

Young people on the cusp of adulthood are reporting poor mental health and uncertainty about the future

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Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

There is no question that young people are finding it tough right now.

Amid the lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, feelings of

political alienation and environmental despair, [young people](#) are navigating their formative years through challenging circumstances.

This begs the question—are the kids OK?

Our new research suggests that, for many young people, the situation is bleak.

In 2022, as part of the Life Patterns research project, we surveyed 1,243 Year 11 students from 39 schools across New South Wales, Victoria, the Australian Capital Territory and Tasmania. The survey included questions about their health, well-being, outlook on the future and advice for politicians.

The results are concerning.

For many young people, pessimism and uncertainty define what it means to be young in the 2020s. Feelings of hopelessness that were exacerbated during the pandemic years, as personal and [social relationships](#) faltered and a lack of stability altered how young people think about the future, appear to have remained.

This is further compounded by [mental health](#) struggles and pessimism about the future of our planet.

Health and well-being: Not feeling great

When we asked the students to rate their mental health, 29% of males and 44% of females reported feeling unhealthy or very unhealthy.

Students living in cities were more likely to report feeling mentally unhealthy than their counterparts living in country towns or rural areas.

Mental health is connected to the other dimensions of young people's lives. Only about one in two students were satisfied with their lives, but the vast majority (85%) of participants who reported feeling mentally healthy also reported being satisfied with their life.

On the other hand, only 21% of those who reported feeling mentally unhealthy were satisfied with life.

This highlights the important role played by mental health in youth life overall.

Participants were given opportunities to elaborate on their answers by including comments about their health. The 689 comments we received showed that many young people were struggling due to the ongoing effects of the social disruptions from the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in their social lives.

Some were contending with pressures from their parents and schoolwork while others mentioned their grief from personal losses.

"My mental health has decreased since COVID, I have lost all motivation to study and do well," said a female living in a regional city.

Optimistic for themselves, pessimistic for the world

We also asked the students about their level of optimism for their own future, the future of Australia and the future of the world.

Encouragingly, a majority felt optimistic about their future—but fewer than half felt optimistic about Australia's future and only one in six of the students were optimistic about the future of the world.

One in seven felt pessimistic about their own future, 29% were

pessimistic about Australia's future and more than half (53%) were pessimistic about the future of the world.

It is clear there is a widespread sense of hopelessness felt by young people when thinking about the fate of their generation worldwide.

Advice to politicians: Listen to us and do your job

Young people also feel that they are denied a seat at the political table, ignored by politicians and governing bodies, and excluded from important public debates.

When [students](#) were asked: "Thinking about the issues facing young people in Australia, what advice would you give our politicians?" more than half of the participants (708 people) provided a comment.

Our analysis identified four main themes:

- Listen to us and give us a voice: "LISTEN TO THE YOUTH—WE MAY BE YOUNG AND CAN'T VOTE BUT WE CARE!!!!!" said a female living in a country town.
- Fix climate change and the environment: "What part of the UN report on [climate change](#) did you not read? It's real," said a male living in a capital city
- They don't care about us, they only care about themselves: "I feel there is no hope left in talking to our politicians, many that have the power to make changes are corrupt," said a (gender not disclosed) person living in a regional city.
- Lack of mental health services: "Support for mental health across some schools is limited," said a female living in a country town.

A growing problem

Our research adds to the growing body of evidence on the severity of mental health issues for this cohort of young Australians. The 2020–21 National Mental Health and Well-being Survey mirrors our findings, with nearly four in 10 people aged 16–24 years reporting mental disorders.

Our participants' concerning levels of pessimism about the state of the world are consistent with the steady decline in both happiness and feelings of optimism about the future among 15- to 19-year-olds between 2012 and 2020.

Poor mental [health](#), dissatisfaction with life and pessimism for the [future](#) are inseparable, forming a complex web of reinforcing negativity. We urgently need to address these issues to do right by young people.

To improve their well-being, we need to revamp the ways we engage with young people, in both formal institutions and in public conversation. But to meaningfully support this generation in navigating uncharted times, we also need to show greater resolve in listening to what they tell us.

This requires us to pay attention to their needs and desires, and support them to build positive futures for themselves—for Australia and for the world.

More information: Too young to vote but not too young to care: Year 11 students' wellbeing and political voice.

education.unimelb.edu.au/_dat...ung-to-care_2023.pdf

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