



national survey of young australians 2010

key and emerging issues

YOUNG PEOPLE



Foreword

NATIONAL SURVEY OF YOUNG AUSTRALIANS 2010

Mission Australia is very pleased to offer the 9th National Survey of Young Australians as a valuable information tool indicating the thinking of our young people.

The 2010 survey is a comprehensive resource which captures the thoughts of over 50,000 young Australians who have willingly shared their thoughts and feelings regarding a range of topics.

In my experience of working with young people in a Christian context I have always found them to be honest and forthright as they wrestle with issues impacting their lives and the environment surrounding them. This survey gives a grand overview of Australian young people's deep and serious thinking about very important topics that impact them, their friends and their families.

Mission Australia has a long and distinguished history working with young people and one of our guiding principles is to assist them to live in a mature and healthy way during these important years of their lives.

As you spend time considering the trends and themes that emerge in these pages I trust you will be better informed and more clearly focused in offering support to our wonderful Australian young people.

Bruce Eagles

National Chaplain



Introduction

INTRODUCTION

In 2010 Mission Australia conducted its ninth annual survey of young Australians. The primary purpose of the survey, as in previous years, was to identify both the values and issues of concern to young people. This year the latter included both the personal concerns of young people and the issues they identified for Australia as a whole. There was also a new question that asked young people how they felt about the future.

PARTICIPATION

50,240 young people aged 11 to 24 participated in the survey in 2010, the largest number of respondents in the survey's history. 7,577 completed the survey online, with the remainder being completed in hard copy.

AREAS OF FOCUS

The survey was deliberately kept brief (19 questions) in order to encourage a large response from a diversity of young people. Seven questions sought respondents' views on a variety of issues, such as what they value, their issues of concern, who they turn to for advice and support and what activities they are involved in. The remaining questions collected demographic information including age, gender, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identification, state/territory location, postcode and disability status.

METHODOLOGY

The survey was distributed to a range of organisations, including all secondary schools and public and tertiary libraries in Australia. It was also distributed to all Mission Australia services as well as to a large network of other service providers, Commonwealth, State/Territory and local government departments, youth organisations, peak bodies and corporate partners. An online version of the survey was also available on a variety of websites.

The questions relating to what young people value, their personal concerns and their sources of advice presented respondents with a list of options which they were asked to rank in order of importance. The data reported for these questions are the proportion of respondents who ranked each item first, second or third. This methodology follows that of previous years and enables comparisons with previous survey results.

Three new questions were introduced in 2010. The first asked what young people thought were the three most important issues in Australia today and answers were categorised and reported in order of frequency. The second question asked respondents to indicate from a list of options how they felt about the future. The survey also asked what young people thought might be done about their major issue of concern. Responses from this question are not included in this report but will be analysed early in 2011.

THIS REPORT

This report contains an executive summary as well as summaries at the national level and for each state/territory. There is also a chapter that compares responses from Indigenous and non Indigenous respondents. Each of the chapters contains a breakdown of the key data by age and gender.



Executive summary

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Responses to the survey were received from 50,240 young people living in a range of communities across Australia. Around 60% were living in a capital city with the remainder in other areas of each state and territory. The largest proportion of respondents was aged 15 to 19 (51.0%), followed by those aged 11 to 14 (46.8%) and a small number of respondents aged 20 to 24 (2.3%). Slightly more females than males participated in the survey (53.9% compared with 46.1%). 2,381 surveys were returned by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people and 7,979 from those who spoke a language other than English at home. 1,575 respondents indicated they had a disability.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE VALUE

Family relationships and *friendships* were the top two items valued by young people. This was the case for both genders and all age groups. About three quarters of respondents highly valued *family relationships* and about 60% valued *friendships*. *Physical and mental health* was highly valued by a third of respondents, while *school or study satisfaction* was valued by 29.3% of respondents, up from 22.0% in 2009. Young adults aged 20 to 24 were much more likely than those aged 11 to 19 to highly value *financial security* while males were much more likely than females to highly value *getting a job*.

ISSUES OF PERSONAL CONCERN

Nationally, the top three issues of personal concern were *body image*, *family conflict* and *coping with stress*. Eight issues were of significant concern to at least one in five young people. Just under a third of respondents indicated *body image* was a major concern, with the proportion concerned about it increasing with age, from 28.1% of 11 to 14 year olds to 40.3% of 20 to 24 year olds. Over a quarter (27.3%) of respondents identified *coping with stress* as a major issue, well above the 2009 figure of 18.7%. One in five 11 to 14 year olds increasing to 44.8% of 20 to 24 year olds indicated it was a major concern.

Concern about *school or study problems* also rose this year, from 17.3% in 2009 to 25.5%. It was an issue for both genders and a particular concern for the 15 to 19 years group. Concern about *depression* was greatest amongst the young adult group with a third of them identifying it as a major concern. Males were much more likely than females to be concerned about *alcohol and drugs*. Concern about *drugs* was higher for the youngest age group than it was for older respondents.

MOST IMPORTANT ISSUES IN AUSTRALIA TODAY

This year a new question was introduced that asked young people to indicate three issues they thought were the most important in Australia today. *The environment* was by far the most frequently mentioned topic with 45.7% of respondents identifying it as a major issue. It was a top two issue for all age groups and both genders and was particularly important to 11 to 14 year olds (55.0%) and female respondents (50.8%).

The second top national issue was *alcohol and drugs* with 37.1% of young people indicating it was important. It was a top two issue for all ages and genders but was identified as important by a higher proportion of younger than older respondents (39.4% of 11 to 14 year olds compared with 25.1% of 20 to 24 year olds) and males than females (40.2% compared to 34.6%).

Around a fifth of respondents identified *crime, safety and violence*, *equity and discrimination* and *the economy and financial matters* as important issues facing Australia. Significant proportions of both genders and all age groups identified them as important.

WHERE YOUNG PEOPLE GO FOR ADVICE AND SUPPORT

The top three sources of advice and support for young people in 2010 were *friends*, *parents* and *relative/family friend* and this was true for all age groups and both genders. About 86% of respondents indicated *friends* were an important source of advice, while around three quarters identified *parents* and about 60% identified a *relative/family friend* as major sources of advice and support. The proportion identifying the *internet* continues to grow, with a quarter of all respondents indicating it was a top source of advice and support in 2010, up from one in ten in 2002. Around 40% of the young adult group identified the *internet* as a major source of advice.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Sports (as a participant), *sports (as a spectator)* and *arts/cultural activities* were the three most popular activities for respondents in 2010, with participation in all activities up from 2009 levels. Participation in *sports (as a participant)* declined with age, while the proportion taking part in *arts/cultural activities* and *volunteer work* increased with age. Close to half the young adult group was involved in *volunteer work*. Males were more likely than females to take part in *sports* activities and females more likely than males to take part in *arts/cultural activities* and *volunteer work*.

THE FUTURE

The second new question in this year's survey asked young people how they felt about the future. Nearly two thirds of all respondents felt either *positive* or *very positive* about the future, and this was consistent across all age groups and genders. Less than one in ten young people felt either *negative* or *very negative* and around a quarter felt *neither positive nor negative* about the future.

SOME PRIORITY ISSUES

A number of priority issues emerged from this year's survey.

- 1. The environment:** *The environment* was clearly identified as a key national issue by a large proportion of young people. Qualitative responses indicate they believe urgent action is required on a number of fronts including: Australians of all ages taking personal responsibility for their behaviour and lifestyle and how it impacts on the environment; community and business awareness and action; and government leadership. Young people's responses urge for a whole of community approach.
- 2. Coping with stress:** The data indicates young people are juggling a range of competing demands and pressures. These often include relationships, education, employment and expectations from parents, peers, schools, the wider community as well as themselves, that they will achieve 'success' and increased independence and self-reliance. In combination, this can be stressful and is reflected in the increasing proportion of young people who identified *coping with stress*, *school or study problems* and *the economy and financial issues* as major issues. Many young people indicated they wanted to be able to manage their stress better, noting the potential negative consequences of not doing so, including a range of mental health issues. This highlights the need for equipping young people, including in early adolescence, with practical strategies to deal with stress when it occurs in their lives. Families, educational and youth organisations have a key role to play in this area. More broadly, the level of concern regarding this issue suggests there may be merit in a community discussion about the nature and source of stress that young people are experiencing.
- 3. Alcohol and drugs:** Young people identified *alcohol and drugs* as the second top issue facing Australia today. Areas for action include ensuring drug education programs are based on the evidence of what works and equip young people with the skills to effectively deal with this issue, if and when they come across drugs. While young people appear to identify *drugs* as a 'youth issue', their concern about *alcohol* appears to be broader and takes into account societal norms around its usage. Effective alcohol education campaigns need to engage not only young people but other key people in their lives as well as the wider community. Such campaigns need to be nuanced to reflect the different perspectives of young men and young women on this issue. The significant level of concern about *crime, safety and violence* reported by young people was often linked to *alcohol*, increasing the urgency for action in this area.

4. **Body image:** Young people's level of concern about this issue remains quite high, particularly among the young adult group who may have missed out on strategies more recently developed and implemented in schools to help young people develop a healthy body image. Initiatives such as those that promote young people's media literacy and self esteem were identified by young people as being important, with a stronger focus on young adults appearing warranted. Continued efforts to urge the media, fashion and advertising industries to help promote positive body messages are also recommended.
5. **Family:** The survey again confirms the importance of family to young people for both genders and all age groups continuing into young adulthood. *Family relationships* are what is most important to young people and they are major sources of advice and support when young people have a problem. It is not surprising then that young people also identified however that *family conflict* can have a profound influence on their wellbeing. Strategies that skill up parents, other family members and friends to openly communicate with young people, including through times of transition, family stress and change, are essential. A particular focus on early intervention, before conflict escalates, is important.

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Over 50,000 young people from around Australia participated in the 2010 survey, providing unique insights on their values, personal concerns and the issues they see as important for the nation. As well as helping to inform governments, non government organisations and other institutions interested in the wellbeing of young people, these findings provide young Australians themselves with relevant information and opportunities for action and discussion in the contexts of their families, educational institutions, workplaces and communities. It is also hoped that the report will act as a stimulus for discussion for those closely involved in the lives of young people, such as parents, carers, friends and family members.