Mission Australia
TRANSFORM

Macquarie Group
Foundation

Insights into the concerns of young Australians: Making sense of the numbers

SNAPSHOT 2010

In 2009 Mission Australia conducted its eighth annual *National survey of young Australians*. The survey asked young people aged 11 to 24 years about what they value, their concerns, where they go for advice and support and who they admire.

Around 48,000 young Australians from a range of backgrounds participated. Just over half were aged between 11 and 14, nearly 47% were aged between 15 and 19 and a small proportion (2.1%) were young adults aged 20 to 24. Just over half the respondents (52.4%) were female, 5.0% of all participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and 14.4% spoke a language other than English at home. 56.4% lived in capital cities while the rest lived in regional and rural areas.

Young people were asked to rank their concerns from the list in Table 1. The top three issues nationally were *drugs*, *suicide* and *body image*, with just over a quarter of respondents ranking each of them as a major concern. There was no one 'standout' issue, with eight items being of significant concern to at least one in five respondents.

Those who completed the survey online were also given the opportunity to make additional comments about their issues of concern. The nature of young people's concerns is explored in further detail in this publication, drawing on the online comments. They offer further insights and shed some light on the numerical information young people provided.

Table 1: Issues of concern to young people, 2009

Issue	%
Drugs	26.8
Suicide	26.3
Body image	25.5
Family conflict	24.1
Bullying/emotional abuse	23.4
Alcohol	23.0
Physical/sexual abuse	22.7
Personal safety	22.2
Coping with stress	18.7
Depression	18.7
School or study problems	17.3
The environment	16.7
Self harm	13.3
Discrimination	11.7
Sexuality (relationships, health, identity)	11.4

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

DRUGS

I have been hearing terrible stories about drugs.

Drugs was the top concern for respondents, and was a major issue for a much higher proportion of the youngest age group (those aged 11 to 14 years), than it was for those aged 15 to 24 years. This level of concern does not reflect usage rates, as younger adolescents are less likely than older adolescents to have recently used illicit drugs (4.6% of 12 to 15 year olds compared with 23.4% of 18 to 19 year olds, AIHW, 2008a). The online comments suggest that younger respondents were aware of the issue of drugs and hopeful that drug use did not become part of their life:

I am very concerned about drugs and use of them. I have been hearing terrible stories about them. (Male, 11 yrs)

I hope no one offers me drugs. (Male, 13 yrs)

Many respondents reported being worried about the relationship between peer pressure and drug usage:

… peer pressure is something that I'm quite worried about … because it makes lots of things like drugs or alcohol worse. You might say you won't be silly with things like that but you don't know what will happen in different settings when you are under peer pressure. (Female, 12 yrs)

Taking drugs is a major concern for me. Many peers and people I have met could develop problems, and there is a major concern that it could spread to other people including myself with peer pressure. (Male, 16 yrs)

The 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey found that 'friends and acquaintances' were the group most likely to supply a young person with their first illicit drug, and the most common reasons given by young people aged 12 to 19 for first usage were curiosity and peer pressure (AIHW, 2008b).

The responses from the *2009 National survey of young Australians* suggest that whilst young adolescents are concerned and aware about the issue of drugs, many in this group do not feel equipped with the skills to deal with this issue should it arise in their lives. This highlights the need for more effective evidence based drug education programs that assist young people to develop the skills to deal with the issue within the social contexts in which it is likely to occur. Programs such as the School Health and Alcohol Harm Reduction Project provide some direction for where drug education programs might head (NDRI, 2009).

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS AND CONFLICT

Family conflict is a terrible issue... and it's almost irreparable.

The importance of family relationships is a major theme of the overall results of the *National survey*. The survey confirms the importance of family in a young person's life, with a large majority (75.6%) of respondents identifying *family relationships* as highly valued and a similar proportion (73.4%) indicating *parents* are an important source of advice and support. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that *family conflict* was a significant concern for between a fifth and a quarter of each age group and both genders, with comments reflecting the significant impact that family conflict or breakdown can have.

I feel that family conflict is a terrible issue that has occurred in my family, and it's almost irreparable. Everyone in the family and some outside the family are affected and it sticks in your mind for a long time. (Female, 12 yrs)

Family conflict: Because my mum and dad split up and then my dad committed suicide. I don't want to go through that again. (Male, 13 yrs)

I've been through two break ups and am concerned about my family. (Male, 12 yrs)

Family relationships are important to me because there are so many families torn apart by divorce. (Female, 24 yrs)

Some respondents wrote of their concern that not enough was done to support families in times of crisis:

There needs to be more of a support network from governments and other organisations when the family breaks down. (Male, 24 yrs)

MENTAL HEALTH AND STRESS

28% of all male deaths among 15 to 24 year olds were due to suicide.

Adolescence is a critical time for mental health and studies estimate that 75% of adult mental disorders begin in adolescence (Hickie et al, 2004). The 2007 National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing found that about one in four Australians aged 16 to 24 years had a mental health disorder in the preceding 12 months (ABS, 2008). While suicide rates among those aged 15 to 24 years are lower than for other age groups, suicide accounts for a very significant proportion of deaths in this age group. In 2008, 28% of all male deaths among 15 to 24 year olds were due to suicide (ABS, 2010).

At least one in five young people across all three age groups who responded to the 2009 *National survey* indicated that *suicide* was a major concern, and that rose to one in four for those aged 11 to 19 years. Male and female respondents were equally likely to identify it as a top issue (around a quarter of both groups). Young people's comments reflected an awareness and deep concern about this issue, including some who wrote about their own struggle with suicidal thoughts:

Suicide is going around a lot in our days so I think something should be done. (Male, 11 yrs)

I think suicide is terrible because people are choosing to die where they could be alive. (Female, 12 yrs)

Suicide is my worrying factor because sometimes you feel so down it does cross your mind. (Male, 13 yrs)

The *National survey* also found that both *coping with stress* and *depression* were of concern to a higher proportion of young adults and those in their mid teens than to those in their early teens. Around 30% of young adults and a fifth of those aged 15 to 19 years indicated that both these issues were major concerns. A number of respondents indicated they were juggling a number of stresses and identified a possible link to other issues:

I am mostly concerned 'bout school or study problems. I am in year 11 and I feel myself getting more stressed and worried about what happens if I fail an exam or don't do well in my HSC. Life seems to be getting harder and harder. (Female, 16 yrs)

I know a lot of teenagers are struggling to cope with pressure and stress put on them by family, friends and school/uni. I know how these stresses can cause other problems such as depression and in worse cases suicide. (Female, 18 yrs)

There is so much pressure and need to become an adult, independent and self-reliant yet in school there is little education on how to achieve this i.e. understanding budgeting, saving, credit card use, rental issues etc combine this with alcohol, drug use and partying and we can become vulnerable and learn habits that will not help us succeed in life. (Female, 24 yrs)

MENTAL HEALTH AND STRESS (CONTINUED)

Depression still widely goes unnoticed... People are afraid to seek help.

There were a number of comments regarding depression, including the likelihood of it going unnoticed, the availability of services, the difficulty in seeking help and the stigma that can be associated with mental health issues. One study has found the main barriers to young people seeking mental health care include a desire for autonomy, anticipated shame or embarrassment, a fear of not being understood by health providers and anticipated time or money constraints (Wilson et al, 2002).

Depression is something that still widely goes unnoticed. Particularly schools and work places need more information about the impact depression can have on a young person's life; and how hard it can be to function normally when the black dog has its teeth around your neck. (Female, 17 yrs)

Depression sucks and a lot of teens turn to the internet because they don't know who to turn to. Unlike the other issues, depression/suicide/self harm aren't widely discussed making it even harder for someone to recognise and do something about it if they or a mate are being affected. (Female, 14 yrs)

People are afraid to seek help concerning depression. (Male, 20 yrs)

Diagnosing major depression was easy, but doing something about it is hard. (Female, 20 yrs)

Too many young people within my life are dealing with suicide and depression and a lot of them feel like there aren't many adequate services to accommodate for them. Or are too afraid to access help. (Female, 17 yrs)

BODY IMAGE

I wish the media would back off and leave young people alone.

Just over a quarter (25.5%) of respondents to the *National survey* identified *body image* as a major concern. This is a decline from 2007 when a third of respondents were significantly concerned about it, but it remains a major concern for both genders and all three age groups.

The recently developed *National strategy on body image* focuses on addressing three influences on young people's body image: cultural messages; the immediate social environment; and individual characteristics (National Advisory Group on Body Image, 2009). Comments from survey respondents indicate their awareness of the interplay between social and individual factors in influencing a person's body image and self esteem.

They suggest young people's concern about this issue does not necessarily reflect doubts about their own appearance, but is often prompted by external factors such as the role media plays in discussion about body image.

I listed my concerns, not because they're a problem in my life, but because I think there needs to be more discussion about them. Body image is always going to be a problem because the media puts too much pressure on what young girls should look like. (Female, 15 yrs)

I wish the media would back off and leave young people alone. It's a lot harder to like yourself and your body image with the media always telling you what to do! (Female, 15 yrs)

BULLYING/EMOTIONAL ABUSE

One in four students from Years 4 to 9 are bullied frequently.

Bullying/emotional abuse was a major concern for about a quarter (25.4%) of 11 to 14 year olds, and around a fifth of respondents aged 15 to 24. Bullying occurs most commonly at a younger age, with some research finding that one in four students from Year 4 to Year 9 are bullied frequently (Child Health Promotion Research Centre, 2009). Bullying can take a variety of forms and occur through mediums such as social networking websites, making it difficult to combat (Child Health Promotion Research Centre, 2009).

Many respondents saw bullying as an experience which damages self-confidence and leaves a young person vulnerable to a number of other difficulties:

I think that all bullying and harassment should be stopped because it can lead to people committing suicide and inflicting self harm. (Female, 13 yrs)

Bullying leads to self esteem issues, when you have no self esteem you do things and let things get done to you that can either be dangerous or just demeaning. You can only live a good, successful happy life if you feel you deserve it. (Female, 17 yrs)

ALCOHOL

Young women are slightly more likely than young men to consume alcohol at risky levels.

Alcohol was a major concern for nearly a quarter (23.0%) of respondents nationally. As in previous years, males (27.6%) were more likely than females (19.0%) to indicate it was a significant concern. Around one third of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents also indicated it was a significant issue.

Alcohol usage varies both by gender and age, with males aged 16 to 17 years more likely than their female contemporaries to drink at least once a week (21.7% compared with 15.4%). The rates for those aged 12 to 15 years however show 3.7% of females and 1.0% of males are likely to drink at least once a week. Further, young women are slightly more likely than young men to consume alcohol at a rate which puts them at risk of harm in both the short and longer term (AIHW, 2008a).

The survey comments relating to alcohol primarily came from older respondents, many of whom indicated an awareness of the prevalence of binge drinking and its negative effects.

People my age go out Friday night and don't get home till Sunday. They're trashing themselves to the point of utter stupidity. (Female, 18 yrs)

I think alcohol is a major issue, especially binge drinking. I am a binge drinker and I come from a family who has abused alcohol for generations. I'm concerned that I will move from binge drinking to more regular drinking. (Female, 23 yrs)

Alcohol particularly is pretty bad, especially when you have 14-year-olds bingeing on the hard stuff… (Male, 19 yrs)

Some respondents urged for more effort to reduce alcohol consumption in Australia.

I think drug and alcohol issues are very prevalent in our society and more emphasis needs to be put into education surrounding these topics. (Female, 20 yrs)

I wish Australian culture didn't normalize getting drunk or smoking. Both are addictive and ruin people's lives. (Female, 18 yrs)

Too many people my age are destroying their futures with drugs and alcohol, and more needs to be done to help these people in rural areas. (Male, 16 yrs)

PHYSICAL/SEXUAL ABUSE

Many young people are too afraid to report abuse or to seek counselling to help them.

More than one in five respondents identified *physical/sexual abuse* as a major issue, with females (27.5%) more likely than males (17.0%) to indicate it was a concern. Females are up to three times more likely than males to be sexually abused, and males slightly more likely than females to be physically abused (AIHW, 2010).

The comments from survey respondents revealed deep concern about abuse and an awareness of its far reaching ramifications, including the stigma that can be associated with it:

Physical and sexual abuse is extremely bad and needs to stop. (Male, 13 yrs)

The most concerning issues to me are abuse: both physical/sexual and emotional... these are not just issues in themselves but can be the catalyst for many of the other issues… many young people are too afraid to report abuse or to seek counselling to help them deal with their experiences. Many also do not know how to help friends who have suffered abuse so they ignore the issue. (Female, 20 yrs)

PERSONAL SAFETY

Personal safety was a major concern for one in five young people.

Personal safety was a major concern to just over one in five (22.2%) young people responding to the survey. A substantial proportion of the online responses, especially those from younger participants, raised this issue and focused on both an awareness of the importance of safety for their wellbeing and anxiety about their own safety, especially when on the streets:

I think that it is important to feel safe and to think that you are needed in this world and that there's always something good. (Female, 12 yrs)

I'm concerned about personal safety the most due to all the random people walking around the streets, when I am walking alone or with just one of my friends and there is a total stranger that seems suspicious I get out my mobile phone for security reasons as I feel that that person could do anything to my friend and I. (Female, 12 yrs)

I am concerned about personal safety because it is easy to be hurt. (Male, 14 yrs)

Other research has found that about a quarter of young people aged 18 to 24 feel unsafe or very unsafe walking in their local area after dark (General Social Survey, 2006, in Office for Youth, 2009). Over a 12 month period, 8.9% of young people aged 15 to 24 were victims of assault, and about one in three of all male victims of assault and one in five of all female victims of assault were aged between 15 and 24. (AIHW, 2007).

It is also possible that young people may be disproportionately fearful about their own safety and this could be engendered by media reporting of violence as well as levels of anxiety regarding community safety that are expressed by parents and other significant adults.

THE ECONOMY

Most young people are deeply concerned with their future. Surely you know this?

Although *the economy* was not included on the survey list of concerns, it received a number of unprompted comments in the online survey. These focused on issues such as youth (un)employment, financial security and the economy at large, perhaps reflecting the more straitened economic times experienced internationally during 2009. Most comments were from older respondents and concerned their personal concerns for the future, while some addressed concerns about family members:

Future security. I have the degree but am unable to find a job which is a) worthwhile or b) pays well. Most young people are deeply concerned with their future. Surely you know this? It's all any of my friends talk about. (Male, 23 yrs)

I found myself feeling worried about the future, especially having failed to secure a graduate job for next year. (Female, 21 yrs)

My major concern is how am I going to afford to live. There is no way I will ever be able to afford a house. Everything is owned by the older generations. (Male, 24 yrs)

I worried about my dad because he hasn't had a job since last Christmas. (Male, 13 yrs)

POLICY AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

The online comments from the *National survey of young Australians*, together with its quantitative data, offer some unique insights on the major concerns of young Australians and provide directions for policy and practice. These include:

- An increased focus on evidence-based drug education programs, particularly for younger adolescents, which provide them with the skills to effectively deal with the issue should it arise.

- A continued emphasis on early intervention strategies for families experiencing difficulties, in order to avoid an escalation of conflict that can have a deep and lasting impact on young people. Programs that support parents and other significant adults to communicate openly with young people, including through times of stress, are required.

- Early intervention initiatives relating to the mental health and wellbeing of young people are also required, including strategies to enhance their mental health literacy and capacity to ask for help when needed, and the skilling up of those closest to them (friends, parents and other significant adults) to identify when young people are struggling and how best to support them. Ongoing public discussion about the level of stress young people may feel under from a variety of sources, including their efforts to balance education, work and recreation as well as the expectations of family, peers, educators, employers and the community, would be helpful given the significant number of young Australians experiencing mental health issues.

- Education campaigns regarding alcohol that are targeted to young people need to be nuanced to take account of gender differences.

- Current national initiatives regarding body image, including those focusing on the role of the media in young people's self esteem, appear to be heading in the right direction and need to be mindful of both the similarities and differences between young males and females regarding this issue.

- A continued national focus on reducing bullying, in all its forms and wherever it occurs, is also required given its potential long term negative impact.

- The safety of young people in all their environments must be a national priority. Legislative frameworks at both the state/territory and national levels can support this priority, as can the development of youth friendly communities, where young people are seen as important contributors both now and into the future. The development of such communities will be particularly important as Australia's population ages in order to ensure that community cohesion remains a hallmark of Australian society. Young people also need to be supported to develop good personal safety habits as well as be given the freedom to actively participate in safe communities.

REFERENCES

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) *National Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing 2007* Canberra, ABS.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2010). *Causes of death, Australia, 2008*. Cat. No. 3303.0. Canberra: ABS.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2007) *Young Australians: Their health and wellbeing 2007*, Canberra, AIHW.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008a) '2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey: First results'. *Drug statistics series No. 22*, Canberra, AIHW.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2008b) '2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey: Detailed findings'. *Drug statistics series No. 22*, Canberra, AIHW.

Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (2010) 'Child protection Australia 2008-09' *Child welfare series no. 47*, Canberra, AIHW.

Child Health Promotion Research Centre (2009) *Australian Covert Bullying Prevalence Study*, Perth, Edith Cowan University.

Hickie, I. et al (2004) *Investing in Australia's future*, Canberra, Mental Health Council of Australia.

Office for Youth (2009) *State of Australia's Young People: A Report on the social, economic, health and family lives of young people,* Canberra, Office for Youth.

National Advisory Group on Body Image (2009) *Body Image: Information paper*, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia.

National Drug Research Institute (NDRI) (2009). SHAHRP: *School health and alcohol harm reduction project*, http://ndri.curtin.edu.au/research/shahrp/

Wilson, C.J. et al (2002) *Adolescent barriers to seeking professional psychological help for personal-emotional and suicidal problems*. Conference Proceedings of the 9th Annual Conference for Suicide Prevention Australia, June 2002, Sydney.

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

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

Anne Hampshire
National Manager, Research and Social Policy, Mission Australia

T: (02) 9219 2000
F: (02) 9264 3713
E: socialpolicy@missionaustralia.com.au

www.missionaustralia.com.au

THANKS

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

MACQUARIE

Macquarie Group Foundation