Parliament of Victoria

Young people in Victoria

Ben Reid

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Research Note

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Table of Contents

Executive summary

Victorian people aged between 18 and 30 across the state face particular problems as they confront the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis. Lower incomes, less secure employment, lower home ownership rates and a greater reliance on the private housing rental market all result in greater vulnerability.

While experiencing better overall health than the adult population as a whole, they have become far more susceptible to mental health risks. The higher incidence of mental ill-health amongst younger people has become further exacerbated. It has reached a point at which many now proclaim there is a ‘crisis’. The policy measures taken by different jurisdictions can seem ‘too little and too late.’

While the 2024–25 Victorian Government state budget mentioned intergenerational equity, it only made limited proposals. Younger people are likelier to have more negative views on parliaments and elections. However, they are engaged with politics and public policy in their own ways. Various youth consultation bodies exist, and the Parliament of Victoria and sections of the state government have developed engagement strategies. Gaps often exist between these bodies’ suggestions and what representative institutions implement; ignoring young people’s proposals for action risks further alienation and disenchantment.

1 | Introduction

Like any demographic, young people experience the social, economic and political climate in particular ways. They invariably face specific problems that reflect their circumstances and life-cycle stage. Currently, a combination of shorter- and longer-term issues is confronting communities in Victoria. The high point of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated policy measures have passed, giving way to increasing cost-of-living pressures and associated monetary policy responses (for instance, increases in interest rates and borrowing costs).[1] There is also ongoing evidence of disenchantment with representative democratic institutions.[2]

Younger people often experience these problems more acutely than other demographics. While they are less susceptible to the COVID-19 virus, evidence exists that restrictions on movement and other policy measures substantially impacted younger people's states of mind and psychosocial development.[3] As this paper outlines, there is considerable evidence of worsening mental health amongst young people. Young people face significant challenges from cost-of-living pressures, with members of this demographic more often studying or in training and employed in lower-paid and less secure jobs. Usually either renting privately or paying off mortgages, younger demographics were disproportionately impacted by recent increases in housing costs.

Parliaments and other representative institutions confront significant challenges in engaging with the public. While this is also true of their engagement with younger people, there is evidence that this demographic has developed ways of engaging in issues of public policy that tend to eschew traditional institutions and practices.[4]

This paper adds to the discussion of these issues in Victoria in three ways. First, the 'Snapshot' section outlines the demographics of younger people in Victoria. In doing so, it uses the definition of 'younger people' employed by the Victorian Parliament's engagement policies: those aged between 18 and 30. Recognising the significant differences within this age cohort, it presents separate data on the 18–25 and 26–30 age groups where relevant.

Second, the paper outlines the results of more recent survey data—notably Monash University's *Youth Barometer* and Mission Australia's *Youth Survey* reports—which present more of a focus on the last 12 to 18 months for the 18-25-year-old demographic.[5]

Third, the paper outlines some recent research surrounding youth and political engagement. It focuses on debates over education and civics and what recent survey data reveals. The latter relies upon the national-level *Australian Election Survey*, as Victorian-scale research does not exist.[6] Finally, it reviews recent efforts by the Parliament of Victoria and the Australian government to consult with the youth sector.

[1] Ipsos (2024) *Ipsos Issues monitor April 2024*, Melbourne, Ipsos.
[2] S. Cameron (2020) 'Government performance and dissatisfaction with democracy in Australia', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 55(2), pp. 170–190.
[3] P. D. McGorry, D. Coghill & M. Berk (2023) 'Mental health of young Australians: dealing with a public health crisis', *Medical Journal of Australia*, 219(6), pp. 246–249.
[4] A. Pennington (2023) *Gen F'd? How young Australians can reclaim their uncertain futures*, Melbourne, Hardie Grant Books.
[5] L. Walsh, B. G. Cordoba, B. Cutler, T. B. Huynh & Z. Deng (2023) *The 2023 Australian Youth Barometer*, Clayton, Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice; Z. Deng, L. Walsh, T.B Huynh & B. Cutler (2024) *The pandemic years and their impact on young people in New South Wales and Victoria: Insights from the Australian Youth Barometer*, Clayton, Monash Centre for Youth Policy and Education Practice; Mission Australia (2024) *Youth Survey 2023*, Sydney, Mission Australia.
[6] I. McAllister, J. Sheppard, S. Cameron & S. Jackman (2022) *Australian Election Study 2022*, Canberra, ANU.

2 | Snapshot: the population aged 18–30

This section summarises the key characteristics of the Victorian population aged between 18 and 30, compared to those above 18, primarily relying on the 2021 Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) *Census of Population and Housing*.[7]

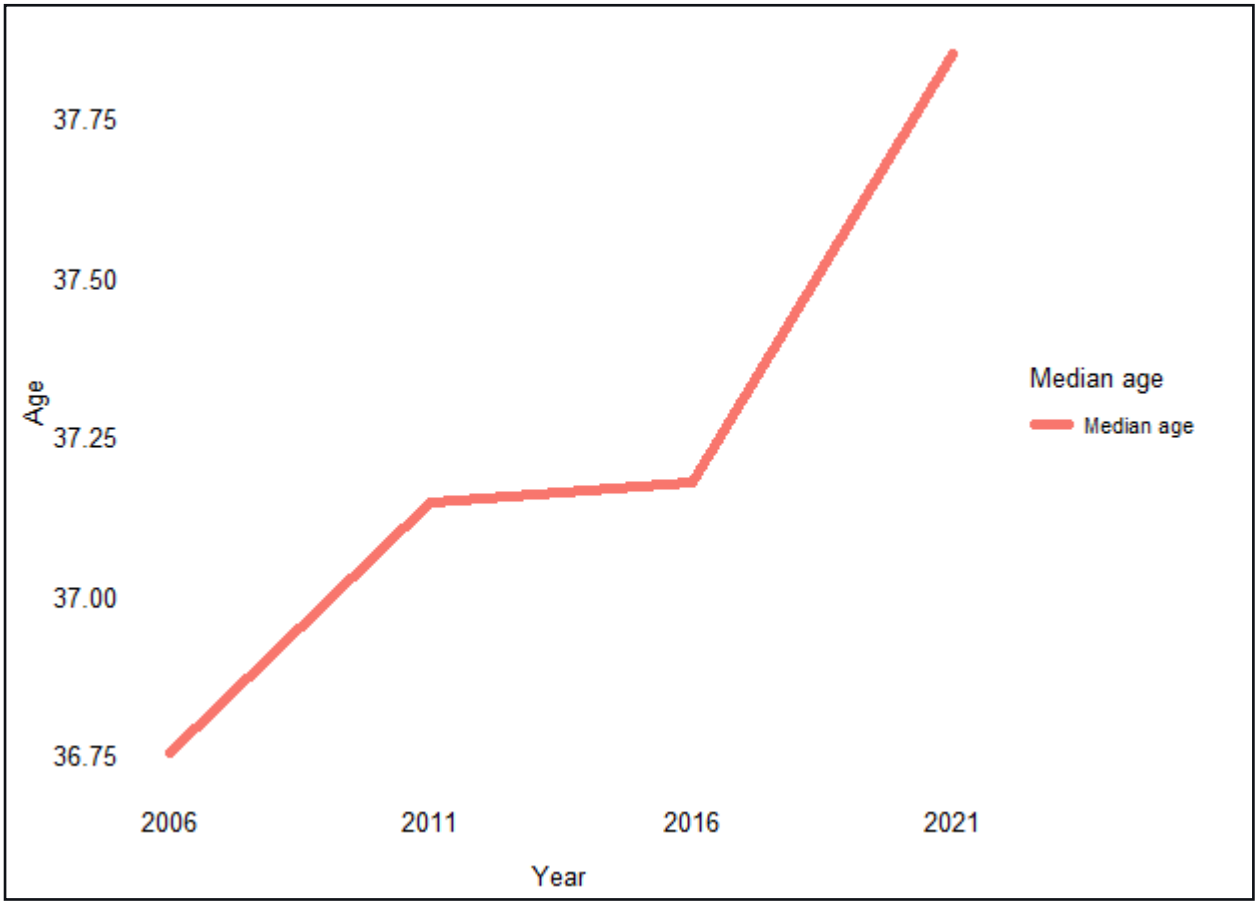
As noted in the introduction, there is considerable variation within the 18–30-year-old age category. People aged between 18 and 25 tend to have different challenges to those aged between 26 and 30. The analysis, therefore, presents three categories of data:

- 'All Youth': population aged 18 to 30
- 'Young 18–25': a sub-category of 'All Youth', including the population aged between 18 and 25
- 'Young 26–30': a sub-category of 'All Youth', including the population aged between 26 and 30.

What are the main trends in population distribution by age?

Overall, while the number of people residing in Victoria continues to grow, it is an ageing population. Figure 1 details the changing median age for the state, according to 2006–21 Census data. The mean age increased from 36.8 to 37.8 years over that period.

Figure 1: Median age for Victoria, 2006–2021[8]



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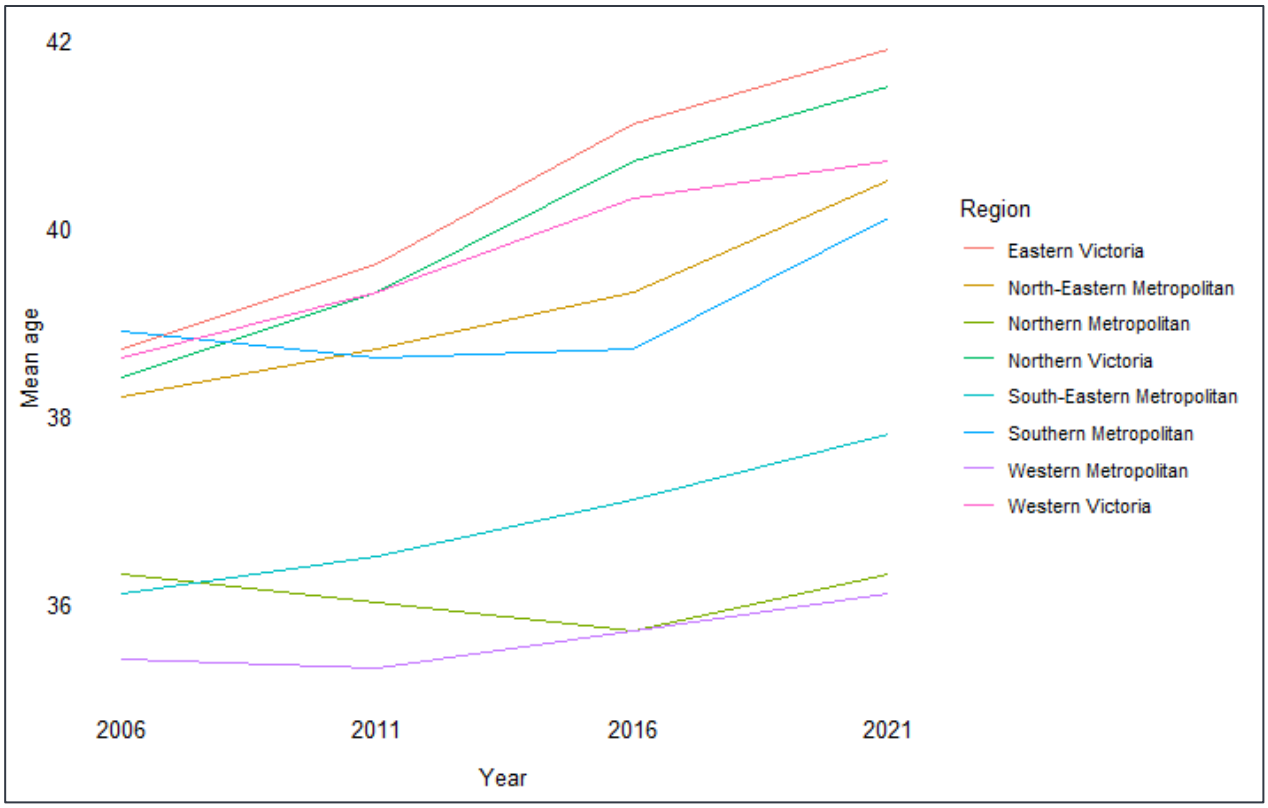
[7] Derived from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) *Census of Population and Housing* [via TableBuilder], Canberra, ABS.
[8] ibid.

Where do young people live in Victoria?

There are considerable differences in the distribution of the Victorian population based on age. For instance, Figure 2 suggests that the average age is increasing across all Legislative Council regions (each comprising 11 districts). Yet some areas—notably the Northern Metropolitan, Western Metropolitan and South-Eastern Metropolitan regions—have lower mean-age populations than others. In contrast, the three non-metropolitan areas—Northern Victoria, Western Victoria and Eastern Victoria regions—have the highest average aged population.

Figure 2: Mean age for Victoria, by Legislative Council electoral region, 2006–21[9]



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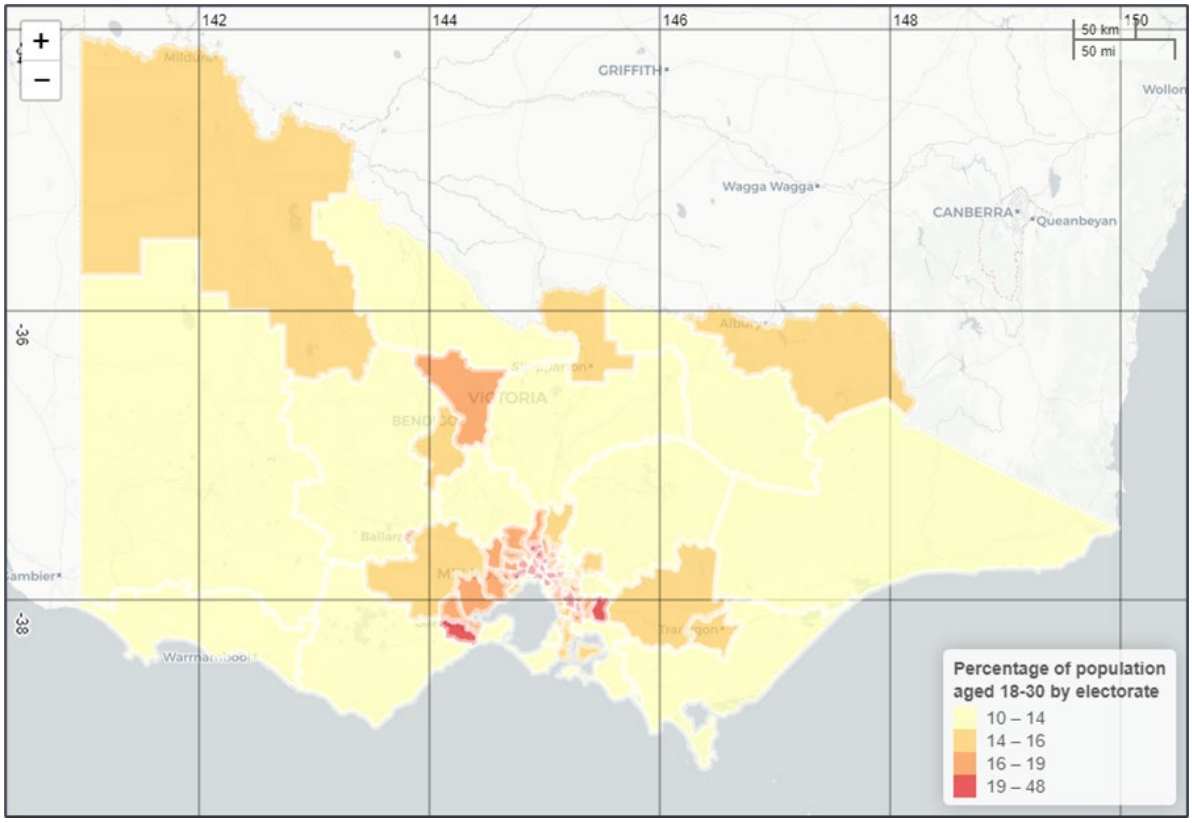
Moreover, breaking the state down by Legislative Assembly district to examine the proportion of the population aged between 18 and 30 provides a more detailed picture of where younger people live (Map 1).

[9] ABS (2022) op. cit.

Map 1: Proportion of the Victorian population All Youth by state electoral district, 2021[10]



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The proportion of the population between 18 and 30 varies considerably across Victoria's 88 Legislative Assembly districts. For example, only 10.1 per cent of the Nepean population is between 18 and 30 years old. At the other end of the spectrum, 47.2 per cent of the population of the Melbourne district is aged between 18 and 30.

Some regional districts—such as Mildura, Bendigo East, Shepparton, Benambra, Narracan, and Morwell—have marginally higher proportions of their populations aged between 18 and 30. Melbourne district has the highest proportion, at 47.2 per cent.

Although younger people comprise a falling share of the population and are more concentrated in some electorates, they face particular problems and challenges.

What kind of housing do young people live in?

One considerable challenge facing young people is housing. In this area, there are differences both between the younger cohort and the overall population and also within the younger cohort itself.

Approximately 15.9 per cent of the All Youth cohort own their home outright, compared to 31.4 per cent for all people aged 18 and over.[11]

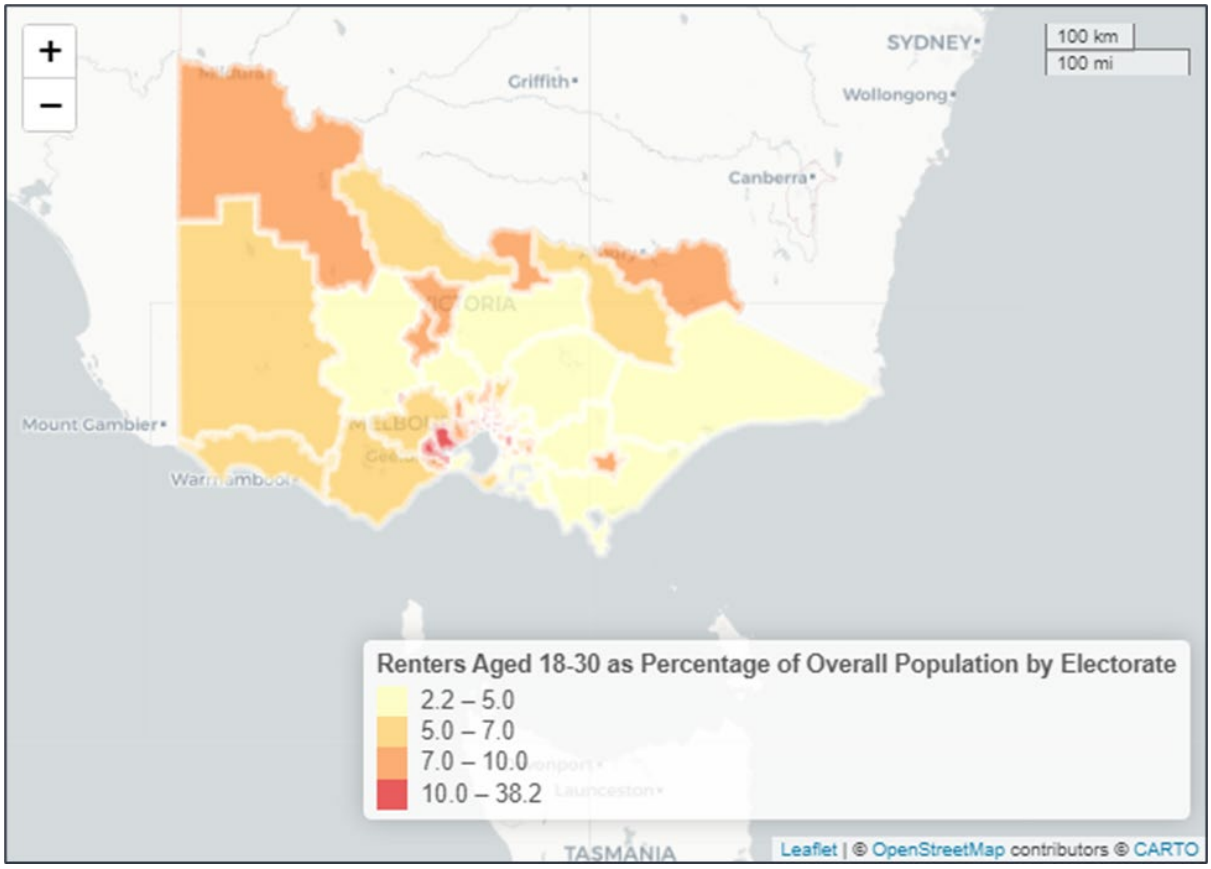
A significant difference exists between the Young 18–25 and Young 26–30 cohorts:

- Around 19 per cent of the Young 18–25 cohort live in houses owned outright, mainly as these are family-owned, and 39.5 per cent are renters.
- Only 11.4 per cent of the Young 26–30 group own their home outright, while over 50 per cent rent.

[10] ABS (2022) op. cit.; Department of Energy, Environment and Climate Action (2023) 'Victorian Upper House Electoral Boundaries 2022 - STATE_ASSEMBLY_2022', Melbourne, *VicMap Admin*.
[11] ABS (2022) op. cit.

Map 2 outlines the main concentrations of where the younger renters live within the state.

Map 2: All Youth that rent their homes as a percentage of the adult population, by electorate, 2021[12]



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Additional sources further indicate the housing stresses that younger Victorians face. The ABS's *Housing Occupancy and Costs* sample suggests a steady increase in the age of the 'reference person' of recent home buyers in Australia between 1995–96 and 2019–20 (the last time a survey took place). The proportion of recent home buyers aged 18–24 declined from 9.6 to 5.3 per cent during this period, while those aged 25–34 fell from 61.4 to 56.1 per cent.[13]

How are young people engaged in the workforce?

Figure 3 compares the labour force status of people aged 18–30 with all those aged 18 and above for 2021:

- The All Youth cohort is more likely to be employed part-time or unemployed. However, they are more likely to be labour force participants overall.
- The Young 18–25 category is likelier to work part-time and less likely to be employed full-time.
- The Young 26–30 category is more likely to work full-time and less likely to be employed part-time.
- All categories of youth are more likely to be unemployed.

[12] ibid.
[13] Australian Bureau of Statistics (various years) 'Housing Occupancy and Costs', Canberra, ABS. The 'reference person' is 'the person with the highest tenure when ranked as follows: owner without a mortgage, owner with a mortgage, renter, other tenure'. See Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019-20) 'Glossary,' Canberra: ABS.

These differences likely reflect changes in the life cycle, with people aged between 25 and 30 more likely to be entering full-time work.[14]

Figure 3: Labour force status of all people aged 18 and above and those aged 18–30 in Victoria, 2021[15]

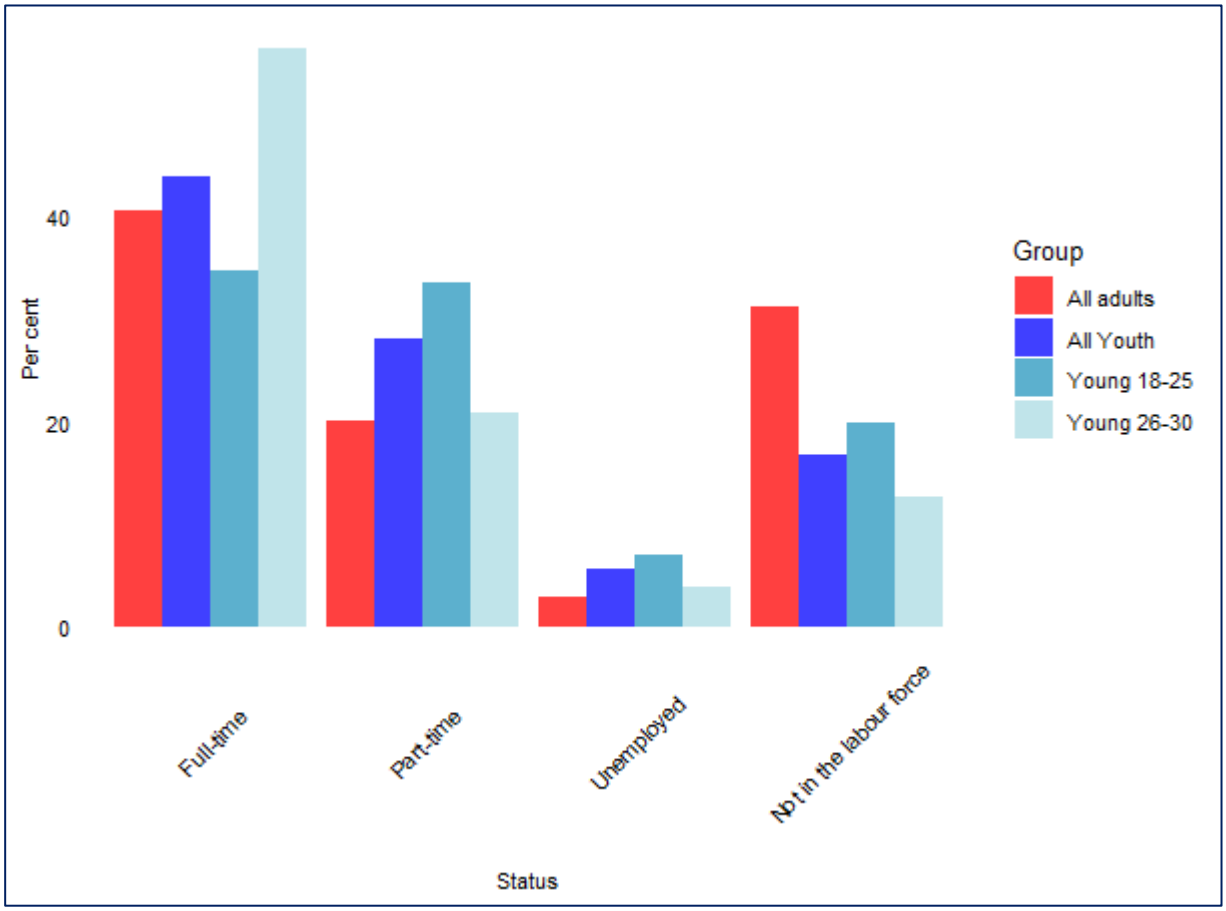

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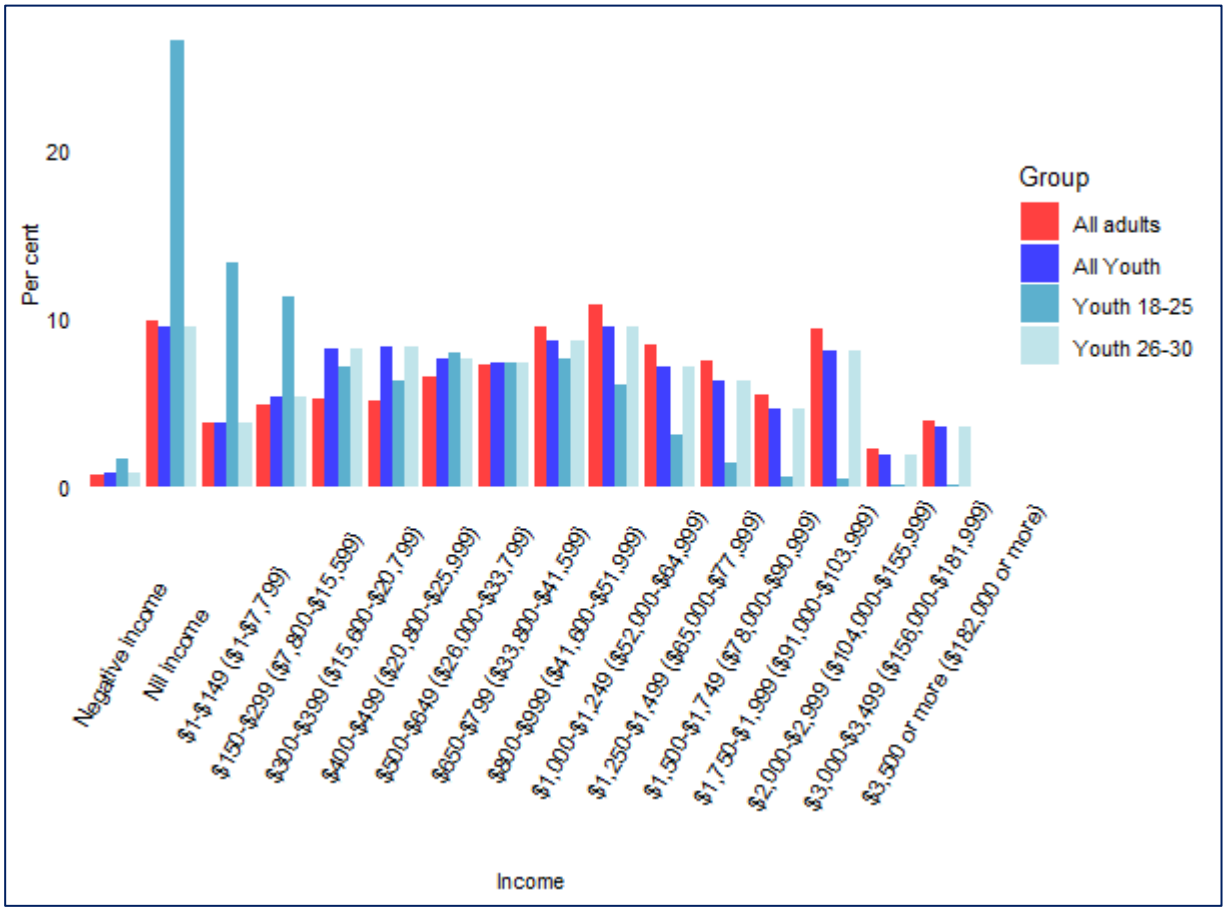
Figure 4 suggests that around 37.7 per cent of the All-Youth cohort reported a personal income of less than $500 a week, compared to 29.4 per cent of all working-age adults. However, the variation between the two cohorts of youth was considerable, with 66 per cent of Young 18–25 having incomes below $500 a week, compared to 35.7 per cent for Young 26–30.

[14] M. Browning & T. F. Crossley (2001) 'The Life-Cycle Model of Consumption and Saving', *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 15(3), pp. 3–22.
[15] ABS (2022) op. cit.

Figure 4: Comparison of individual weekly incomes, 2021[16]



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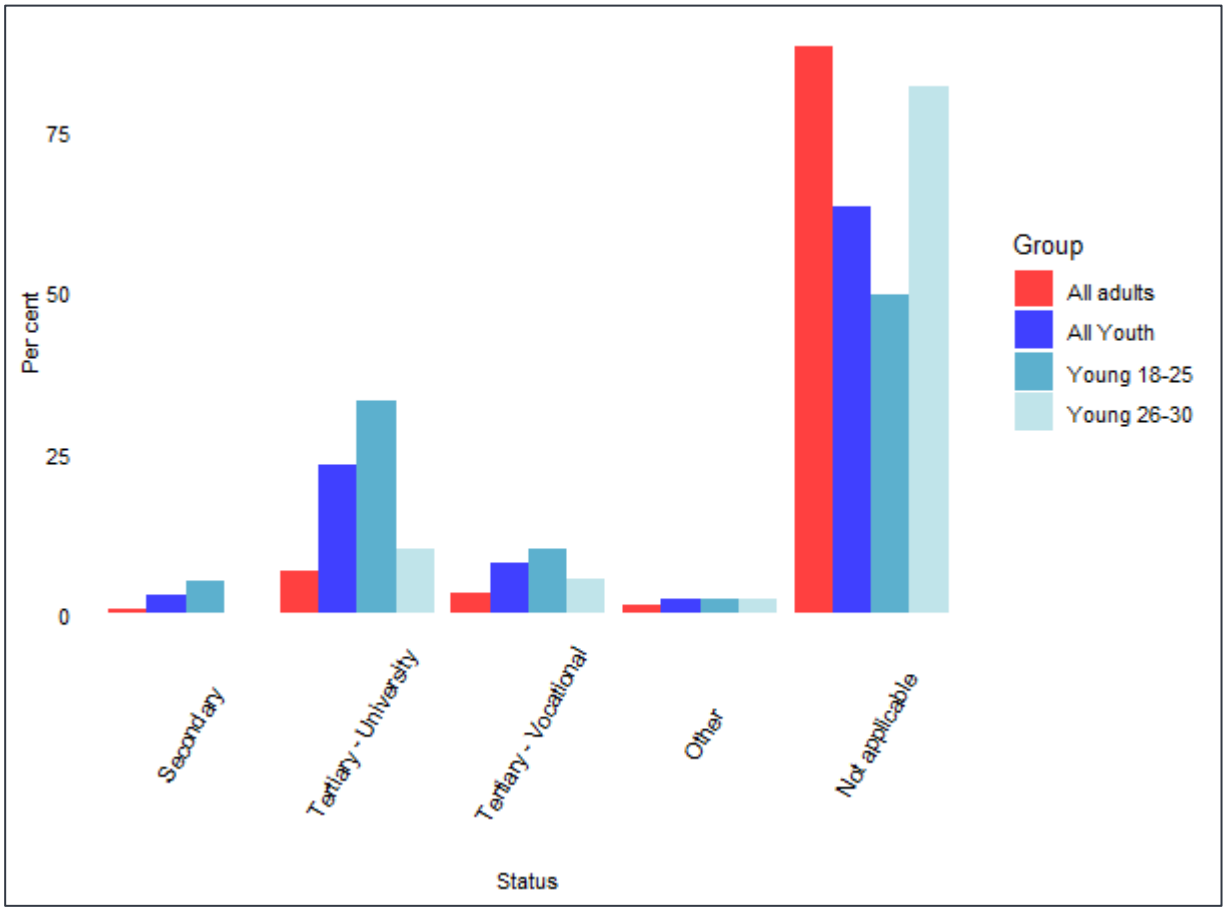
Additionally, 12 per cent of All Youth engaged in 'Voluntary Work for an Organisation or Group', compared to 14.2 per cent of the population. The Young 18–25 cohort was slightly more likely (12.9 per cent) to volunteer than the Young 26–30 group (10.2 per cent).[17]

How are young people engaged in education?

Young people are also much more likely to be currently engaged in education. Figure 5 contrasts attendance at educational institutions for these cohorts. Almost 37 per cent of all youth were involved in some form of education or training, compared to 11.2 per cent of the adult population. Again, significant differences exist within the All Youth cohort. Over 50.3 per cent of Young 18–25 engaged in some education or training, compared to 17.8 per cent of Young 26–30.

[16] ibid.
[17] ibid.

Figure 5: Attending an educational institution[18]



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Young people are in significantly more debt from their education than older cohorts. The number of people aged 30 or below with Higher-Education Contribution Scheme/Higher Education Loan Program (HELP) debt has doubled, from 725,253 persons in 2005–06 to 1,484,645 in 2022–23. Over that period, the amount owing has blown out from $8.7 billion to $41.8 billion. The average debt per person rose from $12,052 to $28,121.[19] An estimated 484,188 people owed an unknown amount or had a debt above $50,000.[20]

What is younger people's heritage?

For language and heritage, the All-Youth cohort is less likely to be born overseas than the adult population (28.4 per cent, compared to 34.6 per cent). Likewise, they were slightly less likely to have both parents born overseas (38.8 per cent, compared to 46.1 per cent).

Young people were only somewhat more likely to speak a language other than English at home (29.6 per cent, compared to 28.9 per cent). Dravidian (southern regions of the Indian subcontinent), Southeast Asian, Iranic and African languages were more prevalent in the younger cohort than those above 18.

Around 1.36 per cent (14,373) of All Youth identified as Indigenous (either Aboriginal or Torres Strait islander or both) in 2021. There was considerable variation in the proportion of All Youth identifying as Indigenous across different electoral districts. The highest proportion (5.9 per cent) was found in Mildura district (although 7.4 per cent of All Youth that recorded 'no usual address' were Indigenous).

[18] ibid.
[19] Australian Tax Office (2023) 'Study and Training Support Loans', Canberra, Australian Government.
[20] ibid.

Family and relationships

As with their engagement with the workforce, education and earnings, the proportion of All Youth with children or in a marriage or marriage-like relationship (MMLR) varies. As with earnings, education and work, considerable differences exist between the two youth cohorts—reflecting different life-cycle stages.

For all people over 18, 60.4 per cent were in an MMLR, while 71.2 per cent of All Youth were not in an MMLR. However, 86.5 per cent of the 18–25 cohort were not in MMLR, compared to 50.9 per cent for those aged between 26 and 30.[21]

Only 6.7 per cent of All Youth reported having children in 2021, compared to 32.4 per cent of all people aged 18 and above. However, 12.3 per cent of the Young 26–30 cohort reported having children, compared to just 2.4 per cent in the Young 18–25 cohort.[22]

What health issues affect young people?

Young Victorians are generally healthier than the adult population, with over 65.7 per cent of All Youth reporting 'No long-term health condition(s)', compared to 46.3 per cent of the adult population. Only 1.1 per cent of people aged between 18 and 30 'need assistance with core activities', compared to 6.7 per cent of all people over 18.

However, young people are more likely to experience mental ill-health. Those in the All Youth category show a higher proportion of experiencing a 'mental health condition (including depression or anxiety)' (11.14 per cent), compared to 8.6 per cent for all adults. No significant differences existed between the two sub-categories of youth.[23]

How do young people identify in terms of gender and sexuality?

Some surveys suggest that younger populations are more likely to identify as LGBTIQA+ or gender diverse. Only 79.4 per cent of All Youth identified as 'Heterosexual or Straight', compared to 94.7 per cent across all age groups in the 2022 Australian Election Study.[24] A difficulty exists, though, in that many survey tools don't adequately capture the diversity of responses encapsulated by gender identity and sexual orientation.[25] Surveys of LGBTIQA+ youth suggest that they adopt a range of identities.[26]

What is young people's involvement in the criminal justice system?

Younger people involved in the criminal justice system face particular problems and vulnerabilities. The formal 'youth justice' category applies to three groups: people as young as 10, those aged between 15 and 18, and those up to 24 years old covered by the 'dual track' sentencing system.[27]

The area remains a considerable focus of reform through measures such as the Review of the *Children and Justice Legislation Amendment (Youth Justice Reform) Act 2017* and the

[21] ibid.
[22] ibid.
[23] ibid.
[24] McAllister et al. (2022) *Australian Election Study 2022*.
[25] M. Carmen, C. Farrugia, A. Bourne, J. Power & S. Rosenberg (2020) *Research Matters: How many people are LGBTIQ?*, produced by Rainbow Health Victoria, Bundoora, La Trobe University.
[26] A. O. Hill, A. Lyons, J. Jones, I. McGowan, M. Carman, M. Parsons, J. Power & A. Bourne (2020) *Writing Themselves In 4: The health and wellbeing of LGBTQA+ young people in Australia: Victoria summary report*, ARCSHS monograph series number 127, Bundoora, La Trobe University.
[27] Department of Justice and Community Safety (2020) *Youth Justice Strategic Plan 2020-2030 - Strengthening the dual-track system*, Melbourne, DJCS.

opening of the Cherry Creek Youth Justice Precinct. The former reported a gradual decline in young people sentenced in the Children's Court of Victoria.[28]

The prison population of Victoria increased from 5,540 people in June 2013 to 6,568 in 2022, while the number of people aged 25 and below in prison went from 682 to 701. The number of younger inmates fell marginally, from 30 per cent to 26 per cent of the prison population.[29]

3 | Current issues confronting young people

More recent survey data and analyses provide further information about Victoria's youth. While the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent rises in the cost of living impacted the population broadly, younger people were particularly affected.

The annual *Australian Youth Barometer* from Monash University is among the most valuable tools and recent publications.[30] As well as surveying 571 participants aged 18–24 with a mix of closed, Likert-style and open-ended questions, the 2023 report synthesised material produced by other researchers. Though focusing on a slightly different cohort (those aged between 15 and 25) and being national in scope, the *Youth Barometer* provides many insights. A New South Wales and Victoria comparative report was also published in 2024, drawing on the 2023 *Youth Barometer* data.[31]

a) Mental health

The Census data suggest younger people report higher levels of mental health problems. Other sources also support such claims.[32] In fact, there is considerable evidence that 'the mental health of young Australians is rapidly declining'.[33]

The *Youth Barometer* reports that '26 per cent of young Australians rate their mental health as poor or very poor … and that 24 per cent of young Australians received mental health care in the past 12 months, while 13 per cent sought but did not receive such care'.[34]

Other sources also reflect these findings. The *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing* suggests the prevalence of mental disorders in people aged 16–24 increased from 26 per cent in 2007 to 39 per cent in 2021. The rates among young women reached 48 per cent.[35]

Some experts view the rising incidence of mental ill-health among this age cohort as alarming. It reflects and suggests the mounting obstacles emerging as people transition to adulthood. Professor Patrick McGorry and colleagues note:

> We invest heavily to bring young people to the threshold of productive adult life. This nurturing of human potential represents the creation of "mental wealth". Yet this wealth is being squandered. Mental ill-health weakens psychosocial maturation, relationships, educational attainment, workplace culture, and productivity. Suicide is the leading cause of death in young people and may be rising again post-pandemic. Severe mental illness additionally reduces life expectancy by up to 20 years through a combination of premature physical illness and suicide.[36]

[28] Department of Justice and Community Safety (2022) *Review of the* Children and Justice Legislation Amendment (Youth Justice Reform) Act 2017*: Statutory Review under section 492B of the* Children, Youth and Families Act 2005, Melbourne, DJCS.
[29] Corrections Victoria (2023) *Annual Prisons Statistical Profile 2012-13 to 2021-22*, Melbourne, DJCS.
[30] Walsh et al. (2023) op. cit.
[31] Deng et al. (2024) op. cit.
[32] J. Bahr (2024) 'The kids are not alright: Is Australia in the midst of a youth mental health crisis?', *SBS News*, 13 February.
[33] McGorry et al. (2023) op. cit.
[34] Walsh et al. (2023) op. cit., p. 44.
[35] Australian Bureau of Statistics (Various Years) *National Study of Mental Health and Wellbeing*, Canberra, ABS.
[36] McGorry et al. (2023) op. cit., p. 246.

Nevertheless, whatever the particular impacts of COVID-19 on Victoria or Australia, a decline in mental health is also prevalent internationally. The United Kingdom and the United States have also reported similar decreases in mental health among younger populations.[37]

One survey in the United Kingdom for 2021–22 found that a third (34 per cent) of young people aged 18–24 'reported symptoms that indicated they were experiencing a 'common mental health disorder' (CMD) such as depression, anxiety or bipolar disorder'.[38] For comparison, just less than a quarter (24 per cent) of people in that age group reported such disorders in 2000.[39]

The impact of COVID-19

The reasons for such high levels of mental ill-health in young people are the subject of considerable debate. It is unclear if more recent events—such as the COVID-19 pandemic—impacted these issues or if the incidence of mental ill-health varied across different jurisdictions. One survey does suggest, however, that 71 per cent of adolescents and young adults in the 15–25 age group reported to have worsening mental health outcomes due to COVID-19.[40] In Victoria, 83.8 per cent of respondents reported that COVID-19 had continued to impact their mental health in 2023, while 26.3 per cent rated their mental health as 'poor or very poor'.[41] Some 27.8 per cent of respondents reported seeking and being able to obtain mental health support, although another 11.1 per cent sought but could not access such services.

Investigations into these factors in Victoria—where restrictions on movement during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic were most pronounced—suggest contradictory outcomes. Younger children have shown an ability to 'bounce back' following the easing of restrictions on movement. However, 'young people aged 18 to 24 are also still showing signs that since the pandemic crisis point has passed, their anxiety has not abated'.[42]

Diminished social connections slowed the maturing of some teenagers. Dr Katherine Dix of the Australian Council for Educational Research says surveys suggest young people are experiencing elevated anxiety levels, especially about loss of control over their lives. Dix argued:

> With resilience, engagement in school, we see that declining with [student] age in every data set … in mood, particularly in secondary school kids, that's still going down …
>
> It should be pretty stable year-on-year, but to see things dropping in hundreds of thousands of kids, it's pretty clear something's happening.[43]

Further, Victorian students were reportedly more anxious about COVID-19 than those in other states.[44]

Economic, social and environmental changes

There seem to be two related factors underpinning the decrease in mental health in young people in Victoria. One leading psychologist argues that economic and social changes:

> … transformed the job market, splitting jobs more starkly into high- or low-skilled occupations. This has led to greater emphasis on specialised skills and higher education.

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[37] F. Sterkaj (2024) 'Why do young people have such poor mental health? A psychologist explains', *The Conversation*, 7 March.
[38] C. McCurdy & L. Murphy (2024) *We've only just begun: Action to improve young people's mental health, education and employment*, London, Resolution Foundation, p. 5.
[39] ibid.
[40] ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods (2021) *The impact of COVID-19 on child mental health and service barriers: The perspective of parents – August 2021*, Canberra, ANU, p. 7.
[41] Deng et al. (2024) op. cit., pp. 6-8.
[42] W. Tuohy & M. Heffernan (2023) 'The teens are in trouble: How Victorian children are faring after lockdowns', *The Age*, 29 October.
[43] Cited in W. Tuohy (2023) 'Pandemic scramble: Some lockdown teens are still stuck, while others are thriving', *The Age*, 29 October.
[44] ibid.

> Educational or career success—or failure—is now more visible than ever. The rise of social media has intensified the need to present a perfect image of success.
>
> Logging into a social media account invariably brings an announcement about someone being promoted, starting a new job, or taking up an exciting opportunity. This can potentially trigger negative feelings, particularly if a young person has been struggling to get a job or even an interview.[45]

One argument is that social media's immediacy constantly encourages comparisons with those who purport to or have obtained some level of success in their career and life.[46]

Looming environmental problems and the mounting evidence of climate change can also lead to more immediate sources of insecurity. One response in young people is widespread 'climate anxiety', described as 'an adaptive response to a real threat, as well as a potential cause of impairment'.[47]

While young people often express considerable concerns over these social and ecological issues, an apparent lack of progress on the climate crisis has created a sense of hopelessness.[48] These anxieties are not abstract, with studies demonstrating increasing concerns over the impacts of 'extreme weather events' in Australia.[49] Four in five young people surveyed by one study reported experiencing at least one climate-related event, such as severe weather or bushfires.[50] Around 13 per cent of people aged 15–19 also said their households or communities faced difficulties related to extreme weather events in 2023.[51] The same survey found that three-fifths of survey respondents 'reported some level of concern about climate change, with 21 per cent feeling *very* or *extremely* concerned'.[52] The data also indicate that 'young people exposed to such events reported higher levels of psychological distress than their peers'.[53]

Leaving aside these more deep-rooted and existential issues, many have criticised different Australian governments for not responding more rapidly to the mounting evidence of a youth mental health crisis. Professor McGorry warns that the Headspace and Orygen youth mental health service is overwhelmed by demand.[54] McGorry has explained that a 'strengthening and reimagination of reform plans was needed, alongside "turning off the tap" of factors contributing to diagnoses'.[55] The Federal Government has responded with a Medical Research Future Fund-backed *Childhood Mental Health Research Plan*.[56] It is primarily a research plan rather than a commitment to more urgent action.

b) Education, work and precarity

Whatever the value of these initiatives, these mental health issues also coexist with a range of problems surrounding education and livelihoods. Considerable differences exist between the Youth 18-25 and 26-30 categories outlined in the 'Snapshot' section. The latter cohort was more likely to be employed full-time, while the former works part-time or is more likely to study. Both are more likely to be unemployed than the overall adult cohort.

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[45] F. Sterkaj (2024) op. cit.
[46] ibid.
[47] T. J. Crandon, J. G. Scott, F. J. Charlson & H. J. Thomas (2022) 'A social-ecological perspective on climate anxiety in children and adolescents', *Nature Climate Change*, 12, pp. 123–131.
[48] ibid.
[49] C.X. Gao, B. Boon, M. Ziou, D. Z. Q. Gan, S. M. Teo, N. Fava, J. Menssink, N. Brennan & K. Filia (2024) *Impact of extreme weather events on young people: Findings from the 2023 Mission Australia Youth Survey*, Melbourne, Orygen & Sydney, Mission Australia.
[50] Gao et al. (2024) op. cit.
[51] Gao et al. (2024) op. cit., pp. 6–7.
[52] ibid., p. 13.
[53] ibid., p. 14.
[54] Headspace (2024) 'Who we are', Headspace website; Orygen (undated) 'About', Orygen website.
[55] T. McIlroy (2024) 'Mental health decline among young reaches crisis point', *Australian Financial Review*, 29 January.
[56] Department of Health and Aged Care (undated) *MRFF Childhood Mental Health Research Plan*, Canberra, DHAC.

The *Youth Barometer* found that, nationally:

> … 55% of young Australians had completed a post-secondary qualification … 14% had not gained any educational qualification.
>
> Forty-five per cent were currently studying full-time, 24% were studying part-time, 2% were studying both full-time and part-time and 29% were not studying.[57]

The recorded levels of recent experiences with, and satisfaction with, education were contradictory. On the one hand, the proportion of young people who were satisfied or very satisfied with various facets of their education was high, usually close to 70 per cent.[58] On the other hand, the proportion of young people in Victoria who thought the COVID-19 pandemic impacted their education was still high, at 80.2 per cent in 2023. Only 41.7 per cent felt 'they belonged at their school or educational institution'. Likewise, 31.8 per cent of Victorian youth thought there was 'not enough or barely enough support for education'.[59]

While the high levels of participation in both part-time and full-time work are encouraging, the ABS Census categories outlined in the 'Snapshot' section arguably don't convey some underlying issues and problems associated with the contemporary labour market. Some argue that increased casualisation of the labour market has led to the emergence of a 'precariat', i.e. a 'growing number of people facing lives of insecurity, moving in and out of jobs that give little meaning to their lives'.[60]

The *Youth Barometer* recorded significant levels of precarity among its survey respondents, involving 'low-wage roles with unclear career progression opportunities'. In recent years, one of the most prevalent forms of precarious work is the 'gig economy', defined as a 'short-term work arrangement in which self-employed workers are matched directly with customers through a digital platform'.[61] Prominent examples include food delivery and driving services, Airbnb, and MTurk. The survey found that:

> Half of young Australians reported earning income in the gig economy at some point in the last 12 months, with 16% stating that they did so often or very often. There is little variation in these figures for young people's participation in the gig economy over the last six months or last month.[62]

The survey claims that '44% of young people experienced unemployment and 57% experienced underemployment at some point in the past 12 months'.[63] In Victoria, however, the proportion of young people who experienced unemployment decreased from 62.8 per cent in 2021 to 46.5 per cent in 2023.[64]

In addition, 73.6 per cent of Victorian young people reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had continued to impact their work situation in 2023, and 44.2 per cent thought there was 'not enough or barely enough government support for employment'.[65]

Precarity strongly correlates with low mood and anxiety. Studies conducted by the Youth Action advocacy group suggested that:

> The precarious nature of employment was a frequent concern, for instance, 'no guaranteed hours', 'no access to paid leave and not knowing what my shifts or pay would look like', and that this is 'very anxiety-inducing'. These conditions cause significant financial stress and hardship. For instance, when discussing shifts, one young person wrote, 'I'd have to take whatever was given to keep going'. Employer misconduct was also addressed, with some 'employers who haven't paid staff for weeks'. One young person said their 'employer decided

[57] Walsh et al. (2023) op. cit., p. 38.
[58] ibid.
[59] Deng et al. (2004) op. cit., pp. 16-18.
[60] G. Standing (2011) *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*, London, Bloomsbury, p. 3.
[61] Walsh et al. (2023) op. cit., p. 27.
[62] ibid.
[63] Walsh et al. (2023) op. cit., p. 34.
[64] Deng et al. (2004) op. cit., p. 32.
[65] Deng et al. (2004) op. cit., pp. 28-30.

> to stop giving [them] shifts after working there for over two years … this had a large impact on [their] self-confidence as it showed they did not value [them] after years of working'.[66]

Young people adopt a range of psychological defence mechanisms to cope with insecurity.[67] The loss of income associated with COVID-19 restrictions had particularly severe consequences in sectors such as hospitality. While some could rely upon family support in the face of cancelled shifts and shutdowns, others faced 'severe financial hardship.' [68]

Recent studies also suggest precarity is not transient or restricted to younger workers obtaining initial entry into the labour market. On the contrary, longitudinal studies indicate that people in 'precarious employment three years after graduation are more likely to have a weaker attachment to the labour force later in life compared to individuals of the same age in standard employment'.[69] As well as causing short-term distress and insecurity, precarity can similarly have longer-term consequences such as employment insecurity.

c) Cost-of-living pressures and financial security

These trends in employment and insecurity flow into other issues of living costs and longer-running questions of economic security and asset ownership. One trend in current policy debates is an enhanced focus on 'intergenerational equity'.[70]

Short-term challenges

Both the Australian and Victorian-level results for the *Youth Barometer* suggest the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent rise in living costs pose particular problems for younger people. Australia-wide, 90 per cent of the 18–25 cohort 'experienced financial difficulties at some point in the past 12 months, with 32 per cent experiencing financial difficulties often or very often'.[71] However, some variation existed between states, with Victorian declaring a slightly lower rate of 85 per cent.

Victorian respondents were likelier to report more negative experiences between 2021 and 2022 than in 2023.[72] It is unclear how these figures compare to self-rated responses from other cohorts. Australia-wide, 56.3 per cent of respondents reported that government financial support was either not or barely enough for their needs. Victoria's proportion was 50.6 per cent.[73]

Housing features prominently among the components of cost-of-living pressures. The *Youth Barometer* reports that:

> The affordability of rental housing is a prevalent concern, with 61 per cent of young people aged 18–25 worrying about being able to afford to pay their rent. These pressures have also increased in recent years: a young person in April 2021 spent 64 per cent of their income to share a two-bedroom unit, whereas in March 2023, they were paying 73 per cent of their income. For young

[66] Youth Action (2021) *The Experiences of Young People with Insecure and Precarious Employment: Youth Action's Submission to the Select Committee on Job Security*, Senate Select Committee on Job Security, Canberra, The Committee.
[67] S. Toivanen, A. O. Tarantino, M. Emmelin & P. Östergren (2020) 'Diverting blame to stay sane - young people's strategies for dealing with the mental health effects of precarious employment: a grounded theory study', *BMC Public Health*, 20, 571.
[68] J. Cook, S. Threadgold, D. Farrugia & J. Coffey (2021) 'Youth, Precarious Work and the Pandemic', *YOUNG*, 29(4), pp. 331–348.
[69] E. Thern, N. Matilla-Santander, T. Bodin & T. Hemmingsson (2023) 'Precarious employment at a young age and labor-market marginalization during middle-adulthood: A register-linked cohort study', *Scandinavian Journal of Work, Environment & Health,* 49(3), pp.201–210.
[70] Australian Government (2023) *Intergenerational Report 2023: Australia's future to 2063*, Canberra, Australian Government.
[71] Walsh et al. (2023) op. cit., p. 12.
[72] Deng et al. (2024) op. cit., pp. 16–18.
[73] ibid., pp. 20–21.

> people on income support, this would leave just $13 a day to cover food, transport, medicine, power and other living expenses.[74]

In Victoria, the proportion of young people who thought that affordable housing options needed immediate action increased from 63.6 per cent in 2022 to 67.8 per cent in 2023.[75] Nationally, the proportion of young people who thought it was likely or extremely likely that they would live in a comfortable home in the future was 54.6 per cent. In comparison, in Victoria, it was 61.5 per cent in 2023.[76]

Longer-term challenges

These short-term trends reflect and amplify considerable anxiety about longer-term financial security. Housing and residential property ownership are of increasing concern to young people.

On the one hand, young Australians remained relatively optimistic about their ability to achieve financial security in the long term despite often seeing their current financial position as 'precarious and unstable'.[77] On the other hand, '41 per cent of young Australians thought it was likely or extremely likely that they will be able to purchase a property or house in the future, down from 49.4 per cent in 2022'.[78] Victorians were more optimistic than the national average, with 44.3 per cent agreeing they would eventually purchase a property. However, this figure was lower than the 54.9 per cent recorded in 2022.[79]

Of course, there is considerable policy debate nationally and in Victoria around housing affordability. The Victorian Legislative Council's Legal and Social Issues Committee investigated 'Victoria's rental and housing affordability crisis' in 2023. Its majority report noted 'a mismatch between evidence on housing and action taken' and that 'home ownership is declining, starting later in life and becoming concentrated in fewer hands'.[80] Its recommendations for action mostly surrounded supply, with little attention given to the more immediate needs of younger people and marginalised groups.

Intergenerational equity

The Victorian Government's 2024–25 budget featured some discussion on 'intergenerational equity'.[81] The concept is often associated with notions of 'sustainable development', meaning 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.[82] Sustainable development provides a framework for discussing relationships between current and future generations around various issues.[83] The Federal Government's report on intergenerational equity focused more on identifying and addressing medium to longer-term risks for Australia.[84]

The Victorian budget focused more specifically on home ownership. It noted that while all generational groups were experiencing high levels of employment growth:

> … younger Victorians face a number of economic disadvantages compared with earlier generations.

[74] Walsh et al. (2023) op. cit., p. 13.
[75] Deng et al. (2024) op. cit., p. 23.
[76] ibid., p. 25.
[77] Walsh et al. (2023) op. cit., p. 12.
[78] ibid.
[79] Deng et al. (2024) op. cit., p. 26.
[80] Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee (2023) *The rental and housing affordability crisis in Victoria*, final report, Melbourne, The Committee, November, pp. xiii & xiv.
[81] Victorian Government (2024) *Strategy and Outlook: Budget Paper No. 2: 2024–25*, Melbourne, Department of Treasury and Finance.
[82] World Commission on Environment and Development: (1987) *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future*, Geneva, WCED.
[83] J. K. Summers & L. M. Smith (2014) 'The Role of Social and Intergenerational Equity in Making Changes in Human Well-Being Sustainable', *Ambio*, 43(6), pp. 718–728.
[84] Australian Government (2023) op cit.

> The decline in housing affordability is a key driver. Access to affordable housing and secure tenure is important to providing a sense of stability and wellbeing.[85]

While noting declining levels of home ownership and increasing costs associated with mortgages and renting (along with other challenges, such as rising levels of HELP debt), the government did not make any policy proposals to remedy this in the budget.[86]

There is a broader debate around the issues of residential asset ownership and intergenerational equity. Some see a potential resolution as older generations pass away, giving way to a 'great inter-generational wealth transfer'.[87] Others express concern about 'Baby Boomers' 'spending the inheritance', leaving little wealth for their descendants.[88] Others argue that 'housing in Australia will no longer be able to be purchased with salaries … [and sometimes] inherited late in life, when the window to start one's own family has already closed'.[89] While there is increasing recognition of inter-generational equity, the policy measures advanced remain vague and imprecise.

d) Participation in society

Again, the *Youth Barometer* and other sources note many aspects of young people's participation in society and their attitudes to political and policy-making institutions.

The issues that young people consider crucial have shifted in the wake of recovery from the worst aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The *Youth Barometer* advises that:

> In 2021, 45.7% of young people aged 15–19 considered COVID-19 the top issue Australia needed to address. However, in 2022, 51% of young people identified the environment as the most important issue, an increase of 13% from the previous year.[90]

These concerns were closely followed by 'the economy and financial matters', with 31 per cent identifying it 'as one of the most important issues in Australia compared with 22 per cent in 2022 and 11 per cent in 2021'.[91]

The *Youth Barometer* also found that '70 per cent of young Australians believe affordable housing is an issue that needs immediate action, and 51% believe that employment opportunities for young people is an issue that needs immediate action'.[92] Further, young people 'generally see themselves as civically and politically involved, although they favour more personal forms of participation rather than traditional forms'.[93]

Young people also reported that they often feel they are 'not heard or represented in civic and political discussions', with some considering that 'political consultation with young people is tokenistic or politically motivated'.[94]

4 | Young people, politics and policy

Some debate has emerged over the political mood and sense of satisfaction among younger voters. This section discusses recent data on youth attitudes to social and political participation. There is evidence that these attitudes reflect facets of the experiences outlined in the 'Snapshot' and 'Current issues' sections.

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[85] Victorian Government (2024) op. cit., p. 19.
[86] It also did not address intergenerational equity issues associated with public debt.
[87] G. Anders (2024) 'The great intergenerational wealth transfer explained', *INTHEBLACK*, 1 May.
[88] R. Clun (2024) 'Spending the inheritance: Boomers splurge on dining, travel as young people cut back on essentials,' *The Age*, 23 May. 'Boomers' are people born between 1946 and 1964.
[89] C. Lehmann (2024) 'Boomers, be grateful: We're splitting into a 'neo-feudal' nation', *The Australian*, 27 May.
[90] Walsh et al. (2023) op. cit., p. 65.
[91] ibid.
[92] ibid.
[93] ibid.
[94] ibid.

General dissatisfaction with many institutions

Numerous recent studies suggest that, internationally, young people have been experiencing increasing disenchantment, disillusionment or dissatisfaction with many institutions—since at least the late 1990s. Various events have contributed to these concerns, and there are some explanations as to why.[95]

While fewer studies have occurred in Australia, evidence of dissatisfaction exists. To begin with, Dean et al. found that 'young people are rarely elected to federal, state, or local levels of government.'[96] Political scientist Sarah Cameron, for instance, argues that between 2005 and 2019, 'frequent changes of prime minister, which a majority of voters disapproved of, and rising economic pessimism contributed to the decline of democratic satisfaction in Australia'.[97]

However, the extent of disenchantment across different demographic sections of the Australian population and with various government tiers is less clear. Research often focuses on socio-economic or location-based differences rather than age. For example, significant differences exist in the extent of dissatisfaction felt by regional and urban populations in other international contexts.[98] These studies also tend to use national institutions rather than provincial ones as a framework.

Participation and engagement in the political process

Studies of younger people's engagement with politics and policy are rarer. One important exception is Aaron Martin's research into younger people's 'political engagement in the Anglo-American democracies' from the early 2010s.[99] Despite the widespread perception that greater disengagement exists among young people, he suggested a more nuanced situation existed. More generally, as Dr Sarah Moulds explains, a perception exists that a 'disconnect between our lawmakers and our young people is akin to the familiar gap between parent and teenager'.[100]

On the one hand, younger people were less inclined to vote and engage with formal political institutions. On the other hand, Martin argues that 'while young people are disengaged from traditional channels of participation, such as [political] parties, young people are more likely to channel their energies through non-electoral forms of participation'.[101] While young people's participation and engagement continues, it focuses less on electoral processes and traditional institutions such as political parties. They tend to focus on activities like signing petitions, protesting, or boycotting consumer goods.[102]

Other researchers who advocate improved civics education in response to political disenchantment have made similar observations. While voting—often described as a 'civic'

[95] See, for example: C. Hay (2007) *Why We Hate Politics*, United Kingdom, Polity Press; G. Stoker (2017) *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work*, United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan; E. Bertsou (2019) 'Rethinking political distrust', *European Political Science Review*, 11(2), pp. 213–230; S. Harrison (2023) *Pathologies of democratic frustration: Voters and elections between desire and dissatisfaction*, London, Palgrave Macmillan Cham.
[96] L. Dean, Z. Ghazarian, & K. Lee-Koo (2024) The Participation of Young People in Australian Politics, in M. Bonotti & N. Miragliotta (Eds.) *Australian Politics at a Crossroads: Prospects for change*, London, Routledge, p. 227.
[97] S. Cameron (2020) 'Government performance and dissatisfaction with democracy in Australia', *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 55(2), pp. 170–190.
[98] M. Kenny & D. Luca (2021) 'The urban-rural polarisation of political disenchantment: an investigation of social and political attitudes in 30 European countries', *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society*, 14(3), pp. 565–582.
[99] A. Martin (2012) *Young people and politics: Political engagement in the Anglo-American democracies*, London, Routledge.
[100] S. Moulds (2024) 'Connected parliaments: creating space for young people to shape our democracy', in A. Pepe (ed.) *Beyond Broken: Different Systems for Different Futures*, Adelaide, MOD. (University of South Australia), pp. 184–192.
[101] Martin (2012) op. cit., p. 123.
[102] Martin (2012) op. cit., p. 100-110.

duty—may be unappealing to some younger people, their perceptions of and engagement with policy issues remain strong.[103] Various forms of activism exist, although their relationship to formal institutions is waning. Lesley Pruitt suggests this is primarily a 'supply' issue, as recent decades have witnessed growing economic insecurity among younger people and a lack of policy choice.[104] Young people, therefore, tend to disengage.

Voting at elections

There is further evidence of these themes surrounding youth and Australia's political and electoral institutions. One measure of civic and political participation is voter turnout amongst various age cohorts. Overall, there has been a recent decline in turnout both at the federal and Victorian levels. The former fell from a high of 96 per cent in 1996, to 90 per cent for the House of Representatives in the 2022 federal election.[105]

In Victoria, voter participation rates for the Legislative Assembly also declined from 93.15 per cent in 1999 to 87.13 per cent in 2022. Yet, between 2014 and 2022, the decline was more pronounced in the 18–24 and 25–29 age groups, falling from 91 to 87 per cent and 90 to 85 per cent, respectively.[106] There is, therefore, some evidence of a decline in participation by younger voters.

Moreover, the 2019 edition of the *Australian Election Study* highlighted declining levels of satisfaction with democracy in Australia—falling from 86 per cent satisfied in 2007 to 59 per cent in 2019.[107] There are significant variances according to age. In 2019, the figure was 57.8 per cent for those born after 1996, compared to 63.4 per cent for those born before that year. There were also significant differences between younger and older voters in the issues they considered important in the election. Young people were more likely to be concerned about property prices and environmental issues.[108]

Applying the age categories outlined above, 63.4 per cent of all respondents were either 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with democracy in 2019. Yet only 52.1 per cent of the All Youth cohort (aged 18–30) and only 47 per cent of those aged between 26 and 30 had the same satisfaction levels.[109]

The 2022 *Australian Election Study* led to an increased focus on political differences among different age groups.[110] In contrast to previous years, 74.5 per cent of respondents reported being satisfied with democracy in 2022. The level of satisfaction for those born before 1996 was slightly higher (77.2 per cent).[111] The proportion of respondents either 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied was 76.5 per cent for those below the age of 30, 78 per cent for those aged between 18 and 25, and 69 per cent for those aged between 26 and 30.[112] The 2022 survey recorded an overall increase in satisfaction, although less so with those aged between 26 and 30.

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[103] J-P. Gagnon (2017) 'Democracy in Crisis: Are young people to blame?', in M. Chou, J-P. Gagnon, C. Hartung & L. J. Pruitt (eds) *Young people, citizenship and political participation: combating civic deficit?*, London, Rowman & Littlefield International, p. 39.
[104] L. J. Pruitt (2017) 'Different ways, different domains: the everyday politics of young people', in Chou et al. (eds.) op. cit., pp. 93–95.
[105] T. Shields (2022) 'Voter turnout in the 2022 federal election hit a new low, threatening our democratic tradition', *The Australia Institute*, 22 November.
[106] Victorian Electoral Commission (2023) *Report to Parliament: 2022 Victorian State election and 2023 Narracan District supplementary election*, Melbourne, VEC, p. 67.
[107] S. Cameron and I. McAllister (2019) *The 2019 Australian federal election: Results from the Australian election study*, School of Politics & International Relations, Australian National University College of Arts & Social Sciences, Canberra, ANU, p. 15.
[108] Cameron & McAllister (2019) op cit., p. 18.
[109] ibid.
[110] S. Cameron, I. McAllister, S. Jackman & J. Sheppard (2022) *The 2022 Australian Federal Election: Results from the Australian Election Study*, Canberra, Australian National University.
[111] ibid.
[112] ibid.

Growing generational divide

Perhaps more significantly, the *Australian Election Study* suggests that 'a growing generational divide' existed among voters, with younger voters increasingly more likely to support left-of-centre parties, such as Labor and the Greens, rather than the Coalition parties.[113] The report noted that while 'each *Australian Election Study* from 1987 onwards finds this to be the case', subsequently, 'as age increases, so too does Coalition support, while support for Labor modestly declines'.[114]

Yet, the trend towards generational change has become less prominent in recent years. The 2022 federal election, in particular, appeared to be different:

> The Coalition's share of the House of Representatives vote fell in almost every age group, but especially among the youngest cohorts of voters. Only about one in four voters under the age of 40 reported voting for the Coalition in 2022. At no time in the 35-year history of the *Australian Election Study* have we observed such a low level of support for either major party in so large a segment of the electorate.[115]

It would seem, therefore, that a large part of 'Generation Z' (those born between 1996 and 2010[116]) has developed a unique voting pattern. The primary trend is a fall in support for the Coalition, which appears not to change as much as previous generational cohorts.[117]

The Centre for Independent Studies notes that previous generations tend to start with a bias against the Coalition parties and that this eventually reverses when they reach approximately 50 years of age. However, the degree of bias against the Coalition is much higher amongst 'Millennials' (those born between 1981 and 1995[118]) and Generation Z. Developing a model based on different scenarios of levels of Coalition support amongst various generations, the study concludes that:

> ... to ignore such low levels of support among those born after 1980 is to risk never returning to power. If the Coalition's path back to power is thought to be paved by 'doubling down' on older voters and ignoring the young, it will prove a perilous one.[119]

These trends are most evident at the federal level, and there is no comparable data on state-based attitudes.

Other commentators have addressed what they see as the causes of these trends. The Australia Institute's Alison Pennington echoes many trends discussed in the 'Snapshot' and 'Current issues' sections regarding insecure work and earnings, asset ownership and debt.[120] While not focusing on the 2022 Victorian or federal elections, Pennington suggests that a combination of insecure employment, rising living costs, indebtedness and inaccessible housing markets have created a 'Gen F'd'. Moreover, 'young people have a growing sense of betrayal by democratic institutions'.[121]

Establishing youth-focused groups

Nevertheless, the federal and Victorian governments recently developed youth-centred policies and plans, establishing an Office for Youth at both levels. A national Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) also exists, with some support from the federal government

[113] Cameron et al. (2022) op. cit., p. 22.
[114] ibid.
[115] ibid.
[116] As defined in Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) *2021 Census shows Millennials overtaking Boomers*, media release, 28 June.
[117] See, for example, C. Giuliano (2023) 'Voting patterns by generation at federal elections since 2001', Parliament of Australia website, accessed December 2023; M. Taylor (2023) 'Coalition can't bypass Gen Z, millennial challenge', *The Australian*, 29 June.
[118] As defined in ABS (2022) *2021 Census shows Millennials overtaking Boomers*, op. cit.
[119] M. Taylor (2023) *Generation Left: young voters are deserting the right*, Sydney, Centre for Independent Studies, p. 18.
[120] Pennington (2023) op. cit.
[121] Pennington (2023) op. cit., p. 63.

for its programs.[122] The previous federal government developed a National Youth Policy Framework. However, it disbanded the existing Office for Youth and provided only limited assistance to the AYAC. Subsequently, a federal Office for Youth was re-founded in 2022 and has launched a range of youth advisory bodies.[123]

Victoria's Office for Youth has had a longer life. It is attached to the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) with a *Youth Central* web page and presence.[124] A 20-member Victorian Youth Congress meets monthly and advises the office. The webpage has extensive information on various issues, ranging from standard topics such as education, training and employment to mental health and other issues. It includes advice on 'Getting politically active' and organising, and also has a social media presence. Data on the page's reach and effectiveness are not currently available.

The Office for Youth was central in formulating DFFH's *Our Promise, Your Future: Victoria's Youth Strategy 2022–2027*.[125] It drew upon a survey and submissions lodged via the Engage Victoria website in late 2020.[126] Some 1,100 people completed the questionnaire, and 120 submissions were received. The resulting policy document touches upon many of the issues discussed earlier in this paper:

- Young people 'are often only given the responsibility to educate, raise awareness and advocate on systems and structures that they've inherited and cannot influence'.
- Mental health is 'the top issue for young people. They want age-appropriate, accessible and culturally safe services that understand and respond to their diverse identities'.
- 'Financial stability, access to opportunities and inclusivity are core issues' for young people.
- They want 'accessibility and inclusivity built into [their] policies and programs as a core design principle—not as an afterthought'.
- Some young people also identified an 'absence of a strong family connection' as a critical issue.[127]

The survey also highlighted the specific needs of First Nations people, LGBTIQA+ people, people with disability, and multicultural and multifaith young people. It adopted six general priority areas and a monitoring process across three 'domains'. While the latter signals the need for more systematic data collection and analysis, it does not provide details of how to achieve this.

The state's 'youth sector' also has a long-established (since 1960) peak advocacy body known as the Youth Affairs Council Victoria.[128] Its activities consist primarily of responding to policy changes, facilitating training and a range of other programs, and channelling the views of various stakeholders and member organisations.[129]

Youth engagement at the Parliament of Victoria

There is a growing body of literature focused on newer ways to engage younger people. Moulds is sceptical of the value of traditional internships and stakeholder participation and favours more direct forms of involvement.[130] The Parliament of Victoria has a proactive

[122] See: https://www.ayac.org.au/
[123] Office for Youth (2024) 'Youth Advisory Groups', Office for Youth website.
[124] Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (2022) 'Youth', DFFH website; see also: https://www.youthcentral.vic.gov.au/.
[125] Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (2022) *Our promise, Your future: Victoria's youth strategy 2022–2027*, Melbourne, DFFH.
[126] Engage Victoria (undated) 'Victorian Youth Strategy', Engage Victoria website.
[127] DFFH (2022) op. cit., pp. 15–19.
[128] T. Corney (2021) *A Brief History of the Victorian Youth Workers' Association*, Brunswick West, YWA; see: https://www.yacvic.org.au/.
[129] Youth Affairs Council Victoria (undated) 'About YACVic', YACVic website.
[130] Moulds (2024) op. cit., pp. 188–189.

approach to community engagement and developed an extensive youth engagement program in 2016.[131]

Parliament's first community engagement strategy (2015-2018) identified young people aged between 18 and 30 as among those most disengaged from the formal political process, with a significant number not even enrolling to vote. It committed to making a special effort to connect Parliament with youth.

A series of youth consultations conducted in Melbourne and regional Victoria in partnership with the Foundation for Young Australians in 2016 produced several recommendations on ways Parliament can more effectively engage with young people. This led to the development of:

- a digital engagement strategy for youth, which helped to shape the way Parliament engages on social media;
- a youth associate program, providing short-term paid employment opportunities at Parliament enabling young people to work on community engagement projects;
- youth music events to demonstrate Parliament's interest in engaging with young people;
- a State of the Future project that saw young people conduct consultations and report to parliamentarians on the issues that matter most to youth in different regions of Victoria; and
- Women Engaged in Leadership (WE Lead) forums for young women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

Further youth workshops in 2021 and the employment of a youth coordinator for Parliament's community engagement team in 2022 led to new programs and activities being developed to connect young people with Parliament. An emphasis was placed on youth-led communications about Parliament that would resonate with young people. The initiatives have included:

- Parliament Express with Express Media that is now in its third year and has resulted in a series of articles produced by young writers for Parliament's website;
- Unpack Parliament with SYN Media that saw the production of a six-part podcast series in which young people interviewed Members of Parliament and parliamentary staff;
- youth-led content for Parliament's social media channels;
- State of the Future youth forums in Melbourne in 2023 and regional Victoria (Shepparton and Kyabram) in 2024 leading to a series of proposals focusing on the issues that matter most to young people and actions that could be taken to address those issues;
- New Horizons Leadership Summit with Culture Spring developing the leadership capacity and understanding about Parliament among young people from Victoria's Pasifika communities.

A clear message coming out of this work was that young people want to be consulted on a range of issues that impact their current and future lives. These include mental health, education, housing, employment, environment and climate change.

Heeding calls for better youth engagement, Parliament's committees have responded by organising opportunities for young people to participate in public inquiries in less formal ways to encourage their input on the matters being investigated. Two examples include a youth forum in 2021 conducted by the Legislative Council Legal and Social Issues Committee for its inquiry into cannabis use and a youth roundtable in 2023 conducted by the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee for its inquiry into liquor and gambling reform.

All these initiatives represent steps forward and important ongoing investments by the Parliament of Victoria in its engagement with young people. How effective they will be in

[131] C. Leston-Bandeira (2022) 'How public engagement has become a must for parliaments in today's democracies', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 37(2), pp. 8–16; A. Lomp, 'Taking community engagement to the next level', *Australasian Parliamentary Review*, 37(2), pp. 26–29.

addressing the problems identified in the previous sections should be the topic of future study.

5 | Conclusion

In sum, the review of data, recent surveys and the literature on political engagement suggests three interlinked trends among those aged between 18 and 30 across the state. First, this demographic, like others, faces common problems associated with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent cost-of-living crisis. These problems may have further aggravated difficulties faced by parliaments and other representative institutions.

However, compared to the overall adult population and similar sources, people aged between 18 and 30:

- have marginally lower incomes, less secure employment and lower home ownership rates;
- are less likely to own their home and more likely to be renting;
- are more likely to attend an educational institution;
- are less likely to be born overseas, although they are slightly more likely to speak a language other than English at home;
- are healthier overall, except in areas such as mental health;
- are more likely to not identify as heterosexual; and
- tend to reside in particular districts, often nearer to larger cities.

Additional differences exist between people aged 18–25 and 26–30. For example, the former cohort has lower incomes. They are more likely to be studying.

Second and accordingly, these features of young people's experiences have fed into a range of pronounced problems. Recent surveys and other studies suggest the following:

- The higher incidence of mental ill-health amongst younger people has become further exacerbated. It has reached a point at which many now proclaim there is a 'crisis'. The policy measures taken by different jurisdictions have been criticised as being too little and too late.
- Direct experiences of natural disasters and extreme weather events have magnified the anxiety felt over more global issues, such as climate change and the environment.
- Employment precarity and part-time work amplify the impacts of cost-of-living pressures, making everyday life less affordable.
- The greater incidence of private renting or mortgage holding amongst those aged 18–30 further compounds these pressures through increased housing costs.
- While young people appreciate their education experiences, they have increasingly become saddled with debt associated with study.
- Less than half expect that they may one day be able to buy a home or similar residential property.
- There is some recognition of the issues of intergenerational equity in the most recent Victorian Government state budget. The extent of real policy measures associated with such pronouncements seems limited.

Third and finally, although various surveys suggested increasing dissatisfaction for democratic institutions in Australia (until 2022), younger people were more likely to have more negative views. However, the literature on political engagement among the young suggests contradictory trends exist. While there is scepticism over traditional institutions, many young people are engaged in public policy issues.

Various youth consultation bodies exist, and the Parliament of Victoria and sections of the state government have developed engagement strategies. As Moulds points out, a gap often exists between what these bodies suggest and what representative institutions propose as solutions to these problems. One risk is further alienation and disenchantment if young people's proposals for action are not implemented.

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Enquiries

Victorian Parliamentary Library & Information Service
Parliament House, Spring Street
Melbourne VIC 3002
Telephone: (03) 9651 8640
https://parliament.vic.gov.au/

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