Mission Australia

Insights into the concerns of young Australians: Making sense of the 2011 Youth Survey

SNAPSHOT 2012

Mission Australia's vision is to see a fairer Australia by enabling people in need to find pathways that assist in breaking the cycle of disadvantage. In achieving our vision, in 2011 we conducted our 10th National Survey of Young Australians, receiving 45,916 responses from people aged between 11-24 years. The survey aimed to identify the most significant issues facing Australian youth today, through questions relating to their top three issues of concern, as well as what they think can be done about them.

Young Australians from a range of backgrounds participated. The majority of respondents were in the 11-15 and 16-19 year brackets (47.9% and 49.9% respectively), with only 2.1% aged between 20-24 years. A little over half of respondents were female (53%), and just under half (47%) were male. A small percentage identified themselves as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders (5.8%). Almost one in five respondents (19.5%) spoke a language other than English at home, and the majority of respondents lived with their family (94.5%).

Respondents were asked to rank the issues that concerned them from a list of options (Table 1). The top three issues were School or Study Problems, Coping with Stress, and Body Image; with each issue concerning around one in three respondents. None of the concerns stood out as a singular concern; rather a total of six issues were of major concern to at least one in five respondents. Young people's concerns are explored in further detail in Table 1.

Of the 45,916 respondents, around 10,000 completed the survey online; these respondents had the opportunity to provide comments on their issues of concern and what they thought could be done about them. These comments form the basis of this publication. The insights of the online respondents complement the statistical data collected and offer a richer understanding of the current and emerging issues of young people in Australia today.

Table 1: Issues of Concern to young people, 2011

Issue	%
School or Study Problems	37.3
Coping with Stress	35.4
Body Image	33.1
Family Conflict	28.1
Bullying/Emotional Abuse	22.8
Personal Safety	20.3
Depression	18.1
The Environment	17.7
Drugs	16.9
Alcohol	15.2
Suicide	9.9
Discrimination	8.8
Physical/Sexual Abuse	8.5
Self Harm	6.4
Sexuality	6.4

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

SCHOOL OR STUDY PROBLEMS

"We are led to believe that only 'good' (excellent) grades will lead to a pleasing life. And having to pick your life course at 17, through course and university selection is a prospect I do not enjoy." 17, male

School or Study Problems was the top concern, particularly for the 15-19 year age group; with 41.8% naming it as one of their major concerns. Unsurprisingly, those least concerned about school or study were those in the 20-24 year old age group. A third of 11-14 year olds named school and study problems as a leading issue of concern. School or Study problems was of equal concern to both males and females.

Only one third of respondents (33.9%) who were concerned with School or School problems said they would go to their teacher for advice. Respondents were more likely to go to their friends (81.2%) or parents (79.3%) for advice and support.

One possible reason why school and study may have come to the forefront of the respondent's minds (more so than previous years) may be due to government policies for young people to be either in education or employment (earning or learning), combined with high rates of youth unemployment. Therefore, stresses relating to this may be reflected in the 2011 survey's findings.

Young people appear to be aware of the effects of stress which is reflected in many of the comments they made:

"Both in work and in schooling, there needs to be flexibility. A teenager's last 3 years of being a kid is one of the most stressful times of a person's life. Why is that so? No wonder there is so much teen depression and suicide." 18, male

"School makes you stressed, stress plays with your mind, and that can lead to self harm or suicide." 15, female

A common concern of respondents was not having enough time to do other activities in their life (such as sport and socialising) due to the pressure and time commitments of study.

"Expectations of young people are too high. It is ludicrous to say that students should be in school for 6 hours, study 3 hours thereafter, and then fulfil a plethora of other sporting, social and work commitments." 16, male

"Getting less work and stuff at home so that after working all day at school we have time for extra curricular activities and socialising rather than staying at home working." 14, female

Other comments mainly reflected the pressure felt by students to do well at school due to the huge impact they feel this has over their future. However, some students believed this was exaggerated or over-emphasised by schools.

"I need better time management skills; that's why I get stressed, because I always have so many assignments and so much work to do, and there's never enough time to get it all done." 16, female

Also:

"We all need to get the good scores to get a proper job, so without doing well at school, you won't get a proper start in life." 14, female

MENTAL HEALTH AND STRESS

Suicide was the leading cause of death for both males and females in the 15-24 year age group.[3]

One in three respondents said that coping with stress was one of their major concerns. The older the age group the more likely they were to choose stress as a major concern. Coping with stress was one of the three top issues of concern for just over half of 20-24 year olds, compared to 42.6% of 15-19 year olds and 27.4% of 11-14 year olds. Slightly more females than males mentioned coping with stress as a top issue of concern.

Coping with stress has steadily increased as a major concern over the past four years (increasing from 20.4% in 2008 to 35.4% in 2011). There are many possible stressors in a young person's life, as the Youth Survey highlights; such as study pressures, body image, family conflict, bullying and fears about personal safety, which appear to be young people's main concerns.

It is well documented that high levels of stress can lead to depression[1], which in turn can have the serious consequences of self-harm and suicide. Excessive amounts of stress have been linked to reduce functioning across a range of areas; home, work life and relationships.[2] The Australia Psychology Society reports that young people experience significantly higher levels of stress and lower levels of wellbeing than the general population, whilst concurrently reporting significantly higher levels of depression and anxiety than the general population (Stress and Wellbeing in Australia in 2011).

Depression is a major concern in the lives of almost one in five young people who completed the survey (18.1%) increasing with age (from 14.6% of 11-14 year olds to 35.1% for 20-24 year olds). Stress may be higher among the 20-24 year age group due to the added pressure that normally occurs around this age in the areas of work, employment, and financial issues, as well as issues with living arrangements.

Some of the comments noted that respondents were looking for better ways to combat stress in their life, with some mentioning relaxation techniques and time management.

"I believe I need to learn to relax in order to become less stressed. This can be done by meditating or finding activities which lower my stress levels. As well as become better at managing my time." 17, female

"Having courage and perseverance in myself, talk to a person about my fears of personal safety and also sit around in a quiet place meditating for a few minutes to keep calm." 12, female

Many mentioned the importance of talking to someone if they or someone else are experiencing stress, depression or a mental illness; whilst there were also a number of comments regarding the long term effects of not dealing with stress.

"Stress needs to be talked about with kids because they are turning to alcohol and drugs to relieve it. Especially in schools, the stress of high school can turn a happy young teenager into a wreck." 14, male

"Coping with stress is my main concern because stress can lead to a lot more harmful things in the future." 17, female

Some respondents felt that those working in the public health sector (e.g. General Practitioners) need to be more aware of mental illness and how to treat it.

"GP's need to be better educated about mental illness. My mental illness issues never get dealt with on the day. I always get told to make another appointment to discuss my options - then the 'next appointment' doesn't come around because I don't have the presence of mind/strength/mental energy to organise one." 24, female

Suicide and Self Harm:

Suicide was an issue of concern, although those reporting it as an issue has decreased considerably over the years (26.3%; 2009 declining to 9.9%; 2011). Self-harm as a concern has followed a similar pattern; being of concern to around 13.7% of respondents in 2008 and 6.4% in 2011. We know that in 2010, suicide was the leading cause of death for both males and females in the 15-24 year age group. Young adult males between the ages 20-24 have a consistently higher suicide rate than females of the same age group (males, 15.2%; females, 6.8%[2]) with five times more males than females committing suicide.[3] However, the Youth Survey results noted only a marginal difference between males and females regarding suicide as a concern.

Most comments about suicide and self-harm related to the need to raise awareness of the importance of speaking to someone and awareness of the organisations available to help.

"I think this should be taken very seriously, when someone talks about it, it should not be taken in a joking way. Most teenagers do not want to seek professional help; therefore it is much harder to help them, both in the long and short term. Suicide also affects everyone very heavily, even if they did not know the person personally. Suicide I think should be taught more clearly in school, for some people do not know what to do about these thoughts." 15, female

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[1] http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/public/depression/causesofdepression/stress.cfm

[2] Australian Psychological Society: Stress and Wellbeing in Australia in 2011.

[3] National Adolescent Health Information Centre: 2006 Fact Sheet on Suicide: Adolescents & Young Adults

BODY IMAGE

"Media shouldn't be advertising skinny models, they should advertise girls of all shapes and sizes, many girls have problem with their body size because of all the advertising." 14, female

Body Image was a concern for around one in three young people (33.1%), which has increased steadily over the past three years. Additionally, body image concerns increase with age; 30.4% of 11-14 year olds were concerned with body image, 35.5% of 15-19 year olds, and 41.1% of 20-24 year olds. While the issue is a major concern for females, with two in five females reporting this as a concern; males also expressed a great deal of concern over body image, with around one in five stating body image as a major concern.

The survey showed that young women from English-speaking and Southern European backgrounds are more concerned about body image than those from Asian and Arabic cultures. Also, of those young women who speak English at home, 44.2% listed body image as one of their leading concerns compared to 34.7% of females in non-English speaking households.

Dr Bronwen Dalton, Mission Australia, points out that "this latest analysis raises new questions about how body image initiatives by government and youth agencies should best be pursued. We need to consider why body image ranks as a greater concern among certain cultural groups than it does others and whether we need to develop different approaches for supporting and educating young women of different ethnic backgrounds?"[4]

CEO of the Butterfly Foundation, Ms. Christine Morgan, said that "the strong link between negative body image, particularly in young people, and long-term mental and physical impairment makes it crucial that we focus on finding sustainable solutions that can make a real impact on their health."[4]

Ms Morgan added that "this survey (Youth Survey 2011) has significant implications for our health system, as the growth of body image issues across language and cultural barriers may well be a precursor of a mental illness crisis. It would appear that a greater exposure to images, popular culture and lifestyle choices by some young people is pushing them to adopt body image anxiety, and possibly putting them on a road to disordered eating." [4]

Many of the comments from respondents refer to the media and the pressure that it imposes on young people to be unattainably perfect.

"I believe that the media should stop focusing so heavily on the size of your body as it puts enormous amounts of pressure on young adults (especially girls) to fit what the media depicts as society's norms and expectations." 17, male

"It is important to make people, in particular young girls, feel valued and accepting of themselves by removing anorexic models from advertisements, and increasing promotion of healthy lifestyles." 17, female

Some young people were confused by the media, or believed the media was being contradictory, as some stories they read were about obesity and the need for young people to lose weight, while media images show unrealistically small sized women as an image to aspire to.

"There are conflicting issues being presented with advertisements of ways to lose weight and the growing issue of obesity and then the contrasting campaigns against Photoshop and magazine images." 15, female

"There are so many warnings and ads about obesity but none about eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia." 17, female

There was considerable awareness expressed of further problems that poor body image can cause.

"Almost every person can relate or has experienced negative body image at some time of their life. Some minor, some major, leading to eating disorders, bullying, self harm and even suicide". 15, female

"I know that the concern of 'Body Image' can lead to anorexia, depression, anxiety. I have had all the above due to my image. It can cripple your mental and physical health and is the starter for many other family, personal and social issues....more time must be spent on seeking out those who are too afraid or embarrassed, and help them. This is a serious issue for both sexes and must be sorted out." 18, male

"The government needs to be able to regulate the images that teens/youths see today in magazines, on the Internet and other media outlets. There also needs to be a campaign that promotes healthy body images to reduce the number of youths that suffer from body image related conditions, such as anorexia and bulimia, but the campaign should also be aimed at males." 20, male.

[4] Mission Australia website, http://www.missionaustralia.com.au/daily-news/2668-report-finds-body-image-concerns-among-young-women-differ-between-cultures, accessed August 2012.

FAMILY CONFLICT

"What needs to be done is for more help to be available because I wouldn't even know what to do if I was in a position where I needed help." 15, male

The importance of family relationships is a major theme of the overall results of the National Survey of Young Australians. The 2011 survey once again confirms the importance of family in a young person's life, with a large majority of respondents (74.3%) identifying family relationships as highly valued. Given this, it is not surprising that family conflict was a significant concern for over one quarter of respondents (28.1%).

The level of concern around family conflict has remained constant over the past four years, although the older age group (20-24 year olds) are the least concerned (18.7%). Slightly more females than males stated family conflict as an issue of concern (29.4% and 26.6% respectively).

Some young people commented that family should provide more support and expressed some anger and disappointed that this support was not available to them and other young people.

"How is a family a family if you cannot get along happily and peacefully with one another?" 14, female

"Family conflict is a big part of my life. I think that my family should be more peaceful and calm to each other." 12, male

"Families need to be safe places where people can be comfortable. Parents don't deserve second chances if they mess up, doing bad things to their children then they should go to jail forever. It really makes me angry to see people on TV abuse their kids then only go to jail for a year. THEY SHOULD GO TO HELL!!! (this isn't a problem in my family 'cause I feel safe and loved)." 14, female

Another theme running through the comments was the awareness of the long term effects of family conflict on children.

"Family conflict is the worst. I have had personal experiences and it affects the child emotionally and mentally." 12, female

Some respondents did not know where to go to for help if they needed it and this led to little hope that the family conflict could be resolved. This feeling of hopelessness appears to be very distressing to a young person.

"Family members have different views, which often cause conflict. I don't see how this can be resolved." 15, male

"Families and parents need to be made more aware of the harm their actions have on their children and families, not just themselves." 22, female

BULLYING/EMOTIONAL ABUSE

"I need the bullying to stop because it is constantly going on. The school does nothing about it. I tell people, nothing has really been done and I want it to stop." 14, female

Just under a quarter of respondents (22.8%) were concerned about bullying, with the response rate remaining steady over the last four years. Bullying is of particularly concern for 11-14 year olds, with over a quarter (28.3%) being concerned about this issue. Concerns about bullying decrease significantly with age (18.1% of 15-19 year olds and 12.7% of 20-24 year olds). There is minimal difference in concern about bullying between genders. The survey found that if young people are to seek advice about bullying it will mainly be from their friends (77.0%) or parents (76.7%), with only around one in five young people seeking advice from teachers or school counsellors.

The literature suggests that bullying appears to be something that young people can't get away from, even once they are in the safety of their own home, due to the prevalence of cyberbullying. A DEEWR report: *'An approach to cybersafety for Australian schools'* (2010), shows that cybersafety is one of the most significant issues that schools are dealing with today, with over 70,000 Australian children and young people having experienced a personal safety or security problem on the internet. However, the internet and social networking play an important role in the lives of young people in Australia today, indicating that this type of bullying will play a major role in some young people's lives (DEEWR, 2010).

Young people feel a great deal of empathy towards those being bullied, as many of the quotes reveal; while others reveal the painful experience of being bulled. One of the main themes appears to be that those being bullied should talk to someone about it before it gets worse, which could then lead to mental health issues, self-harm or drug and alcohol abuse.

"Bullying can hurt everyone differently and it can lead to many bad things, the government should really make an effort in making it a number one thing because if bullying is to be stopped, then other things like underage drinking and drugs, self harm and other bad things that make someone get hurt will slowly stop." 14, female

"Bullying is a very big thing all around in the world, people have tried to commit suicide or attempted to, I think it needs to be stopped because it makes people feel ashamed of who they are." 13, female

"Bullying is my number one concern, people get enough shit at home they don't need it at school, they have enough stress and family things to worry about!" 14, male

Those experiencing or who have experienced bullying first-hand explain the pain and hopelessness they feel.

"The government needs to help to stop bullying before it fully develops. I was a victim of bullying a few years ago before I entered the Esther Foundation and it very nearly caused me to commit suicide. As a result of that bullying I became entrenched in other bad decisions that caused me to get involved with the law enforcement a few times. I have made it a personal life goal to change the circumstances caused by bullying in schools around the nation, thanks to Esther Foundation." 16, female

DRUGS AND ALCOHOL:

"I watch my friends think it's cool to get sloshed and that it's a joke when they're only ruining themselves." 16, female

Drugs and alcohol were issues of concern for less than one in five young people (16.9% and 15.2% respectively). In 2011 concern dropped among young people for both drugs and alcohol compared to 2010 (20.5% and 22.2% respectively).

Generally, concern about drugs drops considerably after the age of 14 years (11-14 year olds, 20.2%, 15-19 year olds, 13.9% and 20-24 year olds, 11.4%). However, concern over alcohol remains fairly steady across all age groups.

Drugs are considerably more concerning for males (22.5% compared with females 12.2%).

The same trends can be seen for alcohol (males 19.8% compared with 11.4% females).

Young people are just as likely to seek advice and support from their parents as they are from friends in regards to drugs. This is less so the case with alcohol.

Drugs:

Most responses were around the issue of young people not wanting to be involved in drugs, with fears around health and some legal implications.

"I don't want to get into drugs or my friends to. I am just scared that it is around and that people are taking them and getting arrested and going to jail." 12, male

"Drugs are a concerning issue for millions of Australians that are stressed and depressed. There is really no way of preventing illegal drugs from being used in this society, but I personally have aspired to avoid all self-harming drugs, no matter what it takes." 14, female

Alcohol:

It appears that many young people can see the damage that alcohol can cause and appear to be moving away from the thought that it is a soft drug.

"There needs to be tighter restrictions on imports coming in through quarantine and also more severe punishments for drugs and trafficking. With alcohol, I think the same strategy they used with cigarettes should be used. It should be priced expensively as well as having disturbing images of the effects of alcohol on the bottle." 14, male

"Alcohol needs to be distinguished as a drug which may be just as lethal as other drugs." 14, male

"Alcohol should be illegal just like drugs! How can you tell people to limit the amount of alcohol they drink when they are unaware that they are drinking because they are 'drunk'! Contradictory Much!" 22, female

Some young people can see the large part that alcohol plays in our society and how difficult it is to get away from it.

"Alcohol abuse is so endemic in our culture. Us young people cop all the crap for our bad behaviour when drinking, but we learnt to drink from the older generation who seem to not be able to do anything without." 20, male

"Alcohol is a big issue these days. I hate to think people my age are drinking, it's a waste. I think more education is needed, on the effects of alcohol dangers." 12, female

THE ENVIRONMENT:

"Australians need to be willing to make sacrifices, and lower their standard of living to ensure sustainability." 23, male

The environment as an issue of concern for young people has remained relatively steady since 2008. Almost one in five young people view the environment as one of their major concerns (17.7%). It appears that young people go through a process of concern; where at a very young age (11-14 year olds), they are particularly concerned about the environment (20.1%); they become less concerned as they head further into their teens and then develop a stronger opinion and concern about the environment in their 20's (18.5% 20-24 years noted the environment as a concern). Males and females appear to be equally concerned about the environment and young people are most likely to discuss this issue with their family and friends.

From the comments made by young people it appears that they do not believe enough is being done to protect the environment for this generation and future generations, with blame for this mainly directed at the Government.

"How it will affect other people in the future e.g.: when I grow up my family and friends may be extremely affected. People need to realise the importance of the environment and need to care for it more." 12, female

"Government needs to implement better environmental policies, especially in relation to global warming. Such as a carbon trading scheme and better land-use laws." 16, male

Some young people believe that we may need to accept a change in our standard of living to accommodate improvements to the environment.

"We all need to accept that the environment is all of our problem and that we all need to help. The environment is what keeps all of us living and surviving." 15, female

"Saving energy, saving water, less carbon in the air and helping the environment, e.g.: planting plants etc." 12, male

"The environment is the most important thing; work at community, federal and global levels should be increasing to help solve this problem." 15, female

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The online comments from the National Survey of Young Australians, together with the quantitative data, offer some unique insights on the major concerns of young Australians. Some specific policy considerations relating to the top three issues of concern are provided below:

• School or Study Problems was the top concern for respondents, highlighting the importance of initiatives to support young people's social and emotional wellbeing during their schooling. The provision of integrated support focusing on prevention and early intervention remains critical for young people, particularly in relation to the promotion of physical and mental health during times of stress.

School-based initiatives have the capacity to identify issues for young people before they escalate and provide supports that build resilience and enhance coping skills. Greater collaboration between school-based support and mental health, drug and alcohol, and family violence support services will ensure young people have access to a broad suite of initiatives.

While school-based initiatives are crucial, there is a growing need for peer support and family-focused responses to be developed and delivered in relevant and appropriate settings outside the school environment. With the majority of respondents indicating they would seek advice from their peers or parents, greater attention should be given to programs that build capacity and responsiveness of peer groups and parents to support young people.

There are a number of existing policy initiatives that aim to enhance the educational outcomes and support for young people such as the National Partnership Agreement on Youth

Attainment and Transitions. Under this agreement, case management and outreach services provided to young people through the Youth Connections program provide individualised and flexible responses to young people experiencing significant challenges that may affect their educational outcomes. As the current National Partnership Agreement on Youth Attainment and Transitions concludes at the end of 2012, important consideration will need to be given to shaping future policy to ensure it continues to prioritise the social and emotional wellbeing of young people.

• Coping with stress was also a major concern for young people with bullying/emotional abuse, depression, suicide and self-harm all featuring in the top concerns. This highlights the need for early intervention initiatives relating to the mental health and wellbeing of young people and the skilling up of friends, parents and other significant adults to identify when young people are struggling and how best to support them.

It also confirms the direction that the Australian Government has taken in its National Mental Health Reform Agenda 2011-12; strengthening its focus on prevention and early intervention through creating partnerships between family support and health services, and expanding on a significant scale proven models of mental health care such as Headspace and Early Psychosis Prevention and Intervention Centres.

Early recognition of, and support for young people within the education system who are exhibiting signs of mental illness assists young people to remain actively engaged and participating in school to the extent that they are able to complete their education. This is particularly important given people with mental illness experience greater disruptions in education than the general population (Best, Still & Cameron, 2008).

A focus on the educational needs of young people experiencing mental illness is a critical step towards enhancing social inclusion and workforce participation. Programs such as Mission Australia's Catalyst-Clemente program have actively supported and re-engaged students and subsequently improved their wellbeing.

Schools and other services have a vital role to play in the early identification and intervention of mental health issues to ensure young people are able to make successful life transitions between educational systems, training or employment. There is a need to ensure education and service providers are appropriately equipped to do so by increasing their mental health literacy, but also ensuring they have the appropriate information they require to engage additional support to help the young people they are working with. This is particularly important given the extent of the issue – approximately 14% of 12-17 year olds have some form of mental health problem, with the majority (75%) of these problems emerging before the age of 25 years; yet only one in four young people experiencing mental health problems receive professional help.[5] Programs such as Stay on Track previously implemented by Mission Australia in Tasmania to increase community awareness about depression offers a practical example of how such initiatives can occur within a school.

• The level of concern regarding body image among young Australians has been linked to messages and cultural norms proclaiming thinness as the ideal body type, combined with individual risk factors such as perfectionism and low self-esteem (Shulman & Mulloy-Anderson, 2009). Since 2009, the Australian Government has introduced a number of initiatives to promote positive body image among young people in Australia.

These include the Voluntary Industry Code of Conduct on Body Image and Positive Body Image Awards to guide the media, fashion and advertising industries to adopt more body image friendly practices and the expansion of the Butterfly Foundation's 'Free to Be' body image education services, of which it is estimated over 25,000 educators will receive new resources, with an expected reach of over 100,000 young people. All these initiatives focus on empowering individuals to recognise and counter damaging society and peer messages while simultaneously developing self-esteem and body acceptance. Careful evaluation of these initiatives is needed in order to understand their impact and inform future policy initiatives.

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[5] http://www.headspace.org.au/media/75806/prospectus_web.pdf

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS (CONTINUED)

The 2011 Youth Survey's findings also highlight the need for ongoing support for interventions that focus on the development of young people's sense of autonomy, trust and self-esteem and identity. Mission Australia's Body Talk program is an example of just such support. The program recruits South Australian teenagers to be 'Body Image Ambassadors' to provide peer-to-peer mentoring to promote resilience to body image pressures.

Many of the issues of concern identified by respondents appear to have elements of commonality but our service experience has shown us that the most important response we can provide is one that is holistic, tailored and individualised and places the young person at the centre of the response. Policy that enables services to tailor their approach to both recognise and meet the needs of young people will help to address many of the issues of concern for young people.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

THANKS