven by the reduction of hours in full-time employees.¹² By December 2020, the underemployment rate had returned to near pre-COVID levels, a reflection of full-time employees returning to their original hours. However, in December 2020 there were still more than 1.25 million people underemployed, 1 million of whom were in part-time

¹ McLachlan et al. 2013

² Davidson et al. 2020b, Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020

³ ABS 2021a

⁴ ABS 2021a

⁵ Cassidy et al. 2020

⁶ Davidson and Defteros 2020

⁷ Derwin 2021

⁸ Cassidy et al. 2020

⁹ Kelly 2020

¹⁰ Vandenbroek 2018

¹¹ ABS 2021a

¹² ABS 2021b

employment.¹³ While unemployment is a useful indicator, underemployment captures the trend of an increasingly casualised workforce, which for some can undermine their financial security.

This report contributes to the economic disadvantage discourse by featuring the experiences of young people living in families without parents in paid employment. The findings highlight the differences and nuanced experiences this cohort of young people face and provide new insights to inform policy, advocacy and interventions.

What is economic disadvantage?

While there is not a universal definition, economic disadvantage speaks broadly to the experience of people who are living with inadequate resources and insufficient opportunities.¹⁴ This definition commonly measures income in relation to a minimum threshold needed to attain an acceptable standard of living - 'the poverty line'. The Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS) found that using the 50% of median income threshold, and accounting for housing costs, the threshold for poverty in 2017-18 was a disposable income of \$960 per week for two adults and two children.¹⁵ More than 3.2 million people are estimated to be living below the poverty line, including 774,000 children under the age of 15.¹⁶ Between 2003 and 2017 the poverty rate rose from 11.5% to 13.1%.¹⁷ This can partly be accounted for by the increasing housing costs for people with low incomes and the freeze on increasing the JobSeeker Allowance.¹⁸ The JobSeeker Allowance and other income support payments were designed to keep people and families out of poverty, however at their current levels further income is generally required for people to move out of poverty. Australia's income support payments are among the lowest in OECD countries.¹⁹ ACOSS has found that the current inadequacy of the welfare system leaves a majority (83%) of people with insufficient income to meet their living costs, with around half living in housing stress and more than half reporting unsustainable levels of debt.²⁰

But understanding economic disadvantage by solely looking at the level of income is limiting. First and foremost, income poverty only captures one element of economic disadvantage. Most analyses of income poverty are a 'point in time' measure that fail to capture the nuances of individuals' situations, such as access to other resources, varying needs and other experiences of disadvantage.²¹ Secondly, low income does not inherently imply economic disadvantage, although it is generally considered that people experiencing entrenched and persistent economic disadvantage are a subset of the low income population.²² Finally, exploring economic disadvantage through the lens of income poverty does not capture the views, opinions

¹³ ABS 2021b

¹⁴ McLachlan et al. 2013

¹⁵ Davidson et al. 2020a

¹⁶ Davidson et al. 2020a

¹⁷ Davidson et al. 2020a

¹⁸ Davidson et al. 2020a

¹⁹ Henriques-Gomes 2020

²⁰ Phillips 2015

²¹ McLachlan et al. 2013

²² Derby 2015

and realities of children and young people experiencing economic disadvantage: it treats children as passive, without agency.²³

Therefore, while income poverty is helpful in understanding the broad scale of economic disadvantage, additional approaches are needed to develop a richer conceptualisation that captures the multidimensional and dynamic elements of economic disadvantage.²⁴ Different understandings such as the material deprivation and social exclusion approaches recognise that economic disadvantage is broader than solely income poverty.

Material deprivation is a measure of what is considered the ‘minimal acceptable standard’ of living in one’s own society. The deprivations include essential items or services which are inaccessible to people on the basis of affordability.

The social exclusion approach is a multidimensional approach to understanding economic disadvantage. It encapsulates a lack of resources, rights, and services and the inability to participate in relationships and activities that would generally be available to most people.²⁵ Importantly the social exclusion approach expands the discourse about economic disadvantage beyond discussions about lack of resources towards a broader conversation which includes process, institutional and structural elements of disadvantage.²⁶ It highlights the impact of not just *missing out* on opportunities, but also on being *left out* of important activities and decisions in the society in which one lives. It is suggested that the social exclusion framework best captures the experiences of economic disadvantage for young people.²⁷ Young people are often concerned with the impact of being unable to participate in particular activities, or being excluded in schools, groups or other settings, or not being heard. These feelings and experiences impact their self-worth, confidence and aspirations. Research has found that young people experiencing persistent disadvantage develop what is termed ‘adaptive preferences’ - a narrowing of the range of wants and desires which others would consider customary on the basis of their financial situation, commonly as a protective mechanism.²⁸

In recent Australian research, the material deprivation and social exclusion approaches have been brought together to create a Child Deprivation Index.²⁹

While income poverty, material deprivation and social exclusion all represent distinct approaches, there is overlap and taken together they broadly cover what we are terming ‘economic disadvantage’, which includes reduced access to resources, lack of participation, and being left out of opportunities.

Risk factors of entrenched economic disadvantage

To understand the extent of entrenched economic disadvantage, indicators other than income need to be considered. The employment status of individuals within a household is closely tied with a family’s economic situation.³⁰ Engagement in stable work provides an important source of income for families and increases a household’s level of financial security, thereby decreasing the likelihood of experiencing entrenched economic

²³ Saunders et al. 2018

²⁴ Azpitarte & Bodsworth 2015

²⁵ Levitas et al. 2007

²⁶ Saunders et al. 2018

²⁷ Skattebol et al. 2012

²⁸ Skattebol et al. 2012

²⁹ Saunders et al. 2018

³⁰ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020

disadvantage. However, the type of employment is an important factor. People in part-time or casual employment are likely to experience economic disadvantage for much longer than people who obtain full-time employment.³¹ Australia has one of the highest levels of part-time and casual employment in the OECD.³² Unlike many other OECD countries, Australia does not have the same protections and benefits for part-time workers as for full-time workers. With part-time work typically concentrated in lower paying industries such as retail, health-care and social assistance, hospitality and accommodation, there is a very real concern that the high rate of part-time employment leaves many people without job security, financial stability and future opportunities, all of which increase the risk of experiencing economic disadvantage.³³

Children living in jobless families are at particular risk of entrenched economic disadvantage.³⁴ Jobless families are defined as a family where each member over 15 years old is either unemployed, retired or otherwise not in the labour force. In June 2020, 10.5% of families with dependents were jobless families, an increase from 9.1% in 2019.³⁵ A notable number of jobless families with dependents were one-parent families (213,000 compared with 133,000 jobless couple families).³⁶ In 2017-18, almost half (47%) of one-parent families were reliant on government support. One-parent families make-up a disproportionate number of jobless families and families working short part-time hours, demonstrating how parenting responsibilities can limit a person's ability to gain adequate employment, especially when there is no co-parent to share the duties.^{37,38} Without adequate income support payments, people who are unemployed or not in the job market face the risk of entrenched disadvantage through reduced access to education, employment and community participation opportunities. Further, there is now significant evidence demonstrating not only the impact of joblessness on the individual, but also the subsequent impacts on children and young people.³⁹

Impact of COVID-19

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit Australia in early 2020, one of the most immediate effects was lockdowns, followed by substantial job losses. However, these effects were not felt uniformly. Women, young people (15-24 years old) and low-wage workers were more likely to be working in industries affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns.⁴⁰ Further, individuals and families experiencing disadvantage prior to the pandemic were more likely to face risk of poorer outcomes related to COVID-19.⁴¹

The support measures introduced by the Federal Government went a long way in assisting those experiencing unemployment. By approximately doubling the rate of income support payments through adding the Coronavirus Supplement and the introduction of the JobKeeper payment, an estimated 2.2 million people in Australia who would otherwise have fallen into poverty as a result of the pandemic were kept above the

³¹ Cunningham et al. 2014

³² OECD 2021

³³ Preston and Yu 2015

³⁴ Productivity Commission 2018

³⁵ ABS 2020

³⁶ ABS 2020

³⁷ Baxter et al. 2012

³⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020

³⁹ See Baxter et al. 2012, Gray and Baxter 2011, Kalil 2009

⁴⁰ Wilkins 2020

⁴¹ O'Sullivan et al. 2020

poverty line.⁴² However, the temporary nature of this investment means that many will fall back into poverty now that the supplementary payments have ceased. Further, although the supplementary payments made through JobKeeper helped people remain connected to their employer, many household incomes were reduced and people were facing potential future unemployment.⁴³ The Federal Government's focus on recovery has emphasised the importance of getting people back into work, however the opportunity and likelihood of obtaining work has continued to remain greatly diminished.⁴⁴ Therefore, while the support measures helped many families absorb the immediate shock of the pandemic, the negative impact is likely to be felt for far longer than the supplementary support payments lasted.

Impact of economic disadvantage on children and young people

While economic disadvantage and joblessness can have significant effects on parents, the impact on children and young people can also be profound and long-lasting, leading in some cases to intergenerational economic disadvantage.⁴⁵ Around 1.4 million school-aged people were part of families experiencing employment stress in 2020 - more than double the number in 2016,⁴⁶ the effect of which is the limiting of opportunities and experiences for young people.

Schools are often seen as pivotal in providing children and young people with support they may otherwise be lacking. During the pandemic, a large number of children and young people transitioned to remote, home learning. Students from all years relied on digital technology to undertake their learning and maintain contact with teachers and peers. Due to the speed at which schools and families needed to adapt, unfortunately the learning opportunities were not available to all, highlighting the presence of a digital divide.⁴⁷ While the evidence about the impact of remote, home learning on educational outcomes is still emerging, it is clear that, even pre-COVID, the Australian education system wasn't adequately supporting the most vulnerable students. Analysis of the differences between schools based on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, shows that the Australian education system is notably socially segregated, characterised by different learning opportunities, unequal access to resources, experiences and quality learning built on high expectations.⁴⁸ Economic disadvantage has been identified as the single biggest factor influencing educational success.⁴⁹ Without appropriate support, young people experiencing economic disadvantage are at higher risk of not completing Year 12 and not going on to further education,⁵⁰ an important factor considering there is evidence to suggest university completion can reduce the negative impact of parental joblessness in young people obtaining employment.⁵¹

⁴² Phillips et al. 2020

⁴³ Noble et al. 2020

⁴⁴ Noble et al. 2020

⁴⁵ Vera-Toscano & Wilkins 2020

⁴⁶ Noble et al. 2020

⁴⁷ Baxter et al. 2020

⁴⁸ Kenway 2013; Naylor & James 2016

⁴⁹ Cobbold 2017

⁵⁰ Bubonya & Cobb-Clark 2021

⁵¹ Curry et al. 2019

Young people who grow up in families without a parent in paid employment experience delays in their transition from education to employment and are more likely to experience joblessness as an adult.⁵² Over 40% of young people will experience joblessness when aged between 19 – 32 years if they grew up in a jobless household.⁵³ Furthermore, even when young people find employment, experiences of economic disadvantage are associated with significantly lower wages in their future.⁵⁴ This is potentially explained by the limited resources and income available for educational opportunities earlier on in life.⁵⁵

Experiences of reduced educational and employment opportunities are key drivers in the ‘intergenerational transmission of poverty’, making it more difficult for younger generations to break out of the cycle of economic disadvantage.⁵⁶ More than three times the proportion of Australian children who were in families frequently experiencing poverty were likely to regularly or frequently experience poverty in adulthood (44.5% compared with 13.5% of people who were in families that had never been in poverty).⁵⁷ However, while there is an increased likelihood of economic disadvantage being transmitted to younger generations, it is not inevitable. A combination of family support, educational opportunities, labour market conditions, and public policy combine to determine the extent to which children and young people’s opportunities and future outcomes are dependent on their family situation.⁵⁸

While it is important to address the gaps between economically disadvantaged young people’s educational and employment outcomes, the Australian Child Wellbeing project found that too often the focus of policy approaches is solely on getting young people in schooling or work without also acknowledging the social and relational aspect of economic disadvantage.⁵⁹ Economic disadvantage affects the security of relationships for young people, including exclusion from opportunities and activities which are instrumental in building social capital.⁶⁰ Lack of financial resources limits family’s stability and capacity to engage with broader social networks which can be instrumental to providing a greater range of opportunities. Furthermore, children and young people experiencing economic disadvantage are more likely to face higher risks of behavioural, conduct and relational problems, including being bullied.^{61,62} In order to prioritise educational completion and successful transitions to employment, it is important these familial and peer relationships are first secure.

This report considers the impact of parental unemployment and economic disadvantage on young people. In particular, we identify young people’s involvement in education and employment, experiences of financial concerns and unfair treatment, family functioning and mental health. In doing so, we highlight the experiences of economically disadvantaged young people across a range of their life domains, to enable greater and deeper discussions about their strengths, challenges and needs.

⁵² Mooi-Reci et al. 2019

⁵³ Mooi-Reci et al. 2019

⁵⁴ Mooi-Reci et al. 2019

⁵⁵ Mooi-Reci et al. 2019

⁵⁶ Vera-Toscano & Wilkins 2020

⁵⁷ Vera-Toscano & Wilkins 2020

⁵⁸ Cobb-Clark 2019

⁵⁹ Skattebol et al. 2012

⁶⁰ Skattebol et al. 2012

⁶¹ Taylor et al. 2010

⁶² Sollis 2019

Method

The Mission Australia Youth Survey continues to be the largest annual survey of its kind in Australia. In 2020, Mission Australia conducted its 19th annual survey, receiving 25,800 responses from young people aged 15 to 19 years.

As well as collecting valuable socio-demographic data, the *Youth Survey 2020* sought to capture the views and perspectives of young people on a broad range of issues. Topics covered by the survey include education and employment, factors to securing a job, participation in community activities, general wellbeing, values and concerns, preferred sources of support, and feelings about the future. Focus questions were added to explore young people's experiences of unfair treatment, financial difficulties and help seeking behaviours.

Alongside the socio-demographic questions, respondents were asked about the employment status of their parent/s and/or guardian/s. To answer this question, respondents were offered four options for each parent or guardian: *Yes, full-time or part-time*; *No*; *Not sure*; and *Not applicable*.

In this report, we compare the responses of this group of economically disadvantaged young people against the responses of *Youth Survey* participants with at least one parent or guardian in either full-time or part-time work. Those who indicated that they were *Not sure*, that the question was *Not applicable*, or those who did not answer this question, have been excluded from the analysis.

This report focuses on respondents who identified that neither parent or guardian had full or part-time paid employment. We have classified this group of respondents as 'economically disadvantaged' young people, according to the following definition.

Definitional points

We use the term 'economically disadvantaged' young people throughout this report. Specifically, 'economic disadvantage' relates to the lack of resources, access and opportunities available to young people and their family on the basis of unemployment. This definition serves to focus the following analysis on the social experience and processes of disadvantage that impact upon young people's transition into adulthood.

Nonetheless, we recognise that economic factors are just one dimension of disadvantage. Young people's experience of economic disadvantage in Australia may be further compounded when combined with other aspects of their lives — such as whether they are living with a disability; whether they identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; whether they are from a migrant family and/or from a non-English speaking background; whether they are female; whether they identify as LGBTQIA+; or whether they live in a regional or remote area, among many other factors.

In light of this, we recognise that many of our respondents may have intersecting dimensions of disadvantage. However, given that we solely consider disadvantage according to economic factors in this report, the term 'economically disadvantaged' young people will be used throughout.

Key findings

Demographic characteristics

A total of 24,436 young people who took part in the *Youth Survey 2020* responded to the question regarding the employment status of their parents. The vast majority of these (95.4%) had at least one parent or guardian in either full-time or part-time work.

A total of 1,125 (4.6%) young people who took part in the *Youth Survey 2020* reported that neither parent or guardian was currently in paid employment.

Over half (53.0%) of economically disadvantaged respondents were female, around four in ten (41.2%) were male, 3.9% were gender diverse and 1.9% preferred not to say.

A total of 13.2% of economically disadvantaged respondents identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander. The proportion of respondents who identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander was close to four times higher among economically disadvantaged respondents (13.2% compared with 3.6%).

Close to one in five (18.2%) economically disadvantaged young people indicated they were born overseas (compared with 14.2%). Four in 10 (39.8%) economically disadvantaged young people stated that one or both of their parents were born overseas (the same as young people with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work). Additionally, a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people indicated they spoke a language other than English at home (24.4% compared with 18.9%).

One in eight (11.9%) economically disadvantaged young people identified as living with disability (11.9%). This proportion was double that among respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work (11.9% compared with 6.0%). For economically disadvantaged young people, the most frequently cited disabilities were (in order of frequency): autism, physical disabilities and learning disabilities.

Education

The majority (77.7%) of economically disadvantaged young people were studying full-time. This was lower than for respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work (87.7%). Double the proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported they were not studying (12.2% compared to 6.2%).

As shown in Table 2, compared with respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work, a lower proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported they were *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with their studies (56.1% compared with 68.2%).

Table 1: Participation in education

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Studying full-time	77.7	87.7
Studying part-time	10.1	6.1
Not studying	12.2	6.2

Table 2: Satisfaction with studies

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Very satisfied	9.4	10.5
Satisfied	46.7	57.7
Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	31.1	24.9
Dissatisfied	8.4	5.6
Very dissatisfied	4.4	1.3

Plans after finishing school

Of those that were still at school, a total of 94.2% of economically disadvantaged young people planned to complete Year 12 (comparable to respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work: 97.6%). More than twice the proportion of economically disadvantaged young people did not plan to complete Year 12 (5.8% compared with 2.4%).

As shown in Table 3, *go to university* was the most frequently reported post-school plan for disadvantaged young people (51.0%).

However, economically disadvantaged young people reported this post-school plan at a much lower rate compared with respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work (65.6%).

A lower proportion of economically disadvantaged young people indicated *travel/gap year* plans (17.9% compared with 23.9%). A slightly higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people indicated they planned to *go to TAFE or college* after finishing school (13.3% compared with 9.9%).

Table 3: Plans after finishing school

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Go to university	51.0	65.6
Get a job	30.9	29.9
Travel/gap year	17.9	23.9
Go to TAFE or college	13.3	9.9
Get an apprenticeship	12.3	9.3
Join the defence or police force	7.3	7.4
Other	5.6	4.1
No choices are available to me	1.4	0.4

Note: Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Items are listed in order of frequency amongst economically disadvantaged respondents.

How confident are young people in achieving their study/work goals?

Participants were asked how confident they were in their ability to achieve their study/work goals after school. Table 4 shows that over four in ten (42.3%) economically disadvantaged respondents indicated that they were *extremely* or *very confident* in their ability to achieve their study/work goals (compared with 49.2%).

Additionally, a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people indicated that they were only *slightly confident* or *not at all confident* in their ability to achieve their goals (17.0% compared with 9.7%).

Table 4: Confidence in achieving study/work goals

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Extremely confident	9.9	9.7
Very confident	32.4	39.5
Somewhat confident	40.7	41.1
Slightly confident	11.9	7.4
Not at all confident	5.1	2.3

Employment

As seen in Table 5 only a small minority of respondents from both cohorts reported that they were employed full-time. However, this is not surprising given the percentage of respondents who were still at school.

A much smaller proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported that they were working part-time (28.1% compared with 41.7%).

Conversely, a greater proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported they were looking for work (42.8% compared with 33.8%).

A higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people also reported they were neither working nor looking for work (28.1% compared with 23.9%).

Table 5: Participation in paid employment

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Employed full-time	1.0	0.6
Employed part-time	28.1	41.7
Not in paid employment, looking for work	42.8	33.8
Not in paid employment, NOT looking for work	28.1	23.9

What would help young people secure a job?

Respondents who were looking for work were asked to indicate from a number of items what might help them secure a job, as shown in Table 6.

Flexible working hours, more jobs in my local area and work experience were the top factors to helping young people secure a job.

The biggest gaps between economically disadvantaged young people and respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work were:

- *Training/skill development* (27.3% compared with 22.8%);
- *Mentors* (11.4% compared with 7.7%); and
- *More school support* (16.5% compared with 13.0%).

Table 6: Factors to securing a job

	Economically disadvantaged respondents %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Flexible working hours	68.9	76.4
More jobs in my local area	58.3	59.4
Work experience	45.8	42.4
Improved skills in resume writing	34.5	34.5
Training/skill development programs	27.3	22.8
Volunteering opportunities	20.6	18.0
More school support	16.5	13.0
Job services/agencies	14.2	11.2
More parent/family support	12.9	9.7
Networking	12.5	10.6
Mentors	11.4	7.7
Other	4.4	2.5

Note: Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Items are listed in order of frequency amongst economically disadvantaged respondents.

Issues of personal concern to young people

Young people were asked to indicate how concerned they were about a number of issues over the past year, as shown in Figure 1.

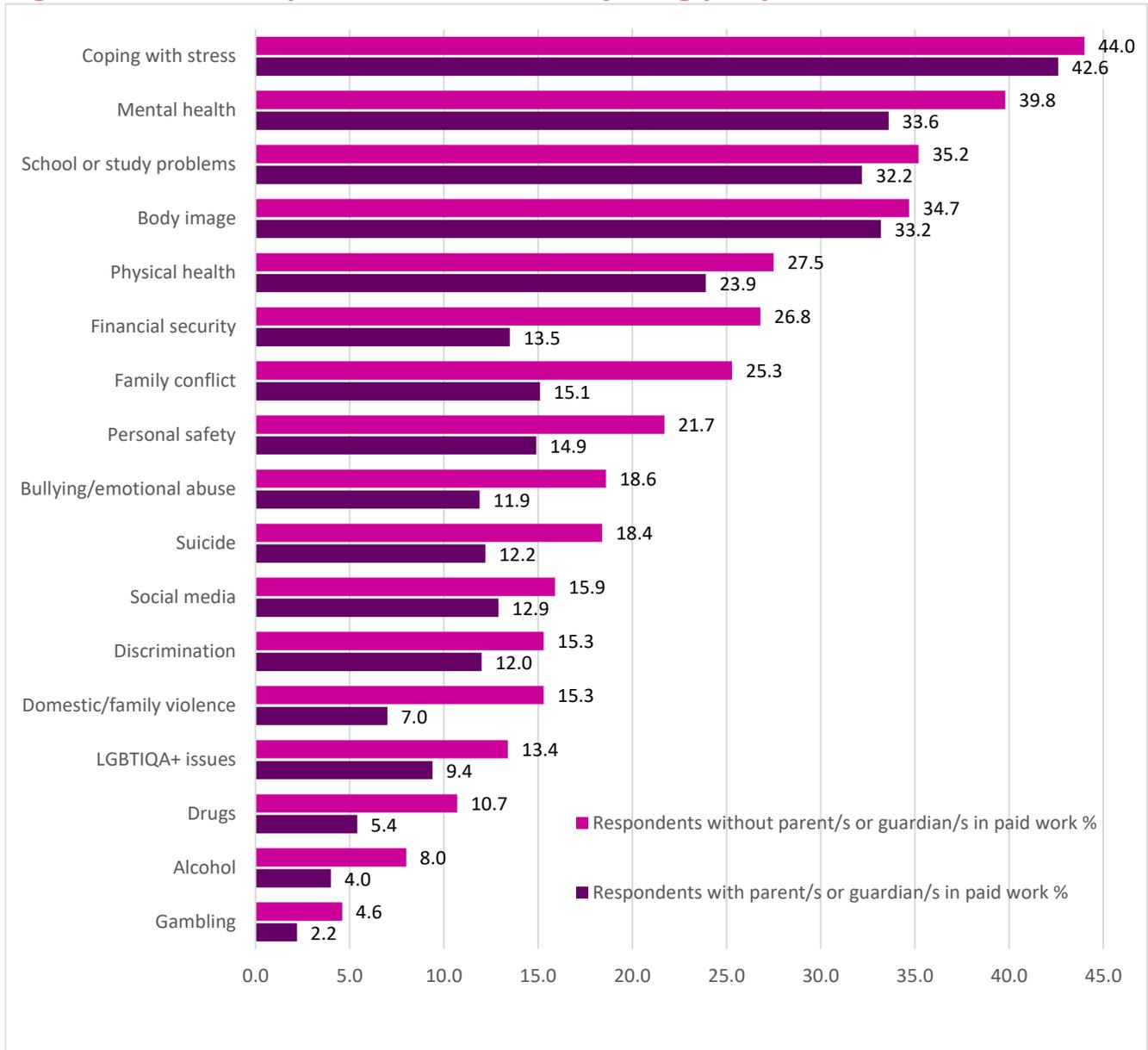
Responses were rated on a 5-point scale that ranged from *extremely concerned* to *not at all concerned*.

Coping with stress, mental health and school or study problems were the top three items of personal concern for economically disadvantaged young people.

As shown in Figure 1, economically disadvantaged young people reported much higher levels of concern about:

- *Financial security* (26.8% compared with 13.5%);
- *Family conflict* (25.3% compared with 15.1%);
- *Domestic/family violence* (15.3% compared 7.0%);
- *Personal safety* (21.7% compared with 14.9%);
- *Bullying/emotional abuse* (18.6% compared with 11.9%); and
- *Suicide* (18.4% compared with 12.2%).

Figure 1: Issues of personal concern to young people



Note: Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Items are listed in order of frequency amongst economically disadvantaged respondents

Financial concerns

Young people were asked to indicate if they and/or their family had experienced any issues because of money concerns in the past year.

As shown in Table 7, greater proportions of economically disadvantaged young people than respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work experienced issues across all items because of money concerns.

In particular, the biggest gaps occurred for *could not pay bills* (31.1% compared with 10.1%), *sought assistance from welfare organisations* (28.0% compared with 7.1%) and *could not pay for petrol or car expenses* (25.6% compared with 6.5%).

Concerningly, almost nine times the proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported they had *spent time in a refuge/transitional housing* because of money concerns in the past year (9.3% compared with 1.1%).

Table 7: Experiences due to money concerns in the past year

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Could not pay bills (e.g. electricity, gas)	31.1	10.1
Family conflict/violence	29.7	14.3
Sought financial help from family or friends	29.4	10.6
Sought assistance from welfare organisations	28.0	7.1
Could not pay for petrol or car expenses	25.6	6.5
Could not pay rent/mortgage	23.7	6.8
Gone without a meal/s	18.0	4.5
Could not afford public transport	17.5	3.5
Spent time in a refuge/transitional housing	9.3	1.1

Note: Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Items are listed in order of frequency amongst economically disadvantaged respondents.

Financial concerns (cont.)

Respondents were further asked if they have gone without certain experiences because of money concerns. As shown in Table 8, greater proportions of economically disadvantaged young people than respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work have gone without the items listed in Table 8 because of money concerns. The biggest difference occurred for *a holiday with family* (48.9% compared with 28.2%), *a meal out with family once a month* (34.6% compared with 16.2%) and *going out with friends* (33.1% compared with 14.8%).

Close to three times the proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported they were not able to *have the internet at home* due to financial concerns (22.6% compared with 8.4%).

Table 8: Experiences gone without because of money concerns in the past year

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
A holiday with family	48.9	28.2
A meal out with family once a month	34.6	16.2
Going out with friends (e.g. to the cinema)	33.1	14.8
Buying new clothes if I need them	31.8	14.3
Attending community events	26.2	9.8
Extracurricular activities at school (e.g. music, sport)	25.6	11.6
Playing sport/joining a club	24.4	10.0
Going on school excursions or trips	22.6	8.9
Having the internet at home	22.6	8.4

Note: Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Items are listed in order of frequency amongst economically disadvantaged respondents.

What issues do young people think are the most important in Australia today?

Young people were asked to list the three issues they considered were the most important in Australia today. The information provided by respondents was categorised and is listed in order of frequency in Table 9. The top three national issues identified by economically disadvantaged young people were *COVID-19, mental health and equity and discrimination*.

These were the same top three issues for respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work; however, economically disadvantaged young people reported lower levels of concern overall.

Table 9: Most important issues in Australia today

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
COVID-19	35.8	38.9
Equity and discrimination	33.1	40.7
Mental health	26.3	31.2
The environment	24.9	30.4
The economy and financial matters	16.7	15.2
Alcohol and drugs	11.7	10.5
Homelessness/housing	9.1	8.3
Crime, safety and violence	9.0	9.3
Employment	8.5	7.5
Politics	7.7	7.4

Note: Items are listed in order of frequency amongst economically disadvantaged respondents.

Have young people been treated unfairly?

Young people were asked whether they had been treated unfairly because of their *age, disability, financial background, gender, mental health, race/cultural background, religion, sexuality* or any *other* reason in the past year. This could mean any treatment that is unfair, hurtful or disrespectful, including being teased, excluded or humiliated.

Over one third (36.0%) of economically disadvantaged young people reported they had been treated unfairly in the past year. This was much higher compared with respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work (26.3%).

Concerningly, almost three times the proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported being treated unfairly due to their *financial background* (21.5% compared with 7.7%).

Why have young people been treated unfairly?

Young people who reported being treated unfairly in the past year were then asked to identify reasons for being treated unfairly from a list of suggested items. There were some differences in responses to the question regarding the reasons they had witnessed unfair treatment take place, as shown in Table 10. Of respondents who had witnessed unfair treatment in the past year:

A notably higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported they have been treated unfairly due to their *financial background* (21.5% compared with 7.7%), *mental health* (37.8% compared with 24.8%) and *disability* (16.3% compared with 6.4%).

Table 10: Reasons for being treated unfairly

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Gender	38.5	41.7
Mental Health	37.8	24.8
Race	36.5	29.4
Sexuality	26.4	18.8
Age	24.0	20.3
Financial background	21.5	7.7
Religion	18.8	13.1
Disability	16.3	6.4
Other	14.6	14.2

Note: Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Items are listed in order of frequency amongst economically disadvantaged respondents.

Have young people witnessed unfair treatment?

Young people were asked whether they had witnessed someone being treated unfairly because of their *age, disability, financial background, gender, mental health, race/cultural background, religion, sexuality* or any *other* reason in the past year. This could mean any treatment that is unfair, hurtful or disrespectful, including being teased, excluded or humiliated.

Over half (53.5%) of economically disadvantaged young people reported they had witnessed someone being treated unfairly in the past year (compared with 55.3%).

What was the reason for the unfair treatment witnessed?

Young people who reported they had witnessed unfair treatment in the past year were asked to identify from a list of reasons why the person was being treated unfairly. Table 11 shows that, of respondents who had witnessed unfair treatment in the past year, *race, sexuality* and *gender* were the most reported reasons for unfair treatment witnessed among both cohorts.

Table 11: Reasons for unfair treatment witnessed

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Race	59.6	62.4
Sexuality	49.5	49.6
Gender	44.0	40.5
Disability	36.9	31.9
Mental Health	36.2	28.5
Religion	32.6	28.5
Financial background	22.6	18.3
Age	21.3	17.1
Other	8.5	5.0

Note: Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Items are listed in order of frequency amongst economically disadvantaged respondents.

Where do young people go for help with important issues?

Young people were asked to indicate from a number of sources where they would go for help with important issues in their lives. *Friend/s, parent/s or guardian/s* and *relative/family friend* were the three most commonly cited sources of help for economically disadvantaged young people and for respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work.

However, as Table 12 below shows, economically

disadvantaged young people were less likely to report that they would seek support from these three sources (74.5%, 61.6% and 48.6% compared with 84.2%, 72.7% and 55.6%).

In contrast, a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people indicated they would turn to a *community agency* for help with important issues (15.4% compared with 10.6%).

Table 12: Where young people go for help with important issues

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Friend/s	74.5	84.2
Parent/s or guardian/s	61.6	72.7
Relative/family friend	48.6	55.6
Brother/sister	43.6	49.9
Internet	43.5	48.5
GP or health professional	39.6	45.2
Teacher	33.0	36.5
School counsellor	28.7	30.3
Mobile Apps	26.7	25.6
Social media	19.5	17.7
Community agency	15.4	10.6
Spiritual/religious mentor	14.3	11.6

Note: Respondents were able to choose more than one option. Items are listed in order of frequency amongst economically disadvantaged respondents.

What activities are young people involved in?

Young people were asked to identify the activities that they have been involved in over the past year from the list of options shown in Table 13.

Economically disadvantaged young people indicated they took part in a wide range of activities over the past year; however, they reported a lower level of participation for some activities.

Much lower proportions of economically disadvantaged young people took part in *sports (as a participant)* and *sports (as spectator)* (52.9% and 45.3% compared with 72.2% and 63.5%). Lower proportions of economically disadvantaged young people were also involved in *volunteer work* and *student leadership activities* (34.7% and 27.9% compared with 44.0% and 34.7%).

Table 13: Activities young people were involved in over the past year

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Sports (as a participant)	52.9	72.2
Sports (as a spectator)	45.3	63.5
Arts/cultural/music activities	42.7	44.1
Volunteer work	34.7	44.0
Youth groups and activities	28.6	25.3
Student leadership activities	27.9	34.7
Religious groups/activities	23.9	23.5
Environmental groups/activities	14.7	14.7
Political groups/organisations	11.0	8.6

Note: Items are listed in order of frequency amongst economically disadvantaged respondents.

How well do young people feel their family gets along?

Young people were asked how well they felt their family gets along with one another. Responses were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from *excellent* to *poor*. As shown in Table 14, a much lower proportion of economically disadvantaged young people rated their family's ability to get along positively (38.2% *excellent/very good*, compared with 55.9%).

A higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people rated their family's ability to get along as either *fair* or *poor* (34.6% compared with 20.5% of respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work).

Table 14: Family's ability to get along

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Excellent	16.7	22.9
Very good	21.5	33.0
Good	27.3	23.7
Fair	20.0	14.2
Poor	14.6	6.3

Wellbeing, happiness, feelings about the future

For the first time in 2020, young people were asked to report on how much of the time they felt stressed in the past four weeks. As shown in Table 15, a higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people felt stressed either *all of the time* or *most of the time* (49.1% compared with 42.3%).

Young people were asked to rate how happy they were with their life as a whole. As shown in Table 16, 43.2% of economically disadvantaged young people indicated that they felt *happy/very happy* with their lives overall. This was notably lower than the proportion of participants with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work (59.9%).

Concerningly, more than double the proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported feeling *very sad/sad* with life as a whole (20.8% compared with 9.9%).

Young people were also asked to rate how positive they felt about the future and to rate their response on a 5-point scale ranging from *very positive* to *very negative*. As shown in Table 17, more than four in ten (44.3%) economically disadvantaged young people indicated that they felt *very positive* or *positive* about the future.

Once again, this proportion was notably lower than the proportion of respondents with guardian/s in paid work (56.5%). A higher proportion of economically disadvantaged young people reported feeling *negative* or *very negative* about the future (20.7% compared with 13.4%).

Table 15: How stressed are young people?

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
All of the time	18.2	11.2
Most of the time	30.9	31.1
Some of the time	28.2	32.6
A little of the time	16.0	19.9
None of the time	6.6	5.1

Table 16: How happy are young people?

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Happy/Very happy (70-100)	43.2	59.9
Not happy or sad (40-60)	36.0	30.1
Very sad/Sad (0-30)	20.8	9.9

Table 17: Feelings about the future

	Respondents without parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %	Respondents with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work %
Very positive	12.1	12.4
Positive	32.2	44.1
Neither positive nor negative	35.0	30.1
Negative	13.2	10.3
Very negative	7.5	3.1

Psychological distress

The *Youth Survey* includes a measure of non-specific psychological distress: the Kessler 6 (K6). Young people were asked to indicate the frequency of particular moods over the past four weeks according to a six-item, five-point scale. The scale ranges from 1-5, where 1 indicates *all of the time* and 5 represents *none of the time*.

Scores across the six items are summed to produce a total. Based on established scoring criteria, the K6

can be used to classify *Youth Survey* respondents into two groups –those who experience some form of psychological distress and those who do not.

Based on their responses to the K6, economically disadvantaged young people experience psychological distress at a much higher rate than young people with parent/s or guardian/s in paid work (38.1% compared with 25.6%).

Policy implications summary

1. The Federal Government should lead a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach to solving youth issues in Australia that seeks active engagement and participation from other tiers of government, the corporate sector, community groups and organisations and young people themselves. Such a roadmap should set goals for improving the wellbeing and social and economic participation of all young people in Australia, and include specific strategies for assisting economically disadvantaged young people. Within this whole-of-society approach:
 - a. the corporate sector should recognise the positive role that it can play in supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and further invest in activities that support employment attainment and retention for this group, particularly in partnership with schools; and
 - b. the community sector and community groups including churches and faith-based groups should ensure that in their service delivery and support activities they promote access, equality of experience and support to all people on the basis of need.
2. Governments and philanthropic organisations should fund and replicate evidence-based programs with proven success in supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to remain engaged with education. These programs should have characteristics that:
 - a. specifically target the needs of economically disadvantaged young people;
 - b. support individual, family, community and school factors that will enhance educational engagement; and
 - c. invest in affordable and reliable devices and internet access to ensure that young people can stay connected to education.
3. State and territory governments should fund, evaluate and replicate alternative education pathways that address the complex needs of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, promote their wellbeing and enhance their engagement with education, employment and training.
4. The Federal Government should lead the development of a national youth employment strategy, in conjunction with state/territory and local governments other stakeholders and young people themselves, to coordinate efforts to secure transitions to work for young people. This strategy should aim to provide meaningful and secure work for all young people and create targeted strategies and wraparound supports for young people who face additional barriers to employment, specifically young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including systemic support for employer engagement programs in schools.
5. The Federal Government should act to ensure that all Australian households have access to adequate income, through:
 - a. ensuring that people have access to decent, stable work options, that minimum wages are set at an adequate level and that people are offered appropriate assistance to obtain and maintain employment; and

Policy implications summary (cont.)

- b. setting working-age income support payments at a level that ensures that recipients and their families are not living in deprivation and are able to pay for the essentials of life during periods of unemployment. The needs and experiences of dependent children and young people should be explicitly considered when setting payment levels.
- 6. The Federal and state and territory governments should work together to ensure that all schools have developed and implemented an evidence-based strategy to address bullying, harassment and discrimination.
- 7. The Federal and State and territory governments should work together to review the adequacy of mental health and wellbeing supports available for young people, identify gaps and where necessary fund additional measures to ensure that:
 - a. sufficient specialist mental health and wellbeing and pastoral care staff are employed by schools;
 - b. outreach programs are adequately reaching young people who are at risk of disengaging or are in the process of disengaging from schools; and
 - c. investment in free or low-cost community mental health supports and specialist youth-focused mental health services are sufficient to meet demand. This includes funding online treatment programs and promoting awareness of their availability.
- 8. The Federal Government should expand the Reconnect program to ensure it meets demand for support to improve family relationships and prevent young people experiencing prolonged homelessness.
- 9. State and territory governments should fund specific therapeutic interventions for children and young people who are victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, to address the trauma they have experienced and intervene early to prevent negative behavioural, wellbeing and educational outcomes.

Policy implications

The policy discussion in this section is based on an analysis of the Youth Survey data, other relevant research, and consultation with Mission Australia frontline staff as well as subject matter experts from other organisations.

Young people aged 15-19 who are respondents to the Youth Survey are at an important transition phase in their life. Participation and outcomes during this period can have significant, ongoing impacts on their social and economic participation and wellbeing.

Analysis of the Youth Survey data reveals five key areas of difference between economically disadvantaged young people compared with respondents with at least one parent or guardian in employment:

- education and employment;
- financial concerns (including material deprivation and social exclusion);
- unfair treatment;
- mental health and wellbeing; and
- family relationships.

The findings in this report highlight that a significant number of young people in Australia are living in deprivation, which requires them to constantly trade-off one of life's essentials with another. Although the proportion of young people experiencing both material deprivation and social exclusion is greater among those with no parent/guardian in paid employment, these experiences are by no means limited to this group.

The timing of data collection for this report is important, as it fell between April and August 2020. During that time, COVID-19 lockdowns were in place (to varying degrees across the states and territories) and governments were implementing a range of measures to assist people affected by COVID-19. Some of these measures were directly targeted to young people and others at parents/carers and indirectly to dependent children.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, policy responses for young people have become even more important. COVID-19 is likely to have a disproportionate effect on the lives of young people, including negative impacts on education, employment and mental health. Certainly, economically disadvantaged respondents to the Youth Survey ranked COVID-19 as the most important issue for Australia. Young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds already have disproportionately worse outcomes in these areas and COVID-19 is likely to exacerbate these further.

Whole-of-society approach

Poverty experienced in childhood and youth has a range of negative impacts, including poorer cognitive, social and health outcomes⁶³ and long-term disconnection from education and employment.⁶⁴

The 2020 Youth Survey findings highlight the complex nature of issues associated with economic disadvantage. The group of young people who were more likely to experience material deprivation and social exclusion were

⁶³ Warren 2017

⁶⁴ The Smith Family 2014

also more likely to have poorer mental health and wellbeing, to experience unfair treatment, and to be disengaged from school or work.

These findings correlate with other research establishing links between these issues.⁶⁵ The complex, dynamic interplay between these issues suggests the need for a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach that can address the intersection between these issues and support young people to access resources in any of their areas of need.

There is a clear and pressing need for a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach to solving youth issues in Australia, with the roadmap and goals set through a Federal Government-led response.

The Federal Government's aims of achieving employment levels that can support an ageing population, tax revenue generation and a sustainable welfare budget depend on all young people in Australia being able to realise their full potential of productivity. The recent elevation of a Minister for Youth into the Federal Cabinet is a very promising development and the new policy structures at the Federal level should help to support a high-level, dedicated and comprehensive approach to youth issues in Australia. Young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds must be a focus of this work.

Corporate and philanthropic organisations also have a significant role to play in supporting the engagement of young people from economically disadvantaged background in education and employment, as well as advocating to governments on a variety of issues that affect young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Many organisations within the corporate sector have taken an active role in supporting positive education and employment outcomes, recognising that encouraging the participation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is a social responsibility that has implications both for their own financial success and for the success of the Australian economy [see pages 45-47].

In addition, community services organisations around Australia, as well as community groups including churches and faith-based groups, provide valuable support to economically disadvantaged young people to engage with education, employment and training, address mental health issues and improve relationships with their family. Such groups can also be important advocates for such young people, both at an individual and a societal level, including advocacy to promote access, equality of experience and support to all people on the basis of need. Just as Mission Australia is privileged to amplify the voices of young people through our Youth Surveys and to fight for their interests, so too other community groups can use their positions to highlight and advocate for our emerging generations. This vital and effective work would have more lasting impact and lead to greater change for young people in Australia if it were delivered within a well-understood, consistent framework as part of a whole-of-society approach.

Recommendation: The Federal Government should lead a comprehensive, whole-of-society approach to solving youth issues in Australia that seeks active engagement and participation from other tiers of government, the corporate sector, community groups and organisations and young people themselves. Such a roadmap should set goals for improving the wellbeing and social and economic participation of all young people in Australia, and include specific strategies for assisting economically disadvantaged young people. Within this whole-of-society approach:

- a. **the corporate sector should recognise the positive role that it can play in supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and further invest in activities that support employment attainment and retention for this group, particularly in partnership with schools; and**

⁶⁵ O'Connor et al. 2020; Saunders et al. 2018; The Smith Family 2014; Productivity Commission 2020

- b. **the community sector and community groups including churches and faith-based groups should ensure that in their service delivery and support activities they promote access, equality of experience and support to all people on the basis of need.**

Education and employment

Young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely than others to experience barriers to participation in education and employment.⁶⁶ This has serious implications for their long-term wellbeing and social and economic participation, and for the workforce needed to bolster Australia's post-pandemic economic recovery.

While economically disadvantaged young people were more likely to indicate a lower level of engagement with education and employment in their responses to the Youth Survey, **they also demonstrated strong aspirations and high levels of optimism that they would meet their post-school goals.** Half (51.0%) of young people without a parent or guardian in paid employment wanted to *go to university* after school, while 30.9% wanted to *get a job* and 13.3% wanted to *go to TAFE or college*. Two-in-five (42.3%) were *very or extremely confident* that they would achieve their study and work goals, and a further 40.7% were *somewhat confident*.

These findings on the motivation levels of economically disadvantaged young people, combined with research demonstrating the efficacy of evidence-based interventions to connect young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with education and employment,⁶⁷ mean there is opportunity to address inequality in education and employment outcomes for young people in Australia.

Education

Educational attainment is an important predictor of future employment, welfare and health outcomes. Research indicates that young people who have achieved year 12 or higher level of qualifications are less likely to experience economic disadvantage in later life.⁶⁸

The 2020 Youth Survey evidenced the significant challenges to educational engagement and achievement by economically disadvantaged young people:

- double the proportion reported they were not studying (12.2% compared with 6.2%);
- a lower proportion reported being *very satisfied* or *satisfied* with their studies (56.1% compared with 68.2%);
- more than double the proportion did not plan to complete Year 12 (5.8% compared with 2.4%);
- a larger proportion went without *extracurricular activities at school* (25.6% compared with 11.6%);
- more than double the proportion were not able to participate in *school excursions or trips* (22.6% compared with 8.9%) and did not have access to *the internet at home* (22.6% compared with 8.4%).

⁶⁶ The Smith Family 2014

⁶⁷ The Smith Family 2016

⁶⁸ Lamb & Huo 2017

It is likely that these experiences of deprivation are related to lower levels of engagement and satisfaction with school; this has been confirmed through other research.⁶⁹

My family is financially struggling which has been extremely hard due to the environment I'm in. All my peers have wealthy employed parents and I feel as though no one understands. I also have major family issues which I cannot afford to deal with legally. I have been extremely unmotivated and fear that I am disappointing people in regards to my studies."

Female, 17, NSW

A range of interventions at the individual, family, school and community level can assist children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to achieve positive educational outcomes. These include supporting students' confidence in their academic abilities, encouraging strong school attendance, engaging parents in their children's learning, and promoting school cultures that encourage academic excellence irrespective of students' backgrounds. Successful approaches also combine early intervention approaches balanced with long-term support.⁷⁰ Responses aimed at supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds need to take into account the complexity of challenges faced and the interventions needed.

Programs that aim to address these factors, such as The Smith Family's Learning for Life program, have demonstrated impact in improving educational outcomes for disadvantaged students

including school attendance, school completion and post-school engagement in education, employment and training.⁷¹ Evidence-based programs such as these should be funded and expanded to maximise opportunities for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to remain engaged with education. Governments have a key role to play in this, as do philanthropic organisations [see page 47].

Where students disengage from traditional forms of education, alternative education programs that are run by community services to help students re-engage with education can help by:

- addressing the complex issues that drive non-attendance at school;
- providing a flexible, safe and supportive learning space that helps to foster feelings of independence, security and tolerance amongst the students;
- identifying educational or employment-related goals; and
- building levels of confidence, self-organisation and self-reliance.⁷²

Programs such as Navigator in Victoria and Flexible Learning Options in South Australia, both operated by Mission Australia, have demonstrated impact in promoting the wellbeing and educational engagement of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The digital divide in Australia has significant negative implications for the education of young people who are experiencing disadvantage. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools and universities are rapidly transforming their courses and curricula, aiming to deliver education online.⁷³

⁶⁹Saunders et al. 2018

⁷⁰The Smith Family 2016

⁷¹The Smith Family 2016

⁷²Skuse 2018

⁷³Barraket & Wilson 2020

Young people with whom Mission Australia services work have reported that they were asked to change the way they engage with education without being given the necessary tools or training to adapt to the fast-changing learning landscape. Students from low-income households will continue to need affordable broadband and devices, even after the pandemic has passed, in order to access modern educational resources.⁷⁴ Urgent steps should be taken to end the digital divide by ensuring that all young people have access to affordable and reliable devices and internet, to support online education as well as access to services and social connection.

Recommendations: Governments and philanthropic organisations should fund and replicate evidence-based programs with proven success in supporting young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to remain engaged with education. These programs should have characteristics that:

- a. specifically target the needs of economically disadvantaged young people;
- b. support individual, family, community and school factors that will enhance educational engagement; and
- c. invest in affordable and reliable devices and internet access to ensure that young people can stay connected to education.

State and territory governments should fund, evaluate and replicate alternative education pathways that address the complex needs of students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, promote their wellbeing and enhance their engagement with education, employment and training.

Employment

High youth unemployment rates have been a feature of the macroeconomic landscape for decades and have been exacerbated by COVID-19 and associated restrictions.⁷⁵ Based on modelling from the last Global Financial Crisis, disadvantaged young people are likely to be disproportionately adversely affected.⁷⁶

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds experience greater barriers to both attaining employment and retaining it over the long term.⁷⁷ Employment challenges for this group include: less access to and information about employment; increased likelihood of needing to find work quickly in order to contribute to family income; and a greater likelihood of obtaining poor quality employment which is seasonal, short-term and unsustainable.⁷⁸

The findings of the 2020 Youth Survey confirm high levels of unemployment indicators for economically disadvantaged young people. Nevertheless, they also show that unemployment indicators are significant for their peers in more economically advantaged households as well, indicating the widespread nature of youth unemployment in Australia.

Among Youth Survey respondents:

- young people without a parent or guardian in paid employment were themselves less likely to be employed part-time (28.1% compared with 41.7%);⁷⁹ and

⁷⁴ ACCAN 2020

⁷⁵ Brotherhood of St Laurence 2020

⁷⁶ Borland 2020

⁷⁷ The Smith Family 2014

⁷⁸ The Smith Family 2014

⁷⁹ Very few respondents in either group were employed full time, which is to be expected given their age range.

- they were also more likely to be unemployed and looking for work (42.8% compared with 33.8%).

When asked about factors that would help them secure employment, economically disadvantaged young people highlighted the need for:

- *training and skill development programs* (27.3%);
- *more school support* (16.5%);
- *more support from families/parents* (12.9%); and
- *mentors* (11.4%).

Both Federal and state/territory governments have a role to play in ensuring that these pre-conditions are met, given Federal responsibility for employment programs and state responsibility for school education.

Schools play an essential role in preparing young people for the world of work. Access to employer contacts at school has been shown to benefit young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, providing them with some of the information, resources and contacts that they are otherwise more likely than their peers to lack.⁸⁰ The more employer contacts that a young person receives at school, the higher likelihood that they will be engaged in education, employment or training at the ages of 19-24 and that they will earning more.⁸¹

In terms of employment programs, the Federal Government increased its measures to assist young people into employment as a result of the COVID-19 downturn, including expanding the Transition to Work program and introducing the JobMaker Hiring Credit.⁸² While government investment in youth employment is welcome, these programmatic investments are tactical rather than strategic and, in and of themselves, do not address the full scope of issues surrounding youth unemployment. We are also concerned that, although labour market participation and unemployment rates are currently much more positive than forecast at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment effects of COVID-19 have thus far been uneven across the labour market, much more deeply affecting those in certain groups including young people.⁸³ There is no certainty that employers will have the confidence to hire young permanent staff particularly in areas affected by COVID-19 such as retail, hospitality and tourism.

In order to address gaps in the supports that are available for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds to obtain and maintain work, we recommend that a national youth employment strategy, led by the Federal Government but involving state/territory and local governments, other stakeholders and young people themselves, be established to coordinate efforts to secure transitions to work for young people. This strategy should take a broad view of the environment faced by young people, rather than simply list the various programs aimed at assisting them. Aiming to provide meaningful and secure work for all young people, the strategy should create targeted pathways and wraparound supports for young people who face additional barriers to employment, specifically young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including systemic support for employer engagement programs in schools.

Corporate and philanthropic organisations also have a significant role to play in supporting the engagement of young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in education and employment [see pages 45-47].

⁸⁰ Mann 2012

⁸¹ Mann 2012

⁸² Australian Taxation Office 2021

⁸³ Nahum & Standford 2020

Recommendation: The Federal Government should lead the development of a national youth employment strategy, in conjunction with state/territory and local governments, other stakeholders and young people themselves, to coordinate efforts to secure transitions to work for young people. Aiming to provide meaningful and secure work for all young people, the strategy should create targeted pathways and wraparound supports for young people who face additional barriers to employment, specifically young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including systemic support for employer engagement programs in schools.

Financial concerns

In the 2020 Youth Survey, the items addressed in the *financial concerns* questions are generally measures of material deprivation and social exclusion. Among Youth Survey respondents, those without a parent or guardian in paid employment were much more likely to experience deprivation and exclusion across the range of measures surveyed.

In material deprivation terms, economically disadvantaged young people and their families were much more likely to have been unable to *pay bills* (31.1% compared with 10.1%), *pay for car or petrol expenses* (25.6% compared with 6.5%), *pay the rent/mortgage* (23.7% compared with 6.8%) or to have *gone without a meal/s* (18.0% compared with 4.5%).

In social exclusion terms, they were much more likely to have gone without *a holiday with family* (49% compared with 28%), *a meal out with family once a month* (35% compared with 16%) or *going out with friends* (33% compared with 15%).

These findings are confirmed by other research demonstrating the intersection between economic disadvantage, material deprivation and social exclusion. Although there is not a direct overlap between deprivation and income poverty,⁸⁴ for most families, regular adequate income is the single most important determinant of their economic situation.⁸⁵ Discrepancies in household income are likely to sit at the heart of some of the key differences between the two groups of young people whose circumstances are examined in this report. Increasing household income is imperative to ensuring that young people and their families can afford the essentials of life.

For work-ready parents and others supporting families, access to high quality, secure employment is important. Some people may require assistance to enter or re-enter the workforce, for example after experiencing long-term unemployment. The Federal Government has made some welcome investments in employment and assistance programs in response to the economic downturn caused by COVID-19, such as through its Local Jobs Program.

Although it is outside the scope of this report to examine in detail, many people who are employed are still living on low or variable incomes. Workers in insecure jobs, with lower or more variable earnings, made up more than one-third of Australians living in poverty prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁸⁶ They have also been

⁸⁴ Saunders et al. 2018

⁸⁵ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2020

⁸⁶ Anti-Poverty Week 2019

much more vulnerable to the economic shocks caused by COVID-19, being significantly more likely to lose their jobs as a result of the pandemic.⁸⁷

Ensuring that the minimum wage is set at an adequate level and that people are supported to access secure employment with decent working conditions that allows them to derive an adequate income while tending to parenting or other caring responsibilities is an important government response. Providing the benefits of stable, decent work are available for all who seek it should be a key policy aim for the Federal Government.

Parents and others who are not able to work or cannot find adequate employment must rely on income support. Inadequate income support for those who are not in paid employment is recognised as one of the main contributors to poverty in Australia.⁸⁸

During the period of data collection for the Youth Survey, the Federal Government had introduced a set of measures to financially support those experiencing unemployment during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns, which included the Coronavirus Supplement⁸⁹ to income support payments and the JobKeeper payment. These measures had a significant economic benefit for the poorest households in Australia, reducing the number of households in poverty by 32%. The reduction in rates of poverty were particularly high for people on working-age income support payments.⁹⁰

It is likely that parents of the Youth Survey respondents or some of the respondents themselves who were unemployed would have relied on these payments during the Youth Survey data collection period.⁹¹

Analysis of the Youth Survey data shows that many young people were still experiencing significant material deprivation and social exclusion even when the Coronavirus Supplement and JobKeeper were applied at their highest levels. This is consistent with reports from Mission Australia's frontline staff that, although people used Coronavirus Supplement payments to purchase essentials they had previously not been able to afford and to repay debt, the payments were not in place at the highest rate for long enough for people to 'catch up' given how long many had been living in poverty previously.

The findings of the Youth Survey support the conclusion that the new level of income support in effect after March 2021 will be absolutely inadequate for preventing deprivation for a group of young people in Australia. The rise of only \$50/fortnight, announced by the Federal Government in February 2021, is \$500/fortnight lower than JobSeeker plus the highest level of the Coronavirus Supplement and is inadequate to lift millions of

"My parents losing their jobs due to Coronavirus, has put our family in extreme financial stress."
Female, 18, NSW

⁸⁷ Nahum & Stanford 2020

⁸⁸ ACOSS & UNSW n.d.

⁸⁹ The Coronavirus Supplement began at \$550/fortnight in March 2020, decreasing to \$250/fortnight on 25 September and \$150/fortnight on 31 December. It was phased out altogether on 31 March 2021, and replaced with a permanent increase of \$50/fortnight.

⁹⁰ Phillips et al. 2020

⁹¹ Our data are limited and can only make a contribution to complex policy discussions about the adequacy of income support payments. We are unable, for example, to draw any strong conclusions about the type of payment that parents and guardians who were not employed would have been receiving. For example, we do not know whether a young person would identify their parent as 'not working' if they were temporarily stood down but had access to the JobKeeper payment. Parents might also be in receipt of a Disability Support pension. However, it is likely that a significant proportion would be on the JobSeeker payment.

people out of poverty.⁹² We recommend that working-age income support payments be increased to a level that keeps people out of poverty and enables them to afford the essentials of life.

Recommendation: The Federal Government should act to ensure that all Australian households have access to adequate income, through:

- a. ensuring that people have access to decent, stable work options, that minimum wages are set at an adequate level and that people are offered appropriate assistance to obtain and maintain employment; and
- b. setting working-age income support payments at a level that ensures that recipients and their families are not living in deprivation and are able to pay for the essentials of life during periods of unemployment. The needs and experiences of dependent children and young people should be explicitly considered when setting payment levels.

Unfair treatment

Respondents to the 2020 Youth Survey were asked whether they had experienced unfair treatment in the past year. Economically disadvantaged young people were much more likely to have experienced unfair treatment (36.0% compared with 26.3%). Of those who had experienced unfair treatment, economically disadvantaged young people were much more likely to report unfair treatment due to their *financial background* (21.5% compared with 7.7%), *mental health* (37.8% compared with 24.8%) and *disability* (16.3% compared with 6.4%).

The starkest result among these is the significant proportion who were treated unfairly because of their financial background. The Youth Survey did not define ‘unfair treatment’ and our interpretation of the data is limited by this. ‘Unfair treatment’ may indicate instances of bullying, harassment or discrimination, and we may also interpret some of the measures of social exclusion as ‘unfair treatment’, including exclusion from going out with friends and various school and community activities.

Economically disadvantaged respondents to the Youth Survey indicated higher levels of personal concern about *bullying/emotional abuse* (18.6% compared with 11.9%), which is consistent with other research findings that children in families where no parent or guardian is employed are more likely to be bullied than those with a parent in paid employment.⁹³

Bullying is an ongoing and repeated misuse of power in relationships, and it can include harassment, violence and discrimination.⁹⁴ Acts of violence can be referred to as bullying (which may be described as ‘physical bullying’), including serious offences like wounding and assault, including sexual assault.⁹⁵ Bullying also includes acts of psychological and emotional abuse, including instances of race hate (which may be described as ‘verbal bullying’).

Anti-bullying programs are likely to be an important response to some young people’s experience of ‘unfair treatment’. However, children and parents are often unaware of school anti-bullying policies, indicating that they require improved implementation.⁹⁶

⁹² Whiteford & Bradbury 2021

⁹³ Sollis 2019 - Although this research was with younger children (ages 6-11) it is reasonable to extrapolate them for the Youth Survey age group.

⁹⁴ Bullying. No Way! 2020

⁹⁵ See Youth Advocacy Centre 2020 and Bullying. No Way! 2020

⁹⁶ Sollis 2019

We note that further research and analysis is needed to understand the nature and extent of the experiences of unfair treatment by young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. In the interim, we recommend that the Federal Government ensure that anti-bullying programs are not only present but also properly implemented in all schools across Australia and that they are grounded in the evidence base.⁹⁷

Recommendation: The Federal and state and territory governments should work together to ensure that all schools have developed and implemented an evidence-based strategy to address bullying, harassment and discrimination.

Mental health and wellbeing

The relationship between economic disadvantage and poor mental health⁹⁸ and low levels of wellbeing⁹⁹ has been established in previous research. Responses to the 2020 Youth Survey indicate a strong relationship between economic disadvantage and a young person's mental health and wellbeing:

- **economically disadvantaged young people experienced psychological distress at a much higher rate than young people with at least one parent or guardian in paid employment (38.1% compared with 25.6%);**
- more than double the proportion reported feeling *very sad/sad* with life as a whole (20.8% compared with 9.9%);
- a higher proportion felt stressed either *all of the time* or *most of the time* (49.1% compared with 42.3%); and
- economically disadvantaged young people were more likely to highlight *suicide* as a personal concern (18.4% compared with 12.2%).

In light of the prevalence of these issues, a body of other research indicates that universal free mental health support through schools is highly important, particularly for children from highly disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁰⁰ Teachers and other school staff members need to be properly trained to identify students' mental health and wellbeing challenges, address them if appropriate and know where to refer them for specialist support. In-school mental health and wellbeing professionals are also essential for providing specialist support to young people where required and to relieve some of the burden on teachers, particularly where students need substantial support.¹⁰¹ However, there are insufficient numbers of specialist mental health and wellbeing staff in schools¹⁰² and more positions need to be funded. In addition, although mental

"My family is struggling financially and sometimes I don't have the time to complete schoolwork because problems occur. I feel like sometimes teachers don't understand the stresses kids deal with at home with parents and siblings."

Male, 15, SA

⁹⁷ Sollis 2019

⁹⁸ O'Connor et al. 2020

⁹⁹ Saunders et al. 2018

¹⁰⁰ Productivity Commission 2020 and Black Dog Institute and Mission Australia 2018

¹⁰¹ Black Dog Institute and Mission Australia 2018

¹⁰² Productivity Commission 2020

health and wellbeing resources are available to schools, funding structures are unclear and schools are often unaware of how to access these resources.¹⁰³

These supports can be supplemented with a range of school programs which are curriculum-aligned and designed to address mental wellbeing, such as Be You, ReachOut Schools and Black Dog's Headstrong programs. They can also be supported by the presence of school chaplains and other pastoral care staff. An evaluation of the Federal Government's National School Chaplaincy Program found that the program increased the wellbeing of students and the broader school community, and was well supported by the school community including principals and parents.¹⁰⁴

However, given the greater likelihood that young people in economic disadvantage will be disconnected from school, further efforts are required to provide mental health support to school-aged young people. An important mechanism for addressing this is via the provision of outreach mental health services, which the Productivity Commission has recommended should be expanded to ensure that all young people who are at risk of disengaging or have disengaged from education are supported. It also recommended that services should proactively engage with students and families who are referred to them once a student's attendance declines below a determined level.¹⁰⁵

For young people who have entirely disengaged from education or are no longer school-aged, a range of free or low-cost, community-based mental health supports is needed. Online treatment services are a promising avenue of service delivery and can provide many people with a convenient, effective and low-cost way to manage mental health issues.¹⁰⁶ A significant proportion of Youth Survey respondents indicated that they turn to the internet for advice and support (43.5% of young people without a parent or guardian in paid employment). While it is important to note that some young people will prefer face-to-face support options, these results indicate a significant need for effective, evidence-based online resources. Online treatments for young people have been evaluated positively, with Orygen's Moderated Online Social Therapy (MOST) program being shown to reduce hospital admissions and improve negative symptoms including depression and anxiety.¹⁰⁷ To encourage availability and access, the Federal Government has a key role to play in funding online treatment services and promoting awareness of their availability.¹⁰⁸

Young people who need more intensive mental health support than can be provided by in-school, outreach or online programs need be able to access specialist youth-focused mental health professionals. Currently, demand for such specialist services remains higher than supply, despite considerable investment by governments in services such as headspace. There is a group of young people with moderate to severe and complex mental health needs who are falling through the gaps in care between primary and tertiary mental health systems – in need of greater support than through prevention programs but failing to meet the threshold for acute care.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰³ Productivity Commission 2020

¹⁰⁴ Kantar Public n.d.

¹⁰⁵ Productivity Commission 2020

¹⁰⁶ Productivity Commission 2020

¹⁰⁷ Headspace and Orygen n.d.

¹⁰⁸ Productivity Commission 2020

¹⁰⁹ Orygen and headspace 2019

Encouragingly, during the early stages of the pandemic, Federal and state and territory governments made several funding commitments for mental health services particularly to support young people.¹¹⁰ Nevertheless, improving mental health and wellbeing supports for young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds will require additional investment in support and coordination, including through:

- universal, free mental health supports in schools;
- outreach programs for young people who are disengaging from school;
- community-based supports including online treatment options for those who have either disengaged from school entirely or are no longer of school age; and
- specialist youth-focused mental health professional services for those needing intensive support.

Recommendation: The Federal and state and territory governments should work together to review the adequacy of mental health and wellbeing supports available for young people, identify gaps and where necessary fund additional measures to ensure that:

- a. sufficient specialist mental health and wellbeing and pastoral care staff are employed by schools;**
- b. outreach programs are adequately reaching young people who are at risk of disengaging or are in the process of disengaging from schools; and**
- c. investment in free or low-cost community mental health supports and specialist youth-focused mental health services are sufficient to meet demand. This includes funding online treatment programs and promoting awareness of their availability.**

Family relationships

Children and young people living in families in economically disadvantaged circumstances have higher levels of family conflict and emotional distress than their more affluent peers.¹¹¹ Financial pressure can lead to family breakdown, increased violence within families and detrimental impacts on mental health.¹¹²

The 2020 Youth Survey results support this evidence:

- economically disadvantaged young people reported much higher levels of personal concern about *domestic/family violence* (15.3% compared with 7.0%);
- they also reported higher levels of concern about *family conflict* (25.3% compared with 15.1%);
- a low proportion of such young people rated their family's ability to get along positively (38.2% *excellent/very good*, compared with 55.9%); and
- a much higher proportion indicated that they had experienced *family violence/conflict* because of money concerns in the past year (29.7% compared with 14.3%).

The Youth Survey items on family conflict and violence potentially cover a range of issues of varying severity, ranging from low-level tension to serious cases of domestic and family violence. There is insufficient detail from the Survey items to determine the nature, extent or severity of the issues faced by respondents.

¹¹⁰ Department of Health 2020

¹¹¹ Sollis 2019

¹¹² Relationships Australia 2015

However, we know from other research that **economic disadvantage affects the security of relationships for young people, and children without a parent or guardian in paid employment are more likely to face higher risk of behavioural, conduct and relational problems.**¹¹³ We also know that there is a complex interplay between poverty and domestic violence. Financial abuse or other forms of abuse from perpetrators can limit the acquisition and use of economic resources. This can affect victim-survivors' ability to escape violence and to recover and rebuild after experiences of violence.¹¹⁴

The findings suggest the need for two courses of policy action. One is to ensure that sufficient early intervention programs are available to support young people and their families through periods of tension and conflict. Family conflict can lead to serious consequences such as youth homelessness and to this end, we recommend that early intervention programs such as the Reconnect program, funded through the Commonwealth Department of Social Services, be expanded to meet need. Reconnect has been positively evaluated and found to promote positive relationships within families, in addition to a range of other outcomes including housing permanency and improved engagement with employment, education and training.¹¹⁵ The program is highly regarded by the community services sector, has demonstrated positive outcomes in reconnecting families, and has existing service infrastructure through current Government contracts. It is therefore a reasonable candidate for further government investment to meet the needs of young people at risk of homelessness due to family conflict.

The other is to undertake a range of measures to ensure that children and young people subjected to domestic violence are safe. The exposure of children to domestic and family violence has a range of negative effects, including poor mental wellbeing, educational outcomes, a range of behavioural issues and trauma. Children who are exposed to domestic and family violence often also suffer other forms of child abuse or neglect, and are more likely to become caught in cycles of intergenerational violence.¹¹⁶ Although historically children have been seen as passive witnesses to violence, recent thinking has focused on the active roles that they take in relation to violent situations, often seeking to maximise the safety of their siblings, the non-violent parents, and themselves.¹¹⁷

We therefore recommend that – in addition to measures that support adult victim-survivors of domestic and family violence including adequate income support and access to safe and affordable housing - specific therapeutic interventions should be funded for child victim-survivors that seek to prevent or address negative outcomes stemming from their experience of violence.

Recommendations: The Federal Government should expand the Reconnect program to ensure it meets demand for support to improve family relationships and prevent young people experiencing prolonged homelessness.

State and territory governments should fund specific therapeutic interventions for children and young people who are victim-survivors of domestic and family violence, to address the trauma they have experienced and intervene early to prevent negative behavioural, wellbeing and educational outcomes.

¹¹³ Taylor et al. 2010

¹¹⁴ Mission Australia 2019

¹¹⁵ Mission Australia 2016

¹¹⁶ Campo 2015

¹¹⁷ Kinewesquo & Bonnah 2015

Implications for the business sector

The findings of the 2020 Youth Survey report have implications for the business sector as well as for governments. Many businesses within the corporate sector are concerned about the wellbeing of young people in Australia, including those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Young people are both the workforce and consumers of the future, and the sustainability of the Australian economy depends on their participation in employment, ability to pay taxes and contribute their purchasing power to a healthy business sector. A well-educated, diverse workforce is a critical part of successful businesses. Many organisations within the corporate sector have recognised that their encouragement of the participation of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds is part of their social responsibility, and that this has benefits both for their own financial success and for the success of the Australian economy as a whole.

Many businesses have already instituted programs to assist young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, including work experience initiatives and pathways into long-term

employment opportunities. Employer engagement initiatives have significant benefits for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹¹⁹ These are therefore an important contribution to enhancing the social and economic wellbeing of young people from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The findings of this report suggest a number of actions for businesses and the corporate sector:

- The Youth Survey results confirm that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds face a range of barriers to engaging in education and employment, but are nonetheless determined to do so. Businesses should take account of their strengths, including **high personal motivation** levels, and make recruitment decisions based on the strengths and aspirations of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- The Youth Survey identified that economically disadvantaged young people seek better access to **training and skills development programs** to secure work. Businesses should consider how to provide pathways into their organisations through targeted work experience, apprenticeships and traineeships and recruitment programs. They can support collaborative efforts by business organisations such as Chambers of Commerce and industry associations who deliver and/or support training and skills development programs within local areas or industry sectors.





- The Youth Survey results also identified that economically disadvantaged young people seek better access to mentoring programs. Businesses can partner with organisations that deliver evidence-based **mentoring programs**, and with schools on mentoring, coaching and work experience programs to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds to complete Year 12 and develop connections to employment opportunities. For example, the Australian Business and Community Network runs a number of workplace mentoring and business/school partnerships.¹²⁰
- Recruitment is only the beginning, and businesses should also consider ways in which to support young people to **remain engaged with employment** over the longer-term. Businesses can provide supportive employment pathways for young people from financially insecure households through a number of channels, including peer networking, mentoring programs and paid cadetships such as the Cadetship to Career program.¹²¹

In addition to the contribution that can be made by individual businesses within their own operations, the corporate sector has an important role to play in advocacy. There are many policy areas involving disadvantaged young people where the corporate sector speaks to government and other decision makers, including through organisations such as the Business Council of Australia, Chambers of Commerce and industry associations.

There are sound economic reasons for such groups to advocate for above-poverty levels of income support payments, to promote the expansion of the vocational education and training system, to advocate for reform to ensure Australia's future workforce includes those from disadvantaged backgrounds, to encourage adequate funding of youth mental health supports and to argue for an Australia where children from disadvantaged households have equal opportunity to realise their full potential.

Implications for the philanthropic sector

Many philanthropic trusts and foundations have invested significantly in efforts to improve outcomes for young people from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. As philanthropic interest moves towards addressing long-term complex problems through evidence-based approaches, data sources like the Youth Survey can be valuable resources to inform their priorities.

Increasingly, philanthropic trusts and foundations are understanding the cost effectiveness of

investments in early intervention measures to support children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve their full potential. The Youth Survey results provide philanthropic organisations seeking to fund evidence-based programs and supports for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with information about areas of needed investment. They confirm that resources should focus not just on material deprivation but other aspects of young people's lives, including their exclusion from services, activities and social relationships, their mental health and wellbeing, connection to education and employment and their family relationships.



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Contact us

For further information please contact
our Research Policy team on:



08 8218 2826



researchandpolicy@missionaustralia.com.au



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