

# 2021 YOUTH SURVEY OVERVIEW

The Mission Australia Youth Survey is the largest annual survey of young people in Australia. Now in its 20th year, the Youth Survey aims to identify the values, aspirations and issues of concern to young people. In 2021, 20,207 young people in Australia aged 15 to 19 years participated in the Youth Survey.



**20,207**  
RESPONDENTS  
aged 15-19 years

The Youth Survey hears from young people during a key transitional period in their lives. For some young people this is an exciting period filled with positive experiences and healthy stresses they can manage, but for a considerable number the findings of this survey point to a difficult and challenging time if not appropriately supported.

The Youth Survey 2021 showed that most young people were engaged in study or work, felt confident about the future and were happy with their lives. It also highlighted some important areas of concern and challenge. The issues identified by young people in the Youth Survey 2021 reflect the findings of other research that demonstrate similar trends.

In response to questions in the Youth Survey 2021, young people continued to demonstrate a strong civic awareness and concern about a range of issues. **They nominated COVID-19, the environment, and equity and discrimination as key issues that Australia needs to address.** These issues were also reflected in the top concerns for young people personally, the most important of which were coping with stress, mental health and school and study problems.

## Most important issues:

 **COVID-19**  
45.7%

 **The environment**  
38.0%

 **Equity and discrimination**  
35.4%

As in previous years, responses to the Youth Survey 2021 reveal that, in general, young females have more heightened concerns than young males about some issues and were more likely to experience certain negative outcomes. This includes in areas such as confidence in achieving study or work goals and barriers to achieving their goals, concerns about coping with stress, mental health and body image, and unfair treatment due to gender. The experiences and concerns of gender diverse young people were even more heightened in relation to all of these and additional areas.

While the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people were connected to education, valued their family and friends and felt positive about the future, they also reported more and deeper challenges than their non-Indigenous peers, including being less likely to feel happy or very happy with their lives. Particularly concerning is the higher proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander respondents who reported having been treated unfairly in the past year compared with non-Indigenous respondents (47.1% compared with 33.6% of non-Indigenous respondents). Half (52.5%) of those who had been treated unfairly said the reason was race/cultural background.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young females had more heightened concerns and were more likely to experience negative outcomes in a number of areas than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young males, including concerns about mental health and related issues. Of particular concern, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander female respondents experienced comparatively low levels of happiness and comparatively high levels of stress.

The marked differences based on gender and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander status indicate that policy and service responses to the issues and concerns raised in the Youth Survey need a nuanced approach. The inclusion of data for gender diverse young people this year has highlighted some particular challenges for this group.

These findings remind us that diversity has to be specifically recognised and included in the development of strategies, programs and policies for young people. It is incumbent on us all – governments, health professionals, community services, businesses, schools, members of the community – to create welcoming environments that are responsive to the needs of all young people, whatever their background and circumstances.

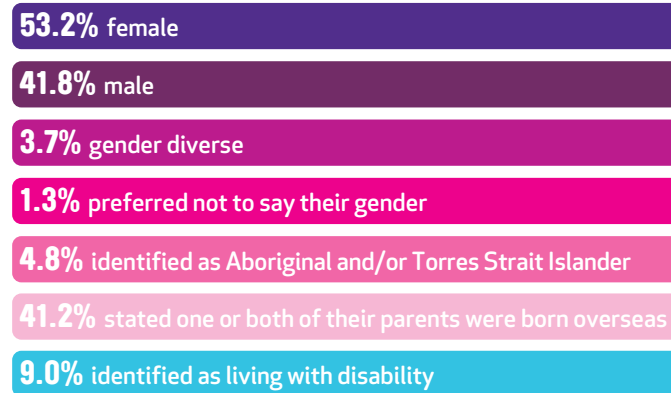
**Young people need to be at the centre of policy and service design and development, to bring their unique perspective to bear on issues that affect them and on the development of solutions.**



# KEY FINDINGS



**20,207**  
RESPONSES



In 2021, a notable proportion of young people identified as gender diverse. As a result, for the first time, the responses from gender diverse young people are included in gender breakdowns in the *Youth Survey 2021 Report*.



**studying full-time**

**84.5%**  
of young people

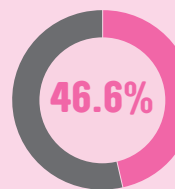


**employed part-time**

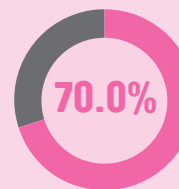
**45.4%**  
of young people



**barriers that impact on study or work goals**



**of young people studying identified barriers to achieving their study or work goals**



**of gender diverse young people studying identified barriers to achieving their study or work goals**

**Top 3 barriers identified by all respondents studying:**



**Mental health**  
51.5%



**Academic ability**  
42.1%



**COVID-19**  
32.2%



**Mental health**  
83.2% compared with 51.5%



**Discrimination**  
29.4% compared with 6.9%



**Lack of family support**  
21.9% compared with 9.8%

**Compared to all those studying, much higher proportions of gender diverse young people identified as barriers:**



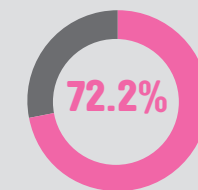
**concerns about mental health**

**41.9%**

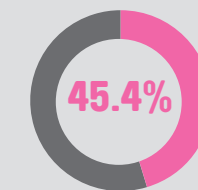
**of young people were extremely or very concerned about mental health**

## Gender diverse young people

Gender diverse young people experienced poorer mental health across numerous indicators throughout the survey. This data shows that particular care and consideration is needed when developing mental health responses, services and recommendations.



**were highly concerned\* about mental health as a personal issue**



**rated their mental health and wellbeing as poor**



**feelings of safety**

**31.2%**

**were highly concerned about bullying/emotional abuse** compared with 13.3% of all respondents

**30.9%**

**were highly concerned about personal safety** compared with 19.3% of all respondents

\*'Highly concerned' consists of those who responded as feeling extremely or very concerned.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females also experienced higher levels of personal concern about mental health and related issues than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males:



**Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females**

**50.3%**

**were highly concerned about mental health**

**48.5%**

**were highly concerned about coping with stress**

**44.3%**

**were highly concerned about body image**

Many young people's screen, exercise and sleep habits are outside of the Australian physical activity and exercise guidelines for 5- to 17-year-olds<sup>1</sup>.



**screen, exercise and sleep habits**

**77.0%**

**spent more than 5 hours on screens per day**

**67.4%**

**engaged in less than 7 hours of exercise per week**

**21.6%**

**were getting 6 hours or less of sleep per night**

# MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES IN AUSTRALIA

1



COVID-19

45.7%

identified it as one of the most important issues in Australia

compared with 38.8% in 2020

Young people identified areas of their life negatively impacted by COVID-19.

## Top 3 areas impacted negatively by COVID-19



Participation in activities

68.3%



Education

62.3%



Mental health

50.3%

**"[COVID-19 has affected me] through the cancellation of events and uncertainty about the future as well as an inability to do things I want to do. I think about the future, both immediate and long term, and I really want to travel however COVID quashes those dreams every time)."**

Female, ACT, 16, non-Indigenous

2

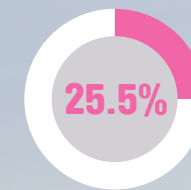


THE ENVIRONMENT

38.0%

identified it as one of the most important issues in Australia

An increase from 34.2% in 2019



of young people were personally extremely or very concerned about climate change

**"Every problem we face, not just as Australians but as citizens of Earth, can be linked back to discrimination and climate change. We must take action to not only acknowledge Australia's casual racism and complete lack of action against climate change but to take action and implement initiatives and legislation that will require us to do something about these problems. We cannot continue to treat our fellow human beings so poorly, we must call ourselves on our dreadful behaviour and work to improve. We have no future without a habitable planet."**

Non-binary, 16, NSW, non-Indigenous

**"Climate change, I am very concerned as to the effects of massive industry gas emissions on the environment and global climate change and the birds not coming home in spring."**

Male, 15, TAS, non-Indigenous

**"I've felt very depressed about the future of the Earth. I have lost a lot of faith in humanity, and feel like nothing is being done (or very little, very slowly) to reduce the effect of climate change."**

Female, 15, QLD, non-Indigenous


# 3

## EQUITY AND DISCRIMINATION


**35.4%** identified it as one of the most important issues in Australia  
An increase from 24.8% in 2019

In 2021, 34.2% of respondents reported experiencing unfair treatment themselves, in the past year, which is an increase from the 27.0% of respondents reporting unfair treatment in 2020<sup>2</sup>.


### Top 3 reasons given for unfair treatment

-  **Gender**  
37.3%

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-  **Mental health**  
27.6%

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-  **Race/cultural background**  
27.6%

Higher proportions of gender diverse young people reported being unfairly treated (69.9% compared with 38.3% of females and 25.3% of males).

**69.9%** of gender diverse young people reported being unfairly treated

Close to half (47.1%) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experienced unfair treatment. Double the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people experienced unfair treatment due to their *race/cultural background*.

**52.5%** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people who experienced unfair treatment said it was due to *race/cultural background*

**References**  
1. Department of Health, n.d. Physical activity and exercise guidelines for all Australians, <https://www.health.gov.au/health-topics/physical-activity-and-exercise/physical-activity-and-exercise-guidelines-for-all-australians#:~:text=Physical%20activity%20and%20exercise%20guidelines%20for%20all%20Australians,02%206269%201080.%204%20Summary%20by%20age.%20>  
2. Tiller, E., Fildes, J., Hall, S., Hicking, V., Greenland, N., Liyanarachichi, D. and Di Nicola, K. 2020. Youth Survey Report 2020, Sydney, NSW: Mission Australia.

**“My biggest concern is discrimination of any kind. Kids need to have consequences instead of being told to not do it again then being let off.”**  
Non-binary, 15, NSW, non-Indigenous

**“As someone with Asian heritage I have been worried about myself, my family and other Asian friends when going out in public due to the rapid increase in Asian hate crimes. I think that a much wider education of the impacts and causes of racism need to be applied into Australian society.”**  
Not listed, NSW, 16, non-Indigenous